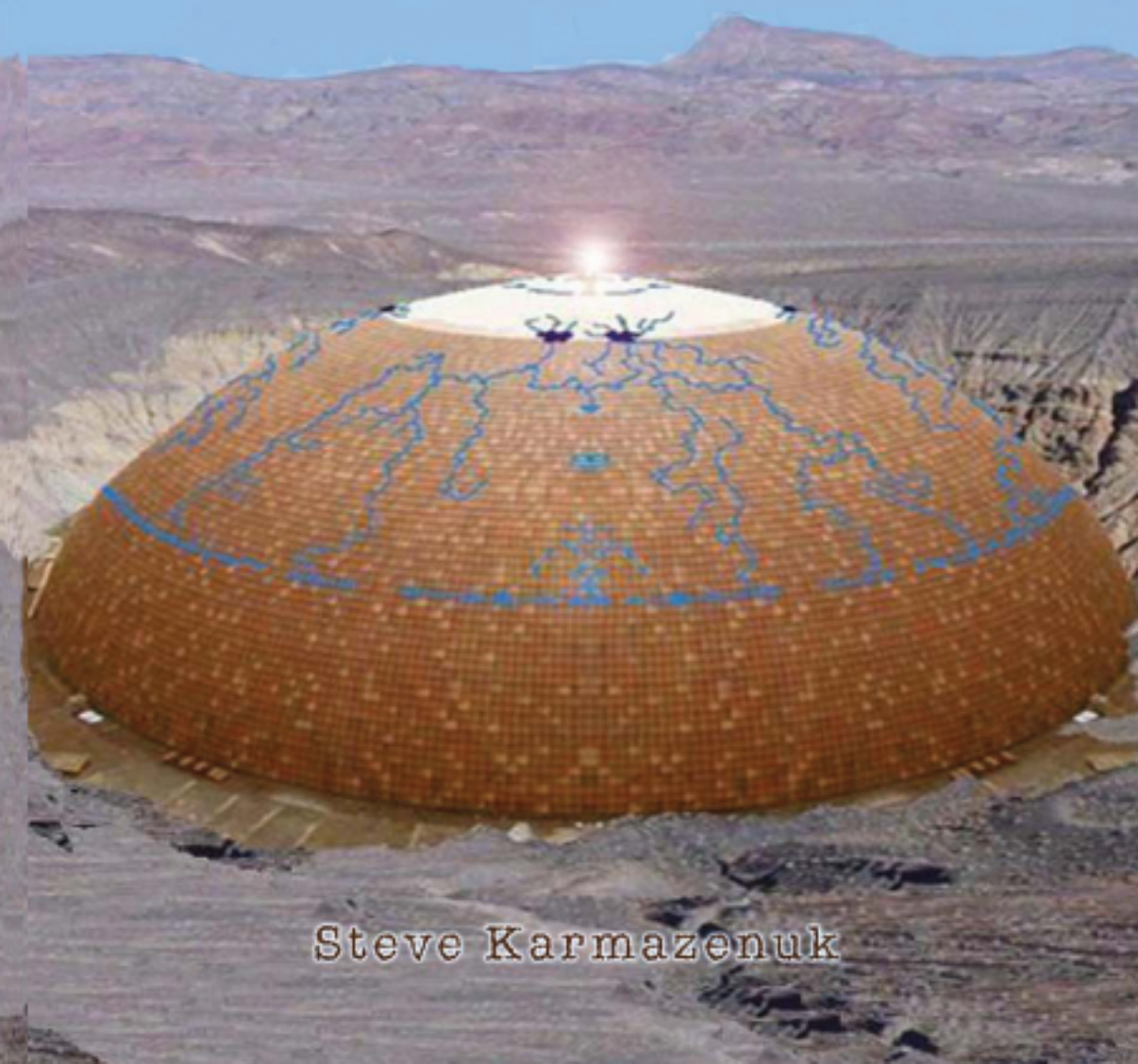


The Unearthing



Steve Karmazenuk

**A massive alien artifact is discovered beneath the desert
outside of Laguna, New Mexico.**

**Before its existence can be concealed, the object unearths itself
and news of the discovery is leaked to the international media.**

**As religious leaders strive to reconcile the artifact's existence
with their faiths and governments wrestle over its many secrets
and how to exploit them, ordinary men and women around the
world struggle to make sense of a perpetual onslaught of live
and unfiltered news broadcasts about the object.**

**When a survey team is sent in to examine and explore it, they
discover that not only is the artifact still operational, but it is
conscious and has been waiting for tens of millions of years...**

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ISBN : 1-4241-3164-2

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Electronic edition

All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

About The Author

Steve Karmazenuk is the author of two novels, *The Unearthing* and *Oh Well, Whatever, Nevermind*, Excerpts of which are available exclusively through

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To Tom, for always knowing.
To Kevin, for always believing.
To Angel, for never doubting.

It has always been the way of tales and dreams. Time forgets itself. That is also the way of remembering. But when remembering or retelling, it is best to start at the beginning. And for all memories, all tales, and all dreams, there is but one beginning...

PRELUDE

THE BEGINNING

In the beginning all was void and without form. There was no substance, no matter or energy. The elemental forces did not exist; neither did space or time. All that existed was nothing. Born of this irresolute paradox the Universe came into being and for the first time the eternal dark was broken by the Light.

The order of oblivion was shattered by the chaos of creation. Elemental forces of unstoppable violence roiled, pushing back the void to make room for the strange powers and energies that were screaming out from the core of creation to find their place in the new reality. The elemental powers, titans of weak and strong and strange attractors defined the first basic laws that governed creation. Their wrestling war against one another unleashed the energy that fuelled the continued growth of existence. Protomatter coalesced from burning plasma caught in fields of cold unmerciful gravity only to be rent asunder and scattered in an ever-widening sphere. The farther away from the violent chaos of creation these scattered elements fled the cooler they became. And as the matter and energy of the newborn universe began to cool a new order descended over all.

Vast nebulae formed from cooling gasses and strange, elemental particles. These nebulae grew so large and dense, so fertile with the stuff of

creation that they began to collapse upon themselves. As matter condensed energy was released in violent reactions and chain reactions. New explosions dawned in a universe scarcely a billion years old. Globules of superhot matter and energy were scattered to the winds of spacetime, trailing dust in their wake. When these burning spheres finally came to rest rotating gracefully on their own axes, the dust they had stolen began to settle into rings and disks around them. Slowly these disks of dust underwent their own transformations, forming dense pockets of matter and trapped energy all their own. Sometimes enough substance would collect into spheres of gas. Sometimes these spheres would collapse and ignite, becoming new, smaller stars. In other cases the matter would collect into loosely affiliated but nevertheless super dense clouds of gas. Just as often matter would collect into spheres dense enough to harden into planets or cold, random lumps of rock. Other stranger forms of matter and energy were often born but their placement would remain as much a mystery as their substance.

Not every world would bear the gift of life, but life still appeared and in many cases flourished in the otherwise barren universe. Not all worlds that held life held it long enough for sentience to emerge. And not all worlds that held sentient life would live long enough for that life to spread out beyond the cradle of its birth. And tragically the losses on these worlds went unnoticed by the universe at large. On many of these worlds civilizations rose and fell, succeeding and often failing on their own merits. Other times it was blind and uncaring cosmic chance that decided their fates.

But on every world where life did prosper, where sentience emerged, the desire to understand the origins of their world, their universe emerged as well. Many worlds approached these issues from a philosophical standpoint, looking to the sun, to spirits, to gods to ponder questions about the nature of the universe and why they were in it. Other worlds looked at creation analytically, using the methods of empirical knowledge to determine how they came to be. Many worlds asked both how and why, trying to merge the twin opposites of science and religion into one. Invariably whether worlds of individuals or hive-like superorganisms, whether peaceful or warlike, whether superstitious or scientific, all sentient worlds turned their attention beyond their nesting spheres and out into the heavens. The ships created by these worlds were as wide in variety as the races that spawned them. Their means of propulsion were diverse, sometimes using systems of kinesis and power that the scientists of other worlds would maintain were impossible.

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But on every world the first ships and on many worlds whole flotillas of ships were explorers.

As explorers set out, first tentatively learning about their own star systems before heading out into the darkness of space, they discovered much of consequence about their own origins and the fragility of their worlds. Sometimes within their own systems they found other life. Often the explorers would discover themselves alone orbiting their parent stars. But when they left behind their homeworlds and birth stars, they set out with hope of finding others.

1

THE DISCOVERY

A dust storm was blowing across the road as James Johnson piloted the camper down the long stretch of New Mexican highway. A sheet of dust rippled and danced, breaking like a wave against the asphalt. The storm was so bad that James had to switch on the enhancer in the camper's windshield. The enhancer created a computer-rendered simulation of the road and desert surrounding him. The wire frame image of the world outside his windshield compiled quickly, filling in with detail and colour that looked almost exactly like the real world.

"James, where are we?" the Prof called from the back of the camper.

"Hang on, I'll check," James called back.

There was a small monitor mounted in the middle of the driver's display panel, the stylized word

Galileo™

shimmering on the screen.

"Galileo," James said. "Where are we?"

Over the music playing through the camper's stereo system came the

perfectly-simulated female voice of the Galileo system, “We are now approaching the city limits for Laguna.”

“We’re just crossing into Laguna, Prof,” James called back.

A moment later he added, “I thought we were already *in* Laguna.”

“We are,” the Prof called. “We crossed into the Laguna Band *District* an hour ago and now we’re going into the town of Laguna, itself.”

As if in confirmation of this the camper rolled past a large white sign, proclaiming

**WELCOME TO THE TOWN OF LAGUNA
GOVERNMENT OF THE SOUTHWESTERN
NATIVE PROTECTORATE
LAGUNA BAND DISTRICT**

In the back of the camper, sitting in the horseshoe-shaped booth guarding a Formica table Professor Mark Echohawk sat working with his console. He wore a small but elaborate headset: an earphone in his left ear from which radiated a compact array: a microphone stretched out beside his mouth and a boom extended a small display screen over his left eye. The band that held the console to Echohawk’s head cinched down over his long, greying hair. The headset was connected by a small, flexible cable bundle to the CPU Echohawk wore on his belt. The device itself weighed less than the headset and most of its size was taken up by the Digital Optic Slip reader on its front. A wireless remote keypad sat on the tabletop. Echohawk, an archaeologist attached to the World Aboriginal Anthropological Society and working out of UCLA, was studying images of an object unearthed in the desert near Laguna. The Chief of the Laguna Band, Paul Santino, had contacted the Society only days before requesting someone come. What the Lagunas had apparently unearthed was one side of a golden pyramid. Echohawk got wind of the discovery and immediately asked to be assigned to the project. His passion was the study of the ancient civilizations of the Americas and this discovery had captivated him.

“We’re almost there, Prof!” James called from the camper’s cockpit.

Echohawk stood up, retracting the monitor boom of his console and folding up the keypad. He headed forward and took the front passenger seat

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beside his assistant. The camper reached the turn-off to head into the town of Laguna. The side road was little more than hard-packed dirt. But as they crossed the decorative wall guarding the approach to the town they left the desert behind them. The town of Laguna was an oasis in the desert. Greenery and trees sprang up in large tracts of parkland surrounding the downtown core. The Southwestern Protectorate had developed extensive water reclamation systems and was bringing life back to the desert. The residential neighbourhoods were densely packed communal green spaces the norm more often than not. As the camper swung through the streets some of the locals took notice.

Laguna was a closed community, a company town promoted and developed as one of the crown jewels in the Southwestern Native Protectorate. Unemployment was near zero, with the town's twenty-odd thousand residents working either on the farms or in the shops, or the town's backbone, the One Tree Hill software company. Following the Galileo system's concise directions James took the camper right to the parking lot of the Municipal Building where Echohawk would meet with Paul Santino.

"We're here," James said, parking and shutting down the camper.

The Ballard cell engine cycled down, the whine of the system dropping to a hum and then silence. Echohawk climbed out.

"Great news," he said. "Even better, there's a Coke machine. I don't think I could stomach another cup of your coffee."

Echohawk fed his debit card into the soda machine as James slipped on his own console headset.

"Call Peter," he said into the microphone.

A second later he was connected. "Peter? Yeah, we made it. How far behind us are you? Uh-huh...okay, well the Prof wants to get out to the site as quickly as possible so I'd suggest linking to our Galileo and following us there. No, unless you want to stop and get some sodas I think you can bypass the town. No, the Prof's going in to meet with him now." As James spoke Mark Echohawk made his way into the air-conditioned interior of the Municipal Building.

The Municipal Building was only four storeys high but its lobby could have been that of a more auspicious building: elegantly decorated with local flora, pictures of area landmarks adorning the walls. Echohawk was about to announce himself to the receptionist when the man he'd come to see came

down the hallway and introduced himself.

“Professor Echohawk? I’m Paul Santino,” the Laguna Chief said, extending his hand.

“Mark Echohawk.”

“Please to meet you; my office is this way.” Santino led Echohawk down the hall. They were close in age though Echohawk was visibly older, his hair greying slowly through the ponytail hanging down his back. Santino, his hair dark and closely cropped, had the robust features characteristic of an outdoor life in the New Mexico badlands. Echohawk had over the years become an academe. This was the first fieldwork he’d done in a few years, though the weathered look of a seasoned field archaeologist had not softened from his face. They reached the office. The ground floor corner suite looked out over a spacious park rich in greenery and with a flowing fountain. The blinds were open and the office was alive with rich sunlight. Santino sat behind his desk and pushed a file across to Echohawk. The archaeologist picked it up and began flipping through the pictures inside.

“Tell me again how this was found.”

“A few local kids were tooling around the desert in gas-powered buggies,” Santino replied. “One of the buggies wrecked pretty bad and dug up the tip of the pyramid. When they started digging it up they thought it might be old cowboy loot dropped from a saddlebag. It didn’t take them long to realize it wasn’t. That’s when they came to town to get help. We managed to excavate almost three meters of the thing before we called your people.”

“That was a week ago,” Echohawk said. “Have you managed to unearth any more of the object?”

“We cleared off a second face of the pyramid to a total depth of four meters,” Santino replied. “The damn thing is huge. The size of the excavation’s making it harder to dig up and the soil is rocky around here so the dig is pretty tough.”

“The land around here’s remained unchanged for tens of thousands of years,” Echohawk said. “Under accepted theories about native migration across the continent that shouldn’t be possible. Then there’s the question of just *how* the object was buried. How far is it to the site?”

“It’s almost thirty klicks out of town,” said Santino. “Well past city limits, but still within the Laguna District.”

“Any other towns nearby?”

“Ghost towns now; most of the land around here was given up after the war. When White Sands was nuked the fallout blew right through this area.”

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“It doesn’t seem to have affected things here.”

“Laguna’s the end product of the first twenty years of Southwestern Protectorate civil engineering,” Santino replied. “The town and the Band are old, going back to the Reservation era, but after the war this area was pretty badly beaten up. The town’s only looked like it does now for about ten years.” Echohawk nodded gravely. He remembered the battles that had been waged both in the political and personal arenas to establish the American First Nations Protectorates.

“How hot is the dust where the pyramid was found?”

“Remarkably it’s almost clean,” Santino said. “The radiation level is negligible.”

“Can we get out to the site? I’d like to see the object for myself.”

“We can leave right away if you like,” Santino said, rising.

Echohawk also got to his feet.

“We’ll follow you in my camper,” Echohawk said. “I want to get out to the site and start setting up a base camp right away.”

“I’ll get my car and meet you around front.” They headed for the door.

They traveled to the site on a dirt path stamped out in the earth by the recent activity surrounding the buried pyramid. This was outback; hilly desert stretching out for miles around them. The dig was visible as a glint on the horizon long before they reached it. Several cars were parked haphazardly around vaguely crescent-shaped pit, a canteen truck standing guard by the cars while a dump truck waited near the portable toilets as earth and stone was hauled from the arena by wheelbarrow. James pulled the camper up to the other cars as Santino parked his own vehicle close by. Echohawk left the camper, approaching the Chief of the Laguna Band.

“Who’d you get for the dig?” Echohawk asked.

“Locals,” Santino replied. “City works crews and high-schoolers looking for summer work.”

Echohawk descended into the work pit. The excavation had uncovered two faces of the pyramid which shimmered in the late morning sun. The work pit was about ten meters wide at its base with a gradually sloping pathway to the surface. They’d moved a lot of earth; the problem with excavating a pyramid was that the further down one went, the larger the pit had to be so that there was enough room to work around the bottom of the pyramid and continue digging. Echohawk studied the dig so far: they had been primarily concerned with hauling away the earth and stone surrounding the pyramid’s

two exposed sides. The bad news was anything in the earth of geological significance that had been thus far removed was now lost. The locals had been eager to unearth the structure and in so doing had destroyed many potential clues to the pyramid's origins. However there was still enough undisturbed land around the pyramid's two unexposed sides for them to learn what they needed to know.

"I'm going to want to clear everyone out," Echohawk said to Santino. "We have to proceed carefully and for now that means shutting down the dig."

He turned to James, who was once more on the console link to Peter.

"James, when Peter gets here I want you guys to start taking core samples from around the site," he said. "We need to establish the geological age of the pyramid. Also, get a grid set up on the unexposed sides; thirty square meters of half-meter squares. Then until we've dug everything out to the same depth. We'll do Doppler seismography to get an approximation of the site after the geosurvey cores are taken."

James nodded and began relaying the information to Peter who was leading a small convoy of three cube vans of equipment and crew to the site. Echohawk started down into the work pit and approached the pyramid. Though only two sides were exposed and then only four meters of the structure it was already impressive, imposing. Its golden surface reflected the sunlight brilliantly. The pyramid was nearly perfectly smooth. There was hardly any sign of weathering on its surface; few scuffs or scratches and almost no dents or pockmarks. Given the tools the locals were using Echohawk had expected there to be some significant scoring on the pyramid's surface, but there was none. It was almost too smooth. He knelt beside the pyramid, running a hand over its surface.

"Excuse me, Professor," Santino said, "but I was wondering: you'd mentioned doing a geological survey of the land. May I ask why?"

Echohawk stood up, looking around the work pit. Shovels and pickaxes, yet no damage to the pyramid.

"A geological survey will allow us to establish, roughly, about how long the structure's been buried," Echohawk explained. "As time passes, the ground, surface dust and natural debris changes. Each new surface layer preserves the one underneath. Each layer of earth will be characteristic of a different geological era. Certain types of seed found mixed in the earth could be extinct in the present era or be the progenitor of a current plant. Soil metallurgy changes too, as time goes on. One layer of earth might have a relatively high amount of salt from when this was once an ocean floor.

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Another could contain high quantities of particleized iron or other materials indicative of a nearby meteor impact. The pyramid's position relative to the local geological history and how the earth around the pyramid settled will tell us how long it's been here and then hopefully help us figure out who put it here and more importantly, when."

As Echohawk and Santino finished speaking, Mark became aware that several pairs of eyes were focused on him; some faces suspicious, some hopeful, all expectant.

"Hello, ladies and gentlemen," Echohawk began. "I want to start off by thanking you one and all for the effort you've made so far in digging up the pyramid behind me." And Echohawk was very aware of the pyramid behind him. The Mayan and Incan civilizations had worshipped at pyramids and he easily imagined this object being used as the source of veneration. He wondered when there had last been an elder preaching as a crowd gathered around him to listen. Though he admitted, the smooth lines of this pyramid owed more to Egyptian styling than South American.

"My crew and I were sent here based on the pictures your band council sent to the World Aboriginal Anthropological Society. I can tell you that the discovery of this pyramid is an important one, not just from an archaeological point of view but also as a societal one for us and for all Aboriginal peoples in the Americas. Because of the need to gather as much information as possible and because of the need to protect the structure, we will have to temporarily cease excavation."

Grumbles and disappointed moans greeted Echohawk's words. He raised his hands in a stopping motion, calling for silence.

"Folks, please...I said temporarily!" Echohawk called. "This is necessary, because we have to run certain tests in order to properly date the find, study the soil composition and to determine the height of the structure itself. In order to do that, unfortunately, we have to stop digging for a while. I promise that as soon as we are ready to resume digging any and all of you who are still interested in working on the dig will be rehired. And when you are rehired you'll be working for the WAAS and being paid according to their very generous scale." This brought smiles and some applause. There were worse ways of kicking people off a dig site. As the work crew shouldered their shovels and pickaxes, climbing from the work pit, Echohawk returned his attention to the pyramid. He reached out to its golden surface, laying his hand on metal warmed by the desert sun. Except that the metal covering the surface of the pyramid was cool; it certainly was no hotter than air

temperature, which on that fine summer morning was hovering around thirty-two degrees Celsius. Baking in the sun, the skin of the pyramid should have been much warmer. Echohawk slid his hand along the pyramid, feeling the smoothness of it. There were some scratches and pockmarks on it, but they felt weathered, smooth. He couldn't find any fresh scratches or gouges despite the equipment that had been used. The surface of the pyramid was mottled but that appeared to be a function of design. Echohawk stood and made his way from the pit. This was an unbelievable find and so far the information didn't make sense to him at all.

**LINX TO: LAURA ECHOHAWK
FROM: MARK ECHOHAWK
SUBJECT: LAGUNA DIG**

DEAR LAURA,

I GOT YOUR LAST LINX YESTERDAY. I'M GLAD YOU LIKE THE BOOK; FINDING A TOME ON ABSTRACT ART OF THE 1980S WAS DIFFICULT. I THINK YOU'RE ONE OF THE FEW PEOPLE ON EARTH WHO ACTUALLY LIKES WORK FROM THAT ERA. I HOPE THE BOOK HELPS YOU WITH YOUR CURRENT PROJECT. IT WAS ALSO GOOD TO HEAR THAT YOU AND YOUR ROOMMATE MANAGED TO WORK THINGS OUT; ALLISON'S A GREAT GIRL AND IT WOULD HAVE BEEN A SHAME IF YOUR FRIENDSHIP ENDED OVER SOMETHING AS TRIVIAL AS HOUSEWORK DIVISION.

I HAVE NEWS OF MY OWN: I HAVE RETURNED TO THE FIELD! IF YOU CAN BELIEVE IT, I FINALLY GOT A FIELD PROJECT INTERESTING ENOUGH TO PULL ME OUT OF THE CLASSROOM: EARLY LAST WEEK, SHORTLY AFTER I LINXED YOU MY LAST LETTER, THE WORLD ABORIGINAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL SOCIETY CONTACTED ME REGARDING A DISCOVERY MADE IN NEW MEXICO ON LAND BELONGING TO THE LAGUNA BAND. THE LAGUNAS DISCOVERED THE TIP OF A GOLDEN PYRAMID BURIED BENEATH THE DESERT.

THREE THINGS ABOUT THIS DISCOVERY HAVE PIQUED MY INTEREST WELL BEYOND MY USUAL TOMB RAIDER'S

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CURIOSITY: FIRST, IT WAS PREVIOUSLY ASSUMED THAT THE PYRAMID-BUILDING ABORIGINAL SOCIETIES HADN'T ESTABLISHED THEMSELVES ANY FURTHER NORTH THAN THE MEXICAN PENINSULA. SECOND, THE LAGUNA PYRAMID HAS MORE IN COMMON IN DESIGN WITH EGYPTIAN PYRAMIDS THAN IT DOES TO ITS SOUTH AMERICAN COUSINS: IT IS COVERED IN GOLD OR SOME SORT OF GOLD ALLOY AND HAS A POINTED PEAK AND SMOOTH SIDES, AS OPPOSED TO THE PLATEAUED SUMMIT AND STAGGERED SIDES OF MOST SOUTH AMERICAN PYRAMIDS. LASTLY, THAT THE LAGUNA PYRAMID IS BURIED IS SIGNIFICANT, BECAUSE THE LAND AROUND LAGUNA HAS BEEN UNCHANGED BY GEOLOGICAL EVENT FOR THOUSANDS UPON THOUSANDS OF YEARS. THIS MEANS THAT EITHER THE LAGUNA PYRAMID IS QUITE ANCIENT OR IT WAS METICULOUSLY AND DELIBERATELY BURIED. I HAVEN'T BEEN THIS EXCITED ABOUT A PROJECT SINCE DOCTOR AIZIZ AND I DISCOVERED THE QUIPU REPOSITORY, IN COLUMBIA.

I HOPE THIS LINX FINDS YOU WELL; I LOOK FORWARD TO HEARING FROM YOU SOON. LET ME KNOW HOW THINGS GO AUTHENTICATING THOSE WORKS YOU DISCOVERED IN THE UNIVERSITY'S WAREHOUSE. WE'LL GO OUT FOR COFFEE AS SOON AS I GET BACK TO LA.

ALL MY LOVE,

DAD

Peter Paulson arrived at the head of a convoy of cube vans and one flatbed trailer. They parked just inside an area marked off earlier by James using orange "CAUTION" tape and aluminium poles. A small army of assistants, graduate students and general help, began unloading crates of equipment and setting up tent-like portable shelters to be used as living quarters and a mobile lab building made from corrugated aluminium sheets and a titanium frame. By the middle of the afternoon Mark Echohawk's archaeological team had set up the entire base of operations and James and Peter had drilled out their first core samples.

“James!” Peter called, stepping inside the lab. “What have we got going?”

James turned his chair away from the workstation and shook Peter’s hand.

“Sup, Pete?” he asked. “What we’ve got going is the end-stage analysis of the core samples.”

James handed a sheaf of paper to Peter.

“This is interesting,” Peter said, reading the report. “It says here there’s a high concentration of iridium in the soil around the structure.”

“Only at a specific depth in the soil,” James answered. “It looks like a local meteoric impact.

“Yeah, but the patterning suggests the KT boundary,” Peter said.

“You noticed that too, huh?” James asked. “The Prof shit when he saw it. He wants me to drill new samples and re-run the geological survey.”

“I can see why.”

In geology, the KT boundary is a marker indicative of a time at the end of the Cretaceous Era when the Earth was subject to massive meteoric bombardment, including the so-called “Death Star” that wiped out the dinosaurs. The hallmark of the KT boundary was an uncommonly high concentration of iridium in the soil of the era; iridium being an element common in space, but exceedingly rare on earth.

“I don’t believe it’s the KT myself,” James said. “I think it’s just an anomalous iridium layer, probably from a local nearby meteoric impact.”

“That would make more sense to me,” Peter replied. “It’s something to keep an eye on. We’ll look for other signs of a nearby impact when we do seismography.”

“Yeah, the Prof wants to see you about that,” James told him. “He wants the cannons set up for a wide scan.”

“Why?”

“He wants to completely rule out the KT boundary’s significance to the dig.”

Peter made his way across their narrow, dusty compound to Mark Echohawk’s trailer. He was a couple of years older than James and was tall, dark-haired and athletic. Coming from a poor neighbourhood, he’d exploited an athletic scholarship to get himself into the UCLA anthropology department. It didn’t take his teachers long to realize this jock in particular was more interested than working in the field than playing on one. It wasn’t long after that Mark Echohawk, dean emeritus of UCLA’s newly-expanded archaeology department, took an interest in the young Peter Paulson.

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Peter found Echohawk in the camper's kitchenette brewing a pot of coffee. He favoured an old-fashioned percolator urn-style coffee maker over the more popular—and faster—drip-brew coffee makers. He was waiting patiently for the “Ready” light on the urn to turn red, a large glass mug in his hand.

“Hi Mark,” Peter said.

He was the only one of Echohawk's students to call him, privately, by his first name.

“Hello Peter,” he said, reaching for the tap on the coffee urn the instant the light flashed red. “Want a cup?”

“Hell yeah,” Peter said, sliding into the horseshoe-shaped booth. If there was one thing the Prof did exceptionally well besides archaeology it was brew a pot of coffee. Echohawk put milk, brown sugar and a bottle of cinnamon on the table. Peter began fixing his coffee as Echohawk sat down. Peter, almost twenty-five, watched the sixty-odd-year-old Echohawk fix his own coffee. Peter had studied under Echohawk for years now and had been fortunate enough to go into the field with him twice. This was their third expedition together and Peter, close to graduating and beginning his own career as an anthropologist, considered Echohawk both a friend and mentor.

“You read the geosurvey report?” Echohawk asked.

“Yeah.”

“What do you think?”

“I think we have to run some scans and dig.”

“Why?”

“The iridium layer,” Peter replied. “It could be anomalous, but I've seen enough spectrographs of the KT boundary to know when I'm looking at it. So either the structure was buried at the end of the Cretaceous or else it was built in a pit dug out that far down and then very meticulously buried.”

Echohawk nodded. He'd come to the same conclusion. Neither of them liked the implications.

“That's why I want to start off with an extended Doppler seismology scan,” Echohawk said, “to see if it was buried deliberately or not. I also want to find out if the pyramid was part of some sort of temple complex. If they dug a pit to build the thing in, chances are it wasn't a stand-alone structure. Chances are there's other structures buried nearby and I want to see if we can't locate them as well.”

“We should follow up with a hard dig,” Peter said. “Use Positron Emission Test scanners to see what's between us and the structure and just

strip out as much earth as possible. We may even want to consider getting an orbital deep radar scan of the surrounding desert.”

“One thing at a time,” Echohawk said. “Set up the Doppler cannons for as wide a scan field as possible. Then, we determine the next step.”

It took most of the rest of the afternoon to set up the Doppler seismology cannons for the scan. Doppler seismology scanning had been a beneficial addition to field archaeology years earlier. Using special cannons, slug weights were fired into the ground. The seismic vibrations, Doppler waves, resulting from the blasts were picked up by echographic equipment similar in nature to ultrasound scanners and the resulting information was fed into computing systems that compiled three-dimensional images of objects buried beneath layers and layers of earth. The use of multiple cannons fired simultaneously and networked in to a central computer would generate a detailed image of an object and anything surrounding it for kilometres. Doppler seismology had proven to be most beneficial in palaeontology, helping discover entire dinosaur burial grounds. But Doppler seismology had also been used in archaeological digs in Egypt, Iraq and India. The greatest success of Doppler seismology to date had been the discovery of an entire lost city in China’s Gobi desert.

When James and Peter returned from setting up the cannons, the sun was well on its way towards setting. Three canteen trucks, one cooking hamburgers, fries and pizza, one serving ice cream and one serving just about everything else, had established a beachhead on the edge of Echohawk’s camp. James left to get their suppers while Peter reported in with Echohawk. The rest of the expedition were seated at picnic tables eating, or were working diligently in the lab building preparing for the Doppler scan and running final analyses on the soil samples taken earlier that day. Peter and James ate their fast-food suppers and then joined Professor Echohawk in the lab where the Prof sat with Paul Santino.

“Gentlemen,” Echohawk said, “we’re ready when you are.”

James sat at one workstation, Peter at another.

“Tracking and recording are online,” James said.

“Echography imaging systems on,” Peter said. “We’re compiling a scan of ambient seismic activity.”

“An ambient scan will allow us to get an accurate image,” Echohawk explained to Santino. “By sampling the seismic ‘noise’ made from foot and

vehicle traffic and natural shifting in the ground, the scanner will then be able to filter out that background activity and focus entirely on the shockwaves set off by the cannons firing.”

Santino nodded and continued to watch the display screens in front of James and Peter.

“We’re ready, Prof,” James called.

“You may fire when ready,” Echohawk said with amusement.

“Thirty-second blast warning,” Peter said, toggling a switch.

Two short blasts of a siren erupted in response, followed by a long wail which cycled higher and higher in pitch before dying out.

“Cannons armed,” James reported.

“Final countdown,” Peter said, reaching for an isolated console. “Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two and one. Fire!”

James unlocked a sealed button on the computer console and pressed it. There was a deep muffled rumbling noise and the slightest of tremors passed through the ground. A sound like distant thunder rolled through the compound and instantly every screen on the monitors before them flared to life, recording the progress of the shockwaves set off by the multiple cannons firing. A distinct image was forming on the main screen where the Doppler compilation was being done. It showed the pyramid as seen from above, resting atop a large circular dais. From there the image became strange, almost incomprehensible to Echohawk or his team: The dais was sitting on top of the crest of an arched dome, kilometres across. The dome was covered by an irregular network of pits and canyons and large constructs that looked like clusters of buildings. The dome itself was so huge that its periphery could not be seen on the scan image.

“What the hell was that?” Echohawk asked, rising.

“I don’t know,” Peter said. “I don’t understand what we’re looking at.”

“Show me three-D of the scan,” Echohawk said. “James, how far did we scan?”

“We set up the seismology to scan everything within a ten-kilometre radius of the pyramid,” James said.

“Can we compile further out?” Echohawk asked. “Extrapolate based on what we have so far?”

“It won’t be well defined,” James said, “but there’s enough seismic activity for the Doppler imager to compile an image another ten K out, with about fifty to sixty percent accuracy.”

“Do it,” Echohawk commanded.

“I have the three-D, Prof!” Peter called.

Echohawk leaned over Peter’s workstation and stared in disbelief.

“The view is along the Y axis,” Peter said. “We’re looking at it from the horizontal now.” The pyramid appeared onscreen with scale measurements below the image. The Laguna Pyramid was almost twenty meters tall and nearly twenty-five meters wide at the base. Hardly a large pyramid by any standards, but it crested the ridge of a massive dome. At its summit the bowl of the dome was six kilometres wide and stretched down beyond the scope of the initial Doppler image. About two kilometres down along the surface of the dome was a ring of pyramids spaced evenly one every half-kilometre around.

“I’m recompiling all images now,” James called from his workstation. “You aren’t going to believe this.” The image onscreen shrank, to accommodate its full scope. The dome was not a complete sphere but part of a mountainous arch that curved down into a massive disk. They were looking at the upper half of a massive object onscreen. One whose presence they could not even begin to understand. Their compiled image was twenty kilometres in diameter. The object they were looking at was a circular disk with an arched dome on its surface. Said dome was seven kilometres high and at its widest was fifteen kilometres. Most incomprehensible was that the gargantuan object was right now buried beneath their feet.

“I think we need to call somebody,” Echohawk said, stunned.

2

EXCAVATION

“I won’t believe it until we’ve had the entire Doppler seismography equipment checked out and another set of scans done,” Echohawk said during the next morning’s meeting.

“In fact I wouldn’t object to replacing the Doppler equipment altogether. Is it possible that something in the local geology is setting up some weird harmonic that’s messing with the equipment?”

“Not likely,” James said. “Prof, Peter looked at the Doppler equipment while I went over the geology last night: the equipment checks out fine and the only anomaly in the soil out here is that the area we’re in has significantly lower fallout levels than most of New Mexico. White Sands was a nuclear target during War Three and most of New Mexico has measurable fallout. There’s almost none in the area surrounding the Laguna Pyramid.”

“What about the iridium in the soil from around the Pyramid?” Peter asked.

“That’s the other problem with the dig,” Echohawk replied. “If the object was deliberately buried then the spread of iridium through the soil would not be consistent from one sample to the next. There is a very distinct spread to the iridium layer and from what we can see it’s right through the KT Boundary. So according to the current evidence not only was the object buried naturally, it was here well before the end of the Cretaceous.”

“That would mean the object was here more than sixty million years ago.”

“I know,” Echohawk said, dryly.

“But that would be impossible,” James said. “Unless there was an advanced civilization here on Earth sixty million years ago. No evidence has *ever* been found to even suggest that.”

“James, until a few years ago there wasn’t any evidence to suggest there was life on one of Jupiter’s moons,” Peter said. “Then the Clarke probe brought back water samples from Europa that were rich in bacteria.”

“The point is we don’t know what it is we’re dealing with,” Echohawk said emphatically, “and the only way to find out is to dig. We’ll start a full excavation today. I’ve asked the Society to book us some time with the orbital labs so we can get a deep radar probe of the area and find out for sure if the object is really as big as the Doppler seismology says.”

“When do we expect the sweep?” Peter asked.

“In about a week and a half,” Echohawk replied. “The lab aboard the Concord 3 station is very busy right now and even as a priority booking the earliest we could get is then.”

“Well between now and then we have some earth and stone to start moving,” Peter said. “We should use Magnetic Resonance Imagers and Positron Emission Testers to make sure we can dig through quickly. Anything of significant interest between us and the Pyramid will show up on a scan.”

“I agree,” Echohawk said, “and this dig will be slow enough as it is. The real question is whether or not we go public with what we have so far; and if not, just how long we can expect to keep it a secret.”

A limited press release was issued by the WAAS. It said in part that a structure of unknown origin had been found on land belonging to the Laguna Band and that a team of researchers was currently undertaking its unearthing. Aside from a few details about the size and composition of the structure, little else was added. Some people were curious and came to see but no more so than would be expected on most digs. Only Santino, Echohawk and Echohawk’s senior assistants knew the truth. And none of them were talking.

The dig was progressing well enough; the PET and MRI scanners allowed them to dig more quickly and less gingerly. They had excavated much of the Pyramid in a widening circle. Laser cutters on loan from the Society allowed them to clear away the heavy stone deposits, but the dig was nonetheless

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becoming more difficult because of the nature of the structure they were unearthing. During extensive excavations, it was often possible to “level” a dig laterally so the maximum width of a work pit could be maintained. But with a pyramid, the deeper one dug the wider one had to make their pit. The wider they had to make their work area the more soil they had to move from the surrounding land. Consequently the dig was starting to slow down. Where they had taken a week to reach their current depth, it would take them twice as long to expose the rest of the buried pyramid. And that was without considering what lay beneath that. If anything of significance presented itself in the soil between them and the base of the pyramid, they would have to excavate that object before continuing.

Echohawk’s team first exposed all four sides of the Pyramid and from there dug down another four meters. The Pyramid was now peeking out of a pit eight meters deep, itself nearly ten meters wide to a side at that level. Their work pit was a further twenty meters wide at current depth. Actual digging had stopped while James and Peter began another round of tests on the ground, using the PET and MRI scanners to ensure there was nothing archaeologically significant between them and the base of the Pyramid.

“How’s it looking?” Echohawk asked, as he approached his two assistants.

“If the Doppler seismology reading was right,” James said as he and Peter calibrated the MRI scanner, “we’re about nine, maybe ten meters from the base of the Pyramid. The ground is starting to become solid rock at this point, so we might consider precision blasting to widen the pit and bringing in more laser cutters to get past the rock deposits.”

“I’m not crazy about using explosives,” Peter advised Echohawk.

“Neither am I,” the elder archaeologist concurred, “but I’m inclined to agree with James. I’ll call the Society and have them send us an explosives engineer. We need to uncover the Pyramid, at least.”

“Yeah, but then what?” James asked. “Prof...this thing isn’t some Mayan ruin. The Pyramid is *metal*. And if it really is sitting on a structure twenty kilometres wide, what the hell is it and what do we do with it once we have access?”

Echohawk shrugged.

“We go inside and have a look around,” he said.

Nightfall brought the day's work to a close, the pit a little wider a little deeper. The last of the work crew left the dig site behind and only James Peter and Echohawk remained, staring at the Pyramid under floodlights. James and Peter were sore, sweaty and filthy from their day in the work pit. Echohawk had done his share, but had to balance his time in the work pit with his time coordinating the other tasks involved in the dig: analysis of recovered soil and stone, coordinating the expansion of the dig site, the logistics of hauling away the earth burying the pyramid and keeping the World Aboriginal Archaeological Society abreast of the ongoing efforts. Experts from around the globe were already beginning to weigh in on the artifact and its origins. Echohawk had to sift through their reports to find nuggets of use to the dig.

"I don't think I've ever seen anything like this," Peter said, tiredly.

"Neither have I," Echohawk replied, "although I've had worse digs. Try cutting through stone like what we're chopping up with jackhammers and weak explosives. We didn't always have laser cutters and sonic pulverisers, you know."

"I keep hearing that with Doppler seismology, MRI machines, PET scanners and deep probe radar that the days of digging are over," Peter said, "and it's all bullshit. We'll never stop digging in the dirt to find things."

"I hope you're right," Echohawk said with a smile.

They turned and began making their way from the site. Echohawk stopped and clasped his left ear as it suddenly started to vibrate. He'd been wearing a communications headset so long that day that he'd forgotten he still had it on. He toggled a small switch on the earpiece and began speaking.

"Mark Echohawk," he said. "What? Really? That's excellent. We're on our way to the lab now. We'll linx in directly from our main computer console. Thanks!" Echohawk ended the linx and began pacing from the work pit a little faster.

"What's up?" Peter asked, jogging up beside his mentor.

"That was Professor Todds," Echohawk said. "We got our operation time with Concord 3. The orbital scan of the area is going to begin in a few minutes."

Early in the twenty-first century, Space Station Unity, the International Space Agency's crown jewel, went into operation. The costly venture helped open the door for other international efforts in space, including the Bova Manned Mars Mission, the Clarke series of robot probes to Jupiter and its moons and an international commercial venture by the Netter Consortium to

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build an orbital hotel. The privatization of civilian space ventures paved the way for cooperative international scientific missions. After long decades of use, Unity Station was retired. But the fledgling World Space Agency was already planning the second generation of International Space Stations. This time four stations were to be established around the globe. Later, two more would be added to the planned project. Six Concord stations were commissioned: five in geostationary orbit around the globe; Concord 1 hung in the sky over Europe; Concord 2 over Asia and Eastern Europe; Concord 3 over North America and Concord 4 and 5 over the North and south Poles, respectively. When Concord 6 was completed it would follow an orbital flight path between the Equator and the Antarctic Circle, covering the needs of the Southern Hemisphere. At the present time only three of the six stations were operational; the other three in various stages of construction. Concord 2, 3 and 5 were fully staffed, while work continued on Concorde 1, 4 and 6. The first five stations would have been up and running had a major electrical fire aboard Concord 1 and a near space collision aboard a fortunately empty Concord 4 not set back the schedule.

Like all of the operational Concord space stations, Concord 3 was staffed by members of the World Space Agency. Following regional preference guidelines, the cosmonauts aboard Concord 3 came primarily from the North American Union; American, Canadian, Mexican and Cuban cosmonauts handled all aspects of the day-to-day running of the station, including the constant research projects from both military and civilian interests. The station's command module was large but cramped; every available surface used as a workstation, including a spherical island moored to the inner bulkhead by a large support column through the center of the room. Two dozen officers occupied the module at any given time, everyone there running or monitoring part of the station's vital functions. The science system module was directly below the command module and looked much the same, though it was devoted to running the two arrays of scientific equipment at either end of the station; one array faced the earth, the other the stars. Between the command and science modules was the command office for Concord 3. The command office consisted of three separate suites: One for the station's chief clerk; one for the officer of the watch and one for the station commander. At this time, only one office was occupied: that of the station commander, Air Force Lieutenant-Colonel Margaret Bloom.

Lt. Colonel Bloom's office boasted a large blister window of a transparent metallic alloy. The view from her office was across the breadth of the space station to the Earth orbiting beyond. In the three months she had been skyside at C-3 Bloom had grown used to the view and then become tired of it. She had three months more to go before returning to Earth and her true love: flying. At fifty-five, Bloom only had ten years left before her flight status was permanently revoked. She had crystal blue eyes and short, blonde hair. She had strong Germanic features and her active lifestyle had kept the age from her features. She could pass for thirty and give women even younger a run for their money with men their own age. A former fighter jock and now an Air Force test pilot, she loathed the idea of giving up the stick. The hazardous nature of her work necessitated that every eighteen months she take a six-month ground or non-flight assignment and each time she spent six months grounded it was to her six more months that she wasn't in the cockpit. The last thing she'd piloted had been the shuttle that had brought her up here. The next would be the shuttle home. The ten years she had left to fly seemed painfully short after almost four times as many years of flying behind her.

Bloom studied the watch report on the electronic notepad before her. All the standard statistics about what was just another day at the cracker factory. She signed off on it, planning to take a break from the monotony long enough to have a coffee and a cigarette. Not that there were any places aboard a space station that one could legally smoke. Bloom wondered how the tobacco companies were staying afloat. For a change of pace she put down the watch report and began going over the requests for access to the station's scientific equipment and arrays. Normally Bloom didn't pay much attention to the scientific research being done; if it was civilian it only concerned her if it was a potential threat to the station. If it was military Bloom was required to supervise. Most of the time the requests for authorization crossed her desk, she signed off on them and they were forgotten. However when the requisition from the World Aboriginal Anthropological Society crossed her desk Margaret Bloom became personally involved.

Bloom finished up on some unrelated paperwork and made her way from the office module into the command module. The communications hub dominated the lower hemisphere of the workstation island in the center of the module. She pushed and floated her way to the com operator's station.

"Colonel?" the communications officer asked, as Bloom drifted to his station.

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“Lieutenant, I need a direct linx to the communications spar for the ongoing deep scan in New Mexico.”

The lieutenant worked his console’s controls and a few seconds later the linx was established. Bloom slipped on a headset and oriented herself to face the two-way screen in the center of the operator’s station.

In Laguna, Echohawk James and Peter took their seats around the main computer station in the lab. The computer was linked in to the World Grid and would shortly be receiving preliminary data from the deep scan being done aboard Concord 3. The actual full compilation of the data would be done on the station and then transmitted down to the Laguna site for full analysis. The data being transmitted to Laguna would be basic, but would be enough to form preliminary images of the object buried beneath them and confirm its size and age, if not its composition.

“We have an incoming linx from Concord 3,” James reported. “It isn’t the data dump, though. It’s a communication linx...for you, Prof; from the station commander.”

Peter and James both looked questioningly at Echohawk, who shrugged and arched an eyebrow. Echohawk slipped on a headset with a video boom and lowered the mini screen over his eye. He toggled a switch on the side of the earpiece and nodded to James.

“Put it through to my spar,” he said. “I’m online.”

James focused a minicam onto Echohawk and then transferred the signal over. Instantly the viewer over Echohawk’s eye filled with the image of Lieutenant-Colonel Margaret Bloom.

“Hello Meg,” Echohawk said. “What a pleasant surprise!”

Bloom smiled.

“Hello Mark,” she said. “How have you been?”

“I’m fine. How about you, Meg? Finally get tired of test-piloting orbital relay fighters? I’m surprised to see you at a desk even if it is in orbit.”

“I’ve been good,” Bloom replied. “And no, I’m on a six-month ground-time rotation. They wanted me back at Engineering and Design but I was so fucking sick of E&D I took a command rotation on Concord 3.”

Bloom was happy to speak with Mark again. It had been too long, she reflected, since she’d last seen him. But they both lived their own lives and they both knew it was best that way. But seeing his face onscreen Bloom knew she wanted to get together with him again soon.

“Have you heard from Laura?” Bloom asked to break the silence.

“Same time every week,” Echohawk replied. “She writes me a linx, tells me how she’s been doing and what’s going on in her life. I always write back and offer her advice when she asks; same as you.”

“And she never takes any advice,” Bloom said, wryly. “Same as you. She gets that from your side of the family, you know.”

“I know. And I’m proud of it; same as you.”

“Mark, I have to say I was surprised to find you back in the field,” she said. “I thought for sure you’d given it up for the classroom.”

“They made me an offer I couldn’t refuse, Meg,” Echohawk said. “Have you read up on the details of our request?”

“Honestly, I hadn’t. Usually the station’s clerk reads through the bulk of it and summarizes the requests in three sentences including one for the applicant’s name.” Echohawk smiled.

“Reread the application,” he said, “and you’ll understand why I’m out here. You’ll also see why we ordered the scan.”

“Mark...do you have any idea how busy it is up here? There’s a hundred projects just like yours going on each day; those are just the civilian operations. Then there’s the government stuff and then the military. There are projects ongoing I’m not even supposed to know about. Then, I have to oversee the day-to-day operations of running this station. I don’t get a lot of time to read requests and reports.”

“I think you’ll want to read this one and not just for my sake.”

“Is it that big?”

“You just said a mouthful.”

History records that early in the twenty-first century international organizations decreed that Internet service was a public utility, much the same way that telephone or electrical services were. They renamed the Internet the World Grid and unknowingly ushered in a new technological era. Television, telecommunications and the services of the Internet were gradually combined into one vast, single medium. Extremely high bandwidth was required to transmit the Grid’s information to the world, so fibre optic trunk lines were established solely to provide Grid access. And the World Grid delivered everything: View-On-Demand television programming replaced broadcast TV’s schedules; people began to watch what they wanted, when they wanted; long-distance calling became a thing of the past because of real-time voice chat; telephones gave way to streaming video

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communication and the host of services once provided by the Internet were still all available on the new World Grid.

The new media required new delivery systems and a small electronics firm working in Ottawa, Ontario provided the world with the next step in computer evolution: quantum optic computing, the computation of information using light instead of electricity and quantum processing. Previous computer systems relied on the electric processing of digital signals. Optic processing used light pulses instead of electrical impulses to transmit information. And where traditional computers transmitted bits of information as either ones or zeros to process information, quantum computation processed information by transmitting them as ones, zeros, or as virtually any probable combination of ones and zeros. Quantum-Optic computers, sometimes called Optical Probability Computers, worked so much faster so much more efficiently that the amount of information that could be transmitted, processed and stored was exponentially greater than any previous computer system designed.

With the advent of quantum-optic computing, Grid service providers replaced or absorbed cable companies, phone companies, Internet service providers and a host of other data-based industries. As currency was replaced by electronic credits to meet an international economy, even banks were absorbed into the new World Grid. The debit card became the new cash, with card-scanners built into most computer keyboards. Banks became largely virtual, with most people performing their financial transactions from their computer terminals. The World Grid was so all-pervasive that governments around the world formed supervisory committees to control as much of the technology as they could. And what couldn't be legislated was closely watched.

Most national Grid oversight committees simply ensured that no criminal activities were committed. There were some governments, however, who used theirs to spy on their own citizens; the United States of America among them. The House Grid Securities Commission had empowered the Homeland Security Agency to do just that. The work was outsourced to the Defence Intelligence Agency. The Laguna dig had been attracting attention ever since it started. But when the Doppler seismology tests revealed the possibility of a massive artificial construct buried beneath the New Mexico desert and that

that object would have been there for millions of years, very keen interest was paid to the dig. When the Concord 3 space station began its survey of the area the DIA was already tapped into their systems through a back channel, recording everything. Already General Roy Harrod, head of the DIA, was aware of the ongoing operation and was supervising it closely under the direct orders of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Within an hour of the deep scan's beginning, the data being compiled by Concord 3 was already being compiled and extrapolated by the DIA's own supercomputers. And the results of that extrapolation were so shocking to General Harrod that immediately after he had read the report he contacted the Cee-Jay-Cee on a Grid channel that was only to be used in the most urgent situations. Harrod's desk was devoid of any furnishing other than three computer consoles connected to the same keypad. The information from Concord 3 was on the console to his right. On the middle console, he was linxing through to the Chairman, Joint Chiefs.

"General Harrod," the Chairman said, "what is it?"

"Sir, this is in regards to the Type Seven in New Mexico," Harrod replied.

"Go ahead."

"I'm linxing the information to you now, sir," Harrod said as he entered a sequence of keys on his keypad. "I would suggest deploying personnel to New Mexico and securing control of the site."

At his own workstation, the Chairman was reading over the report Harrod had just sent him.

"I concur, General. Use standard protocols and keep me fully informed. This is your operation, General Harrod."

"Yes, Mister Chairman."

In his office at the Pentagon, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff sighed heavily. The Chairman terminated the link and then removed his earpiece. He couldn't get the knack for hitting the buttons without seeing them. He tapped in the correct sequence and replaced the earpiece. His console turned black except for a single red dot in the center of the screen.

"Yes?" a voice issued into the Chairman's earpiece.

"Put them on call," the Chairman said. "We may need to meet." There was a long pause on the other end. An emergency meeting was rare.

"Understood," the voice said, at last.

The signal was cut. The Chairman sat back in his chair.

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Two hours after the downlink from Concord 3 began James was nearly done a preliminary compilation of the data.

“A lot of this is going to be conjectural,” he warned. “We’ll know the basic size and shape of the object but we won’t be able to tell its composition or any fine details.”

“That’s all right, James,” Echohawk said. “Let’s see what you have.”

A large display screen had been set up to the left of the main console workstation. It unrolled much like an old projection screen and liquid crystal within compiled the image. They had set up the screen to accommodate the small audience of onlookers who had gathered, including the entire Laguna Band Council.

“We’re only going to be able to see from the top down,” James explained. “We can do a side view, but only of the upper half of the object. Whatever it looks like from below will remain a mystery, unfortunately.”

Those were the last words spoken by anyone for a very long time. Onscreen, the image of an arched dome appeared. The dome stretched out along its base into a long disk so that it seemed to be a tall, rounded mountain stretching out to a valley floor. At the top of the massive dome was the elevated dais and atop that, looking very small when compared to the dome itself, was the Laguna Pyramid. A distance from the top a ring of three-quarter pyramids guarded the crest. According to the scale, there was one pyramid roughly every half-kilometre, twenty-eight in all. At the bottom of the disk, the object was thirty-two and three quarters kilometres across. It was circular and the blister-like top of the arched dome was almost seven and a half kilometres high.

“My God,” Santino said. “What the hell is it?”

“James, get me a linx to the WAAS,” Echohawk said. “I need to speak with Professor Todds immediately.”

James nodded and began working a second keypad.

“I don’t understand,” Peter said. “What are we looking at? A domed city? If so, who built it?”

“We don’t know that that’s what it is,” Echohawk cautioned.

“Well, what else could it be?” Peter demanded. “And how did such a civilization occur without any other evidence ever being found? How did they develop their industry without fossil fuels?”

“Alcohol-based fuel?” James suggested. “Maybe they used geothermal power?”

“James, my linx to Professor Todds please,” Echohawk reminded him.

“Guys, let’s try and stay focused here. We don’t know what we’re dealing with right now and we can’t jump to any conclusions.”

“Prof? We have a problem,” James reported.

“What is it?”

“I have no Grid access,” James said. “I’ve even lost the feed from Concord 3.”

“How is that possible?”

“I don’t know!” James answered. “I can’t access the WAAS, Concord 3, I can’t send linxes and I can’t even get a VOD show.”

Echohawk crossed to where he’d put down his travel bag and pulled out his own console. He switched it on as he slipped his headset on. Lowering the microphone and display booms into place, Echohawk placed his own Grid linx. All his display showed was a standard no-service message:

**ERROR 201.21: UNABLE TO ACCESS WORLD GRID AT THIS TIME.
PLEASE ENSURE THAT YOUR MODEM IS ONLINE AND THAT YOUR CONNECTION SETTINGS ARE VALID. IF THE PROBLEM PERSISTS, PLEASE CONTACT YOUR GRID SERVICE PROVIDER.**

“Shit!” Echohawk swore. “What the hell is going on?”

In response to his question the aluminium walls of the lab building began to rattle and hiss as they were pelted with sand, dust and small rocks. At the last Echohawk heard the distinctive staccato thunder of helicopter blades rumbling in all around them. He, James, Peter and Chief Santino rushed from the shelter into the night air. A storm of debris blew around them as four massive black helicopters landed in the compound. Several other military vehicles, including the British-made Ranger armoured personnel transports were rolling up. The glare from the floodlights on the helicopter illuminated the compound with dusty beams of cruel, artificially white light. The storm began to die off as the helicopters’ propellers cycled down to a halt. The growling whine of the power cells in the land vehicles also faded, leaving only the migraine white of the floodlights that seemed to be everywhere. Echohawk squinted vainly, feeling pain behind his eyes. James and Peter produced sunglasses. Santino shielded his face by making a visor with his

hand. They watched, stunned, as soldiers began running around in an organized, concerted effort. The soldiers were rounding people up from the mess tents and the shelters, bringing them all over to the central location of the laboratory. Two soldiers stood before Echohawk as the rest of the camp's inhabitants and the dozen-odd curious onlookers that were almost always on site were herded together behind them.

"What the fuck is going on?" Echohawk bellowed with indignant rage.

The soldiers said nothing. Finally after everyone was brought together, one of the soldiers spoke into her headset.

"Area secure, Colonel!" she barked. A door in the helicopter nearest to Echohawk slid open. A man in combat fatigues, tall, gaunt with ice-blue eyes and greying hair shorn clean to his scalp walked slowly, deliberately from the cabin. As he reached the hard-packed earth of the desert floor he slipped a visored cap onto his head and walked with the same imperious, deliberate pace he had used to leave the helicopter over to where Echohawk stood. He had all the bearing of a senior officer and all the power and menace of a veteran soldier.

"Professor Mark Echohawk," the Army officer said, "I am Colonel Isaac Jude, United States Army Rangers, Thirteenth Battalion."

"How very wonderful for you," Echohawk said.

Jude ignored the remark.

"By order of the head of the Defence Intelligence Agency, acting on the behalf of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of the United States, we are seizing control of this site and all equipment and records within. This area is now considered to be entirely the property of the government of the United States. You and your people will be detained long enough to be debriefed on the artifact you've uncovered. Until further notice, all access to the World Grid in this area, including the town of Laguna has been blacked out."

"You have to right to do this!" Santino bellowed. "This land belongs to the Southwestern Aboriginal Protectorate, as per the terms of the North American Aboriginal Charter! You can't do this!"

Jude turned his head to regard Santino with a cold, dispassionate gaze.

"Chief Santino," he said, sounding stunned at Santino's words, "we just did." Jude shook his head at their dumbfounded expressions, unable to suppress a smile.

"Colonel Bloom?"

Bloom was at her desk, overlooking resource consumption reports on her

console screen. Bloom keyed open the intercom channel and replied.

“Go ahead.”

“Colonel, you asked to be kept apprised of the deep scan of New Mexico,” the operator on the other end of the intercom explained. “There’s been a development, ma’am.”

“I’m listening.”

“The scan is still ongoing. However we are no longer able to relay telemetry to New Mexico.”

“Put a crew in the virtual chairs and deploy repair drones,” Bloom said. “It’s not rocket science, Lieutenant.”

“The problem isn’t on our end, Colonel,” the lieutenant replied. “There’s no Grid service at the site.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The entire Laguna district of the Southwestern Protectorate, in other words most of northwestern New Mexico, is without access to the World Grid.”

“That’s impossible. There’s optic trunk lines buried right through the continental landmass and we monitor satellite traffic from up here. I haven’t gotten a report of any satellites being down.”

Bloom unstrapped herself from her chair, drifting away from her desk.

“I’m on my way.”

She pushed her way up to the airlock leading from her office and from there left, into the command module.

“Colonel on deck!” the duty officer called.

Bloom made her way to the command and control station that was monitoring the flow of communications to and from Concord 3.

“What is the situation?” Bloom asked, after returning the lieutenant’s salute.

“Well ma’am, as I said, it looks as though Grid service to the area comprising the Laguna District and surrounding communities has been completely cut off. There’s no discernible activity, whatsoever.”

“That’s impossible,” Bloom reiterated. “Every single substation, communication central office, microwave and radio transmission relay tower...all of it would have had to have gone down, at once.”

“Lieutenant-Colonel Bloom,” the duty officer called, “you have an incoming link from General Harrod of the DIA.”

Bloom turned to the young major, a look of disbelief on her face.

“You’re kidding me, right, Major?”

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“No, ma’am,” she replied.

“What in Hell is the head of the DIA doing, calling me?”

She moved back towards the hatch.

“I’ll take it in my office.”

Back in her office, Bloom unrolled the viewscreen from her console. A minicam built into the screen transmitted her image directly to General Harrod’s office.

“General Harrod,” Bloom said as the general’s image appeared onscreen. “What can I do for you, sir?”

“Good evening, Lieutenant-Colonel,” Harrod answered. “I’ll be brief. You can start by collecting all data that you have recorded about the New Mexico deep scan operation and packing it for transport back home.”

“General?”

“There’s a jump plane fuelled and ready for takeoff at Edwards,” Harrod continued. “In ninety minutes, the plane will be docking with Concord 3. I will be aboard and at that time I will take delivery of the optic slips.”

“With all due respect, General, Concord 3 is an international space station and is not subject to American military control,” Bloom said. “If you intend on acquiring a copy of the data, you’ll either have to take it up with the World Space Agency, or with the World Aboriginal Anthropological Society; they’re the ones who commissioned the scan and so by international proprietary law it belongs to them.”

“Lieutenant-Colonel Bloom, I’m not putting in a request. As your superior officer, I am *ordering* you to stand by and surrender those optic slips. You don’t have any choice in the matter. I am seizing them, as they directly relate to the national security of the United States.”

“You are neither my immediate superior nor in any position to order me to surrender those slips,” Bloom snapped, indignant rage filling her.

“You sure as hell don’t have the authority, General, to breach international law and violate World Council treaties! And begging your pardon, General, you damn well know all of this already!”

She hit the killswitch on her keypad and severed the communication. Seconds later, she was sending an emergency audiovisual link to World Space Agency headquarters. She was immediately put through to space station control in Hamburg, Germany.

“Colonel Bloom,” the control operator responding said, “this is Brenda Hensing. How can I help you?”

“We have a situation up here,” Bloom replied. “I have reason to believe that members of the United States Defence Intelligence Agency are going to try boarding the station within the next two hours.”

“What? I don’t understand. Why would they—?”

The signal began degrading; Bloom couldn’t make out what Hensing was saying.

“Say again, Hamburg,” she called. “Say again, please.”

Hensing’s voice came back through the linx, faintly. “We’re getting a lot of static on—.” The image onscreen froze, depixelated and was replaced with a plain blue background. The words

EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS RELAY FAILED

flashed across the screen. Bloom tried to re-establish the linx, but could not.

“Oh fuck,” she hissed.

Throughout time the corrupt have risen to power. Throughout time they have manipulated the Truth in order to stay in power, even when at the cost of Life. The greatest weapon of the corrupt has always been ignorance. But Truth yearns to be free and it always finds a champion...

3

INDOMITABLE TRUTH

He regarded them with ice-blue eyes over a hale, angular face. The corners of his mouth curved upwards into an oh-so slight, ever-present smile, this Colonel Jude. As their captor sat down Echohawk couldn't help the feeling that he was a supplicant before a king awaiting judgment. Jude consulted a notepad which he then tossed down onto the collapsible metal desk that had until recently served as Echohawk's command post within the lab building. Echohawk and Santino stood before Colonel Jude, two of Jude's men behind them.

"Do you have any idea," Jude began, "just how often it is that I've been called in during my career to help save people from themselves?"

The tall soldier regarded them, the crow's feet in the corners of his eyes reaching outward as he squinted.

"You strike me as more of a hired killer, than a professional hero," Santino said, angrily.

Jude regarded him a long moment, perhaps wondering how Santino had gained such astute insight.

"I've been that too, when necessary," Jude said. "Right now, I'm the man who's keeping you from further digging on the object you've discovered out here."

"Do you have any idea what it *is* that we've discovered out here?" Echohawk demanded angrily.

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“No, Professor Echohawk, and neither do you. That’s the problem.” Jude leaned forward in his chair, as if trying to explain things to two errant schoolchildren.

“The fact is, gentlemen, that the object could be anything. And until such time as a proper threat assessment can be made, it is in the interests of National Security to halt the dig.”

“What threat can an object that’s been buried for the last sixty-five million years possibly pose to national security?” Echohawk demanded.

“What threat did the Kreutz virus pose to humankind while it lay dormant in a cave in the Amazon for ten thousand years, until clear cutting exposed it to cattle farmers?” Jude countered. “Professor, my job here is simple: I’m shutting the dig down and I’m going to debrief you and everyone associated with this project on everything you know about the object. Once I’ve completed that, then my superior will decide what action is best taken.”

Of course, this wasn’t strictly true; his superior, namely General Harrod, had already decided what action was to be taken: Echohawk, Santino and the Laguna Pyramid archaeological dig team were to be debriefed and then silenced. The dig site would be closed, permanently and the world would get back to normal. Contingencies had already been discussed, ensuring that no one came out to the dig site for a very long time. This was New Mexico, after all. The Laguna Dig would unearth highly radioactive, contaminated soil from War Three. That contamination would of course force the United States government to cordon off the entire area for the next hundred years or more. A shame about the archaeologists, really, but there were risks to digging within the fallout zone of one of the dirtiest atomic bomb blasts of the war. Jude had no problems with his orders in this case. Everyone on-site was to be considered a red-shirt; expendable. It wasn’t the first time he’d been ordered by his government to kill and certainly not the first time he and his troops had targeted civilians. Covert operations were never pretty. However, they were almost always necessary. And if there was indeed a Type Seven buried beneath their feet at this moment, it was imperative that this area be secured.

“So, quite simply, Professor Echohawk, the quicker you are willing to cooperate with us, the quicker this will all be over.”

A hastily called meeting in the office module brought Lieutenant-Colonel Bloom together with most of her senior staff: Major Jack Benedict, her executive officer and the only one aboard with whom Bloom had served

before; Captain Charles Boucher, Bloom's head of station security; Captain Elizabeth Donnelly, the station's operations chief and Major Louise Cohen, the officer of the watch.

"Current as of now we have a serious situation," Bloom explained. "For some reason the deep scan we were commissioned to do of northwestern New Mexico has attracted some unwanted attention. The Defence Intelligence Agency has decided to black out all Grid communication access to the target area and to seize all material relating to the deep scan, including the originating systems, aboard this station. We've been ordered to turn over absolutely everything we have relating to the scans, including the science console core drives."

"But they can't do that," Benedict replied. "This station is under international jurisdiction."

"General Harrod seems to think he can do whatever he wants, Exo." Bloom looked around the table and stood.

"A jump plane left Edwards Air Force Base less than twenty minutes ago. ETA with the station is ninety-eight minutes. Before that plane gets here there are several things we have to do."

She turned to Benedict first. The younger Black man leaned forward almost conspiratorially to listen. He trusted Bloom implicitly; they'd both flown sorties together as combat pilots during the Australian Conflict a decade past. She'd been squadron leader then. When all but their two planes were destroyed during one firefight, it was her orders and deft manoeuvring that saw them both through.

"Major Benedict, you and Captain Boucher need to secure the station. Seal off all docking ports and the access ways between the docking hub and the rest of the station. That won't stop them, but it will slow them down. Major Cohen, I need you to determine whom among the crew we can trust and whom we can't. Everyone we can't place above suspicion will have to be locked down in the habitat carousel. I suspect some of our fellow Americans might think we're mutinying against the DIA and therefore the US government."

Bloom turned to Donnelly. "Captain, you and I will go over the telemetry from the deep scan. We need to know what it is that's down there, causing this mess. I want to know exactly why the DIA has decided to violate World Council treaty in order to seize this information. Maybe then we can figure out what to do with it."

"Wouldn't that put us in direct violation of orders?" Boucher, the senior

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staff's lone Canadian officer asked.

"Whose orders?" Bloom asked. "We're under the direct and exclusive authority of the World Space Agency up here."

"General Harrod's for one," Cohen replied. "With all due respect Lieutenant-Colonel, he did issue specific orders."

"I'm afraid they're orders I can't legally recognize," said Bloom. "And all they can do is haul us before a hearing. We'd be exonerated."

"And our careers would stall," Donnelly protested. "I'd like to rise in rank and pay a little, before I retire. I'd also like to avoid a series of assignments to Godforsaken posts."

"Like this one?" Bloom asked. "My career was stalled too, a few years back. I was court-martialled twice, acquitted twice and I was never supposed to make major. I'm a lieutenant-colonel, now." She tapped the clusters on her uniform for effect and then continued. "Your objections will be duly noted in my log. If you like, I can confine you to quarters for the duration. Following me on this one will be done strictly on a voluntary basis."

"Count me in, Lieutenant-Colonel," Major Benedict said.

"Me as well," Cohen added.

"What have I got to lose? I work for the Canadian Armed Forces. We're not violating orders that came from *my* government," Boucher confirmed.

"I'm in," Donnelly said, curtly. "Under protest, but, I'm in."

Bloom nodded her head.

"Then it looks like we have a job to do," she said.

The soldiers had done cursory interviews and separated the workers into two groups: Those who knew the full scope of the object they were unearthing and those who did not. The people with little or no knowledge were all herded together, while anyone with any real knowledge was kept isolated and under guard. James and Peter had been quick to pick up on this and played dumb well enough to end up grouped in with those who were genuinely ignorant of the object buried beneath them. They stood together plotting their next move.

"What do you think?" Peter asked James as they tried not to seem too obvious about watching their military captors' movements.

"I think that when we get out of this I'm going to go buy a pack of joints and smoke one after the other."

"I hear you," Peter said. "But that's what I mean: how do we get out of this?"

“I’ve been trying to figure that out, myself. What do you think is *really* going on, here? I mean, did we accidentally dig up something the government buried down here, or what?”

“I don’t know,” Peter admitted, “but I don’t see how they did unless they tunnelled out the whole desert before they built it.”

“Then why do they want so badly to keep this quiet?” James asked. “If it isn’t some super secret government installation, then it’s just the ruins of a civilization that predates man. So what’s the big deal? As old as the planet is and as long as the dinosaurs roamed the Earth, it’s pretty egotistical of us to think that we’re the first intelligent civilization to grace the planet’s surface.”

“That’s just it, James,” Peter said. “What if there’s a third option, one that is the exact reason the feds sent in the troops?”

“Oh for fuck’s sake please don’t say aliens.”

“It has to be considered, James,” Peter said, “What if whatever’s been buried here in the desert for the last sixty-five million years *isn’t* of Earth origin at all?”

James looked around at the soldiers, noticing not for the first time how many of them had their rifles at the ready.

“Then I’d say we’re in a lot of trouble,” he said.

Using handholds built into the padded bulkheads of the space station’s narrow corridors, Bloom pulled her weightless self through the access way and into the science module. Weightless but with mass, her stomach and ears telling her she was in freefall, Bloom—like everyone else not currently in the two-thirds Earth-gravity environment of the habitat carousel had to be careful not to become disoriented or move too rapidly or swiftly. More than once in the time she’d been here Bloom had witnessed someone slamming headfirst into a bulkhead. In zero gravity, nosebleeds could get very serious.

The science module was deserted except for the stocky redheaded woman working one of the console stations. Her hair was tied in a French braid to keep it from floating off and she was strapped into the workstation’s chair so as not to drift. She drank coffee from a bag with a valve-straw that floated near to hand. Bloom took a bag of coffee from the dispenser mounted by the main hatch before pulling herself over to where Captain Donnelly worked. Anyone entering the same hatch Bloom had used would first get the impression that the two women were glued to the ceiling.

“What’s telemetry showing?” Bloom asked.

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“Lieutenant-Colonel You wouldn’t believe me if I showed you.”

“Show me,” Bloom said, stabilizing herself into an upright position relative to Donnelly.

On the viewscreen before them a three-dimensional image began rendering. It showed the object under the New Mexico desert: a massive disk with a blistered dome arching up seven kilometres from the disk’s surface, where it ended in a ring of small pyramids guarding a single pyramid at the summit of the mountainous arch.

“Wait a minute,” Bloom said. “Is this right? This can’t be...the scale shows this thing to be almost thirty-five kilometres in diameter!”

“I told you that you wouldn’t believe me,” Donnelly replied. “And there’s more, ma’am. That was just the initial radar sweep. Further scans have determined the object to be of an unrecognized metallurgical composition which won’t allow us to do a scan of the interior.”

“Is the sweep still running?”

“Never stopped, Colonel Bloom.”

“We got cameras aimed down there? Regular video?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Show me the dig site. It should be right in the center of the scanning field.” Donnelly worked the console and a few moments later a satellite view-from-above image of the Laguna Pyramid dig site appeared on the small viewer immediately to the right of that console’s main viewer.

“Zoom.” The image grew in size and detail. Now they were able to see shapes moving about, evidently people.

“Again,” Bloom said.

The people became visible to them. They were all armed and all wearing camouflage.

“Jesus Christ, the Army’s already taken complete control of the site,” Bloom hissed.

“Now what?”

“Now, we need a new plan,” Bloom said. “Contact Major Benedict and Captain Boucher. Have them meet us in my office the minute they’ve completed their work.”

“Let’s review,” Peter said. “What do we know?”

They were sitting in a corner of the laboratory on folding chairs provided to the detainees by the military. They were fenced in by simple retractable cordons but what was keeping them all in place were the heavily armed

soldiers on the other side of the barrier. James and Peter had pulled their chairs away from the rest of the crowd and were drinking coffee also provided to them by the soldiers.

“Access to the World Grid has been shut down,” James said. “There’s no way to send any Grid-based communications out.”

“Right. And we know that the object underneath us is about thirty-odd kilometres wide and that it’s been here for sixty-five million years at least.”

“We know the government wants it.”

“More precisely we know they want to keep it secret.”

“And we know that they’re doing everything they can to appease us right now,” James added. “Giving us chairs, giving us coffee, donuts...I don’t know if you’ve ever been arrested or detained before, but usually when you’re dumped into holding, the guards don’t try and keep you happy.”

“No,” Peter said. “They just try to keep you *there*.”

“Pretty much.”

“So without Grid communication what can we do?” James sat silent for a long time, his brow furrowed and eyes downcast. Suddenly he straightened and looked at Peter.

“I just thought of something,” James said.

They watched members of the dig being escorted to Colonel Jude’s desk.

“Yeah?” Peter asked.

“The Army came in here in BVT 624 Ranger transports,” James said. “Those babies are equipped with full onboard console systems including independent Grid backbones. Even if the World Grid is being blacked out right now the console systems in those vehicles can get online. If we can get to one, *we* can get online.”

“Great,” Peter replied. “So all we have to do is figure out how to get past the barricade in here, past armed guards, out into their motor pool and into an Army vehicle and online using a computer that’s probably passcode-secured.”

“If I can get to my console I can get in that computer. I’ve got hackware that no one’s ever seen before.” James’s console unit was neatly stowed in its pouch on the desk of the lab’s main computer workstation.

“We still have to get out of here,” Peter said, “which we won’t be doing any time soon.”

“Yeah,” James admitted, “that’s the fatal flaw in my otherwise brilliant plan.”

“I could probably boost the vehicle if we can get to it,” Peter said, “but the instant we try that shit, we’ll come under fire and pursuit.”

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“Not a problem,” James replied. “I read about the 624 Ranger in *Jane’s Review*. They’re armour-plated and can take an RPG round and keep going.”

Peter nodded, suddenly soberly terrified by what he and James were talking about. It was unreal: they were prisoners of the United States Army, plotting their escape, the theft of a vehicle and the expectation that they would be under fire while doing all this.

“This is really heavy,” he said.

Concord 3 hung in space over the Earth, a tiny white mote with silvery-black solar sails above a massive blue sphere. The station orbited over North America, staring forever down upon the eerie luminescence of the night time oceans bordering the continent and the brilliant web of diamonds that were its many cities. Toward the station flew with pointed precision and cold determination a white jump plane inscribed with the insignia of the Defence Intelligence Agency. The triangular, wingless wedge of metal shone from its own running lights as it made the approach. Capable of orbital insertion and return under their own power, jump planes had replaced the ageing space shuttle fleet early in the twenty-first century. Successive generations of jump planes helped lessen the expense of both air travel and space travel, making even lunar voyages accessible to the average citizen. But the plane approaching Concord 3 was hardly an innocuous tourist flight. General Roy Harrod was aboard and he brought with him an entire battalion of troops.

Armed with the news that Harrod’s plane was less than an hour away, Bloom once more stood before her senior staff.

“Donnelly and I have analyzed the telemetry from the New Mexico scan,” she explained to them. “There’s an object buried down there, composition unknown, origin unknown. Everything points to it having been there for the last sixty-five million years, maybe longer. The size and shape of the object as well as its composition seem indicative of it not being of Earth origin. The Defence Intelligence Agency has sent troops in to occupy the dig site. And as we already know General Harrod himself is coming here to seize all evidence of the scan on our end. This is what they’re trying to hide.”

Bloom hit a switch on her desk’s keypad and the wall to their left lit up with a three-dimensional computer rendition of the object.

“Oh God,” Cohen said, her breath catching in her throat.

“My guess is it’s a ship,” Bloom said. “And my second guess is that the US government is trying to keep its existence a secret so they can keep everything

they find for themselves. They're violating both the North American Aboriginal Charter regarding the sovereignty of the Protectorate territories and the World Space Accords to make sure they have exclusive control of the information."

"So what are we going to do about it?" Benedict asked.

Bloom smiled.

"We're going to do just what the DIA doesn't want us to do, Exo," Bloom said. "We're going to broadcast the information out onto the World Grid. Any objections?" There were none.

"Fine. And thank you one and all. Captain Donnelly, I'll need you to put a team together for an EVA. Because our Grid link has been cut we need to aim our communications dish at another satellite. Then we have to hack in and send our signal. That's where you'll come in, Captain Boucher. I understand your skills as a hacker are what landed you in military security to begin with."

Boucher nodded.

"All that's going to take some serious time, Lieutenant-Colonel," Benedict said.

"Correct Exo: time we'll buy for ourselves by shutting down docking control. If Harrod's boys have to dock with the station without our help, it'll take them at least another forty minutes. That gives us time to aim a dish, hack a satellite and transmit the information we have."

"Where are we transmitting to?" Donnelly asked.

"I think there's only one place *to* send the signal," Bloom replied. "Where the world gets its news: INN."

The jump plane neared the space station. Concord 3's appearance in the cockpit window had grown from a speck of light reflecting against the sky to an indistinct shape, finally to a series of three segmented columns joined together in tight parallel. The columns were bisected by massive solar sails, designed to collect most of Concord 3's power from the sun. At the upper end the three columns met together in one junction, joined to the gently rotating barrel-shaped habitat carousel. The carousel spun clockwise and generated an internal gravity approximating two-thirds that of Earth's. Above the carousel was the space observatory array consisting of radio, x-ray, optical and electromagnetic telescope equipment. At the earthside pole of the space station was a similar, though scaled-back array. Between the two arrays and just below the solar sails was the docking hub. And it was towards this target

that the jump plane's pilot was heading. Thrusters fired across the surface of the plane's skin in quick, controlled bursts, adjusting its speed and attitude. In space foils and rudders were useless with no air to displace. Earth hung just beyond the station to their left and as the pilots made another course correction the planet filled the horizon, seeming to roll toward them as they turned. Now they were perfectly aligned with the distant station, growing larger as they approached.

"Docking control, this is the *Trafalgar*. Come in please," the pilot said into his headset. "Concord 3 docking control, this is jump plane *Trafalgar*. Do you copy, over?"

The pilot turned to his co-pilot.

"What's our ETA?"

"We are thirty-eight minutes from hard dock."

"*Trafalgar* to Concord 3 docking control," the pilot said one last time. "We are currently forty minutes—that's four-zero minutes—from rendezvous. Come in, over."

There was no response when the pilot toggled the com switch to receive.

Donnelly's breath echoed loudly within the confines of her helmet. She felt the push of the space suit's built in jets as she thrust her way towards the upper array. Two of her assistants were behind her and watching via cameras from the command module. Major Benedict kept her appraised of their progress. Donnelly watched another bead of nervous sweat pull away from her forehead and float up to the top of her helmet.

"Looking good, Liz," Benedict's voice said over their radio link.

"Yeah, easy for you to say; you're inside," Donnelly replied.

She hated spacewalking. The cosmonaut thing wasn't bad if you were in a space ship or doing time on the lunar or Martian surface, but out in space with no dirt under you? That was too much for Donnelly.

"You're almost there," Benedict reassured her.

"Yeah," Donnelly breathed, "almost."

Donnelly and Benedict had determined prior to her sortie that the station's communication array was being hit by a microwave jamming field, most probably from a nearby military satellite. As the field was aimed at the base of the station and the array pointing toward Earth, the array at the top of the station should be free from such interference. All they had to do was aim one of the microwave scanning dishes at the top of the station down towards another satellite and they would be able to communicate with the world

again. They knew the approximate location of another nearby satellite and were going to use handheld equipment to locate it and aim the dish. Benedict had already run wires from the science lab to the command module, effectively turning the radio astronomy dish into a communications array.

“The SETI people are going to be so pissed about this,” he muttered, gleefully.

“Hey,” Donnelly said through the open channel, “they’ll forgive you, Major, when they hear about the Ship. We’re here. I’m going to start now. We’re going take the dish off its mounting bracket. Christ, the thing is huge...”

“What’s our status?” General Harrod asked, returning to the cockpit for the second time in ten minutes.

“We’re still trying to raise docking control,” the pilot said. “No go. We’re less than twenty minutes from the station, now, sir.”

“Can you dock this thing without their help?”

“I could, but I’d rather not.”

“You’re going to have to I’m afraid,” Harrod replied. “Believe me, son. I’d rather be dirtside as well.”

In truth there were few places that Harrod would not have chosen over space. He hated the constant feeling of falling, the nausea associated with having his stomach contents float around on their own and what *that* did to his acid reflux. Harrod had a long career in military intelligence; most of it as an analyst, sitting comfortably behind a desk. Space was for him the antithesis of comfort. True, he’d done his time in the field as an operative and served proudly. But given a choice between being undercover surrounded by people who would kill you—or worse—if they knew you were the enemy, often on the run, sometimes in shootouts or working a nine-to-seven and having three days off with the wife and kids, any man would pick the latter. Harrod wasn’t one to shirk his duty, but he wasn’t one to necessarily enjoy it, either.

“A manual docking procedure without the station’s help will take longer,” the pilot advised the general. “Probably on the order of forty-five minutes to an hour.”

“Be that as it may,” Harrod said, “just get me and my troops aboard that station.”

There was a haze of smoke in Bloom’s office. She’d manually—and illegally—disabled all the smoke detectors within the confines of the small room shortly after taking command of the station. The lights were off; the only illumination from the glowing red tip of her cigarette. She stared out the

blister window behind her desk, allowing herself to float in the zero-gravity environment. Womb with a view. The view, of course, was Earth's nightside. Dawn was creeping up somewhere to the right. But a different set of lights was shining in front of the luminous night time of America. It was these lights that held Bloom's attention. The *Trafalgar*, an Avro Phoenix III orbital insertion jump plane configured for military use; modular payload convertible between cargo, hardware deployment, or troop capacity. The blinking running lights heralded the approach of General Harrod and his troops. The jump plane had grown from an indistinct reflective blur to a series of flashing lights to the point where Bloom could make out the plane's silhouette. They were minutes away from beginning manual docking procedures and not a damn thing Bloom could do about it except hope her people finished their work before Harrod's troops breached the bulkheads.

"Lieutenant-Colonel?" Benedict's voice came through the intercom.

She toggled a switch on her headset.

"Go ahead, Major."

"Ma'am, the microwave dish has been uncoupled from the array and we're currently trying to locate a satellite we can hack into."

"Good news, Major. But the *Trafalgar* is minutes away from hard dock," Bloom advised him. "And we won't have control of the station for long after that happens."

"We'll be ready on time," Benedict assured her. "You have my word on it."

The confidence in Benedict's voice came through even in the tiny speaker in her ear. He'd changed a lot from the fighter jock she'd known during the Australia conflict. He'd been scared shitless back then. During the attack their entire squadron was taken out in one violent assault by suicide flyers and antiaircraft fire coming in from ground and orbit. The boy that Jack Benedict had been was gone, now. The man who took his place someone that Bloom would want watching her back any day.

"Roger that, Exo," Bloom said. "Contact me when you're good to go."

"Will do, ma'am."

"Banshee out," Bloom said, ending the comm with her pilot's Callsign.

There was a sudden rumble and then the earth shook. Nothing violent and not for very long but there had been a definite quake. The people confined to the lab at the edge of the Laguna dig made a frightened noise, followed by nervous, excited conversation. The soldiers looked to their senior officers for

orders, who in turn looked to Colonel Jude.

“What in Hell is going on?” Jude demanded. “What was that?”

“Earthquake, Colonel,” one soldier offered.

James and Peter saw their opportunity and pushed their way past colleagues to the front of the barricade.

“If you let us get to the main console, we can tell you exactly what’s happening,” James called. “We have Doppler seismology equipment set up all over the area. We can use it to get a Richter count and find the epicentre.”

Jude eyed them suspiciously. Then he nodded to two of the guards, who escorted James and Peter over to the console. The two soldiers stood behind them as they got to work. Surreptitiously, James moved his console to his lap in order to access a keypad that it was blocking. They were bringing up the Doppler seismology systems, reviewing the mild quake that had just shaken the area.

“Well?” Jude asked from behind them.

“We’re at the epicentre of the quake,” Peter reported. “Looks like whatever it is we’re digging up did this.”

“How is that possible?”

Peter looked at him contemptuously.

“You tell us, Colonel,” he said. “You’re the one who stopped us from digging.” Another quake hit, this one longer and more forceful. People screamed this time, as many of them staggered and fell. James and Peter regarded each other, both knowing what had to be done before this quake subsided.

“*EVERYBODY RUN!*” James bellowed, rising to his feet, knocking over his chair. He and Peter shoved past their guards and the colonel who were already off-balance from the quaking ground. The wave of people broke, stampeding for the exits from the shelter. The soldiers at the site did their best to evacuate everyone in an orderly fashion, but the bedlam was out of control. The earthquake stopped by the time James and Peter cleared the building, but the people they had been held prisoner with were still panicked and scattering.

“Which way?” James asked.

Peter looked around and then pointed towards one of the 624 Rangers.

“There!” he said, dashing off.

James was at his heels and they could hear the sounds of more footsteps behind them. James didn’t turn around. He didn’t want to. A soldier was standing by the open door of one of the vehicles, speaking on a linx and

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consulting the console system in the dash. Jackpot. Peter slammed into the soldier from behind, knocking her into the door and pushing the stunned woman aside. He climbed in as James raced around to the passenger side door. They were locked in just as their pursuers caught up to them. The soldiers that had been guarding them were hammering on the vehicle as Peter tried to hotwire the starter, while James began connecting his console to the Ranger's system using an elaborate octopus of cables. The transport was being quickly surrounded by troops—with guns drawn.

“Hurry up, Pete,” James growled.

Floodlights hit the Ranger, turning night into day inside the cab. Colonel Jude was marching towards the human shield forming around the vehicle. He, too had his sidearm drawn. James had no doubts about their fate should they be hauled out of the vehicle. Troops were grabbing at the doors now, trying to get the transport open. The locks were shut but it wouldn't be long until someone produced a master key or an electronic override. Peter was playing with wires and fuses under the dashboard while James began trying to slice into the console. Maybe he could send the information out, before it was too late; maybe he could—

“HOLY SHIT!” James exclaimed.

The Ranger bucked, its front end lifting into the air and slamming back down. Another earthquake had started; this one violent and showing no sign of slackening. The line of troops surrounding them broke as soldiers fell or ran away. The engine of the Ranger whined to life. The three-tonne transport rocked on its suspension from the violence of the quake. The engine was humming now, a sharp arrhythmic sound as Peter climbed back up from under the dashboard. He was bleeding from his forehead but he said nothing as he put the Ranger into gear and tore out of the compound.

“Pete! Over there!” James shouted, pointing.

Echohawk and Santino were staggering away from the dig site. Peter swung the transport over to where his mentor and the Chief of the Laguna Band were, reaching around to open one of the two back doors on his side of the truck like vehicle.

“Get in!” Peter ordered.

Someone had rallied behind them, realizing they were stealing a military transport. Shots were fired, ringing off the back of the camper. Echohawk and Santino scrambled aboard and the stolen Ranger took off.

“Where to?” Peter asked.

“Back towards Laguna,” Santino replied. “Let's get the hell away from this place!”

“What’s going on?” Echohawk asked. “You were working the console before this went down.”

“It looks like the object beneath us is causing the quakes,” James replied, slipping on a headset and beginning the process of hacking into the Ranger’s Grid backbone. “I think it’s trying to unearth itself!”

Short siren blasts sounded from the intercom speakers throughout the station. General Harrod’s ship had completed hard dock and his soldiers were now desperately trying to re-route power to bulkhead doors that had been sealed, their wiring and control circuits either torn out or just incinerated. Bloom stood by Major Benedict as the two of them hovered by the console where Boucher sat, overseeing Donnelly’s progress. She and her team had aligned the microwave dish and were now trying to tune in to the satellite’s control frequency. Boucher kept his hands ready at the console’s keypad. Once they had access to the satellite he would begin the process of hacking in.

“How long?”

“I’ll only need a couple of minutes,” he replied, “once we have the satellite linkup. We’re hacking into K-Sat 213; Concord 3 actually launched that satellite a few years ago, so we have its startup protocols in-system. It’s just a matter of making the satellite think we’re restarting its command sequences without actually shutting it down.”

“I don’t know how much time we have,” Bloom said. “I expect very little.” Boucher nodded his head, his dark features growing more determined.

“I’ll get it done, Lieutenant-Colonel,” he said. “Don’t worry about that.”

“We’re in!” Donnelly’s voice called through their headsets.

Boucher lowered a monitor boom over his left eye and began a furious dance of fingers across the keypad in front of him. Bloom followed the action from her own monitor boom, but the large strings of code meant little to her. Her background was engineering, not code-crunching.

“Almost there...” she heard Boucher say after some minutes.

But his voice was not the only sound she heard. There was the shriek of a bulkhead being forced open, barks of orders and troops rushing to secure locations...they were close, very close.

“Almost got it...”

Bloom looked at Boucher as he said the words then hit the button to seal the command module’s hatches.

“I’m in!” Boucher said triumphantly. “I’m connecting to the INN Grid

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Spar now.” They heard pounding on the main hatchway into the command module.

“Hurry it up, Captain,” Bloom advised.

The pounding on the hatch became more determined and a moment later the door shuddered as they began forcing it open.

“Captain...”

“I’m beginning to downlink the data from the scan, now,” Boucher announced. And then the power to the command module was cut. A moment later the bolts holding the hatch into the command module were cut through and the door was forced open.

“Freeze! Nobody move!” an aggressive, frightened soldier bellowed.

“You’re too late, Colonel Bloom,” General Harrod said, immediately after.

4

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When they had first arrived the land around them was lush with life. Animal, vegetable, even microbial life, in quantities far beyond anything previously recorded or predicted. What had begun as a simple catalogue became an epic task. It was a challenge they met eagerly, devoting themselves to the task of determining why a relatively small world would harbour such a wide variety of life. They had been diverted from their core mission to study this tiny world. The Ship and its crew gave no thought to this change of plan. Though the process of uncovering the secrets of life on this small blue world could well take ages, they themselves were ageless; their mission was already a thousand years old by the time they had been diverted. A thousand more, more or less, would mean little to them.

And so it was that the Ship came to be nestled in the earth of this far-distant world, fecund in its varieties of life. The Ship already held a catalogue of life from a thousand other worlds, but this one was unique. So varied was the plant and animal life that it would merit a special place in the archives. Explorers were sent to all the continents and all the environments on the world to study and collect tissue and fluid from each life form they encountered. The two hundred thousand strong crew devoted entirely to the task of the catalogue.

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They believed, naively, that the enemies of their Purpose and the threats to Life had been left far behind when they had landed their massive Ship on this small world in a distant galaxy. This mistaken assumption would prove to be their downfall.

Sirens wailed throughout the Ship as the extensive catalogue within was secured. They had little time. No time to safely take the Ship away from the planet and no time to prepare the stasis systems for their habitation. Their inattention had condemned them to die. But the Ship could be saved, as could their catalogue. They had calculated the size and trajectory of the approaching asteroid. It was massive, deadly and was deployed to strike dangerously close to their position; it was only luck that had spared the Ship from being at ground zero of the projected impact site. They prepared the Ship, giving it instructions and a cargo so precious that it should survive the destruction of this world even if the Ship's crew could not. After the impact the Ship should sleep and heal. It should wait. When all was ready the Ship began powering down and alone in the last, its crew waited in the darkness for their deaths.

The asteroid slammed into the Earth with a force of immeasurable magnitudes. The shockwaves from the strike blasted out across the planet, levelling everything on the continent struck and raging out tidal waves the size of mountains to obliterate as much as they could on the others. The fire blast created by its impact shot up into space. A fury of molten sulphur stone and metal seared out, burning the land and burying the Ship in the scorching fires of Hell. There were probes still out across the world when the first shockwave hit. Those that survived the shearing hurricanes did not survive the firestorm. They were pummelled by heaps of molten slag as large as they were; slammed into the earth, which itself roiled in revolt as it burned and broke open. And of the many forms of life on the once-secund little world, few were left alive in the firestorm's wake.

Those who lived through the violence of the Cataclysm were almost all wiped out in the time of gentle famine that followed. Little vegetation was left and as the leaf eaters died so did most of their natural predators. Armageddon's Holocaust had visited the dinosaurs and most of the other forms of life left on the world. The dust of the Cataclysm spread, blocking out the sun and the stars in the last. Only the heartiest creatures lived through the thousand-year night, the hundred thousand-year winter. Those who were smart enough to adapt and cunning enough to evolve were the ones who

survived, who prospered, after a fashion. And everything they witnessed, the destruction of their fertile paradise, the descending of the Long Dark and the Great Cold was engraved in them all, the first and most powerful racial memory. So powerful was the trauma that the memory of it was made part of their genetic code, passed down to their descendants, eventually becoming the unconscious birthplace of all nightmares in all creatures in all the world.

Throughout it all, during the dark times when individual animals first learned to eat their young to survive, during the great ice ages that reshaped the continents, during the aeons it took for those same glaciers to finally recede and the flood oceans that followed to rise and fill with life and then to recede and leave their mark on the resurfacing land for the millennia it took for life to return in force and prosperity to a world all but obliterated by an incomprehensible violence and nightmarish devastation, the Ship lay buried, resting, healing and waiting.

Above, the mammals flourished. The strange little world's fertility prevailed in the end and although vastly changed the climates and environments spread out across the globe had returned in vengeance. A small feral animal, designed for ruthlessness, cunning and adaptation emerged. Its lineage was an unbroken chain of evolution, leading back to primitive creatures who had survived the Cataclysm. Had the Cataclysm not occurred, they would have been hunted to extinction by the smaller carnivorous dinosaurs as tasty little morsels. With the dinosaurs gone the furry little mammals' fate had been forever changed and forever changed the fate of the world. Following the Cataclysm this creature's descendants spread out across the globe diversifying, multiplying, adapting to a hundred different environments. In one corner of the world it thrived well enough to begin evolving: creating language; then leaving the trees; learning to hunt, to use tools and then learning to walk upright. The most significant discoveries this primitive species could make after that were the mastery of fire and learning to farm. Their place on the planet was established. In less than a million years the world was theirs.

Below, the Ship rested healed and waited. It slept with its master's final instructions etched forever into memory: Heal and wait.

At last the Ship's wait was over.

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The Ranger raced across the desert back towards Laguna. The ground shook violently now; so badly it was all Peter could do to keep control of the wide, heavy vehicle.

“How could it be unearthing itself?” Santino asked, desperately afraid.

They were being pursued and this gargantuan object that had lain dormant beneath their feet for sixty-odd million years was suddenly waking up like some mythical giant.

“The earthquakes are centered right around the object,” James replied. “And looking over the record the quakes actually started with very mild tremors the moment the orbital deep probe scan began.”

“And what makes you think the object is causing the earthquake?” Echohawk demanded.

“Because the quake zone only extends as far as the outer edge of the object itself,” James replied.

“How’s it coming hacking into the Grid backbone, James?” Peter asked.

“Not good.”

“You’d better hurry up,” Echohawk advised. “We’re about to have some company!”

He looked out the back windshield at the receding dig site. One of the helicopters that had come in with the troops was rising into the air.

Colonel Isaac Jude picked himself up off the violently shaking ground and watched the Ranger tear out of camp with a mix of stunned surprise anger and the grim admiration that a hunter has for skillful prey. People were scattering everywhere around him but he knew the four in the stolen Ranger were the most pressing. He used two fingers to press his headset tighter into his ear, quickening his pace towards the landing area as the aluminium shelter behind him began to collapse.

“Knight to Rooks One and Five,” he hollered to be heard against the din of quaking chaos around him, “get ready for dust-off. Rooks Two, Three, Four and Six to the Rangers Three and Six; we have targets on the move.”

The affirmative call-backs came from his soldiers; members of Jude’s elite covert operations team referred to as Rooks. Jude staggered his way to the landing pad where his pilots were climbing aboard the massive black helicopter whose blades were already rotating for takeoff.

“Lock onto the transponder frequency for Ranger One,” Jude said, speaking his command into the microphone of his headset. “Our main objective is the safe capture of the information held by the people within.

Secondary objective is their live capture. Repeat: their live capture is secondary to our mission. Very secondary.”

Lieutenant-Colonel Margaret Bloom reclined in her bunk, feeling the pull of the tumbler-generated gravity weighing her down towards the outer bulkhead of the habitat carousel, listening to the rumble of the large spinning module of the station. It was strange how after hours in zero gravity the relatively light two-thirds Earth-normal gravity of the carousel made her feel tired. She and Majors Benedict, Cohen and Captains Boucher and Donnelly were housed together, becoming the first people in the history of the Concord space station series to ever inhabit the brig. Little more than a set of four bare-bones beds and a bathroom facility along the outer bulkhead nestled behind the waterworks and electrical supply housings of the habitat carousel, the brig was still built as a jail; one never expected to have been used. Bloom had had enough of sitting. She began pacing, walking up the long round floor of the brig. It was like walking up a constant incline; when she stopped Bloom was almost directly overhead from her subordinates. Gravity inside the spinning carousel was along the outer bulkhead and this created three hundred and sixty degrees of floor space. Interestingly, if one of them were to jump high enough they would break free of the gravity and hang suspended and weightless in the air as the rest of the room spun around them. From Bloom’s angle, her personnel were over her head. Likewise, they were looking up at Bloom.

“Did you get the signal out, Exo?” Bloom asked Benedict, craning her neck to make eye contact.

“Not in its entirety,” he replied. “I’m sorry, Lieutenant-Colonel.”

“No worry,” she said. “Our next move is to figure out how to get out of here and stop Harrod from taking the data off-station.”

“Not likely, ma’am,” Donnelly said. “I’m sorry. But on three sides we’re along the outer bulkhead. The only inner wall is twice as thick as standard bulkheads and the door in and out is a hatch that only opens from their side.” Bloom paced again, completing her circuit around the floor.

“We can’t just sit here,” Bloom growled.

But in truth, she herself didn’t know what more to do. Harrod had won. She’d given him the opportunity to seize the station from her when she’d locked most of the station personnel up in the habitat. Any claim she had that Harrod had planned to violate World Space Agency property or international treaty was gone. She and her command staff could be hauled away, court-

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martialled privately and locked away or otherwise disposed of, permanently. But there had to be something...anything that they could do.

The tremors were worsening. With the collapse of the shelter came a series of violent fissures in the ground. Two of Echohawk's assistants fell into one such rending of the earth to their abrupt and violent deaths. Other people were racing for vehicles or running away on foot. At the dig site was bedlam. But had anyone been able to see the quaking site from the air from even a few meters they would have seen the underlying order to the chaos. Not the whole area was quaking and collapsing. There remained a long, stable landmass extending from the edges of the object to the Pyramid whose unearthing had started the matter. Just before it reached the dig, the stable section of land stretched out in a ring encircling the Pyramid and everything around it for most of a kilometre. Beyond this land bridge the rest of the ground was cracking and shaking, while pinpoints of brilliant royal-blue light began shimmering through the fissures in the earth.

"We have target in check, Knight!"

The call brought Jude forward to the cockpit. The windscreen of the cockpit was a giant display and not an actual window. Onscreen an enhanced image of the stolen Ranger appeared, lit up from the surrounding territory and locked in by several sets of crosshair targeting sights. Telemetry on the vehicle's speed, passengers, onboard electronic and photonic activity surrounded the bottom of the display. Jude ignored them. The Ranger's movement was erratic as it was thrown around the unstable ground burying the Object, as it continued to attempt to unearth itself.

"Arm the ion gun," Jude said. "Disable their electricals."

Rook Five, the helicopter's gunner, nodded his head and began to work his panel. Rook One continued his deft piloting. The gun would fire a sweep of ionized energy at the target, instantly disabling any electrical or electronic equipment aboard by overloading it.

"Charging," Rook Five said.

A staccato pinging noise became one long whine.

"Fire!" Jude commanded.

An arc of electric white fury shot from the bottom of the helicopter. But instead of striking the Ranger dead center and crippling the massive truck-like vehicle, it only glanced impotently off the rear fender. The Ranger had

been thrown from the force of the quaking ground. As the helicopter banked to pursue a sudden flare from the ground exploded, blinding them all temporarily as the viewscreen's RF system compensated for the affront.

"What the hell just happened?" Jude demanded as the helicopter suddenly veered away from the flare.

"I don't know!" Rook One called as he struggled to stabilize the helicopter.

As they regained control, the viewscreen returning to normal, Rook Five reported, "Knight, it looks like some kind of energy wave shot from the ground; I think that the Object caused it."

"Are we all right?"

"Roger that."

"Then resume pursuit!" Jude bellowed again.

This time however, the colonel sat down in one of the cockpit's jumper seats and strapped himself in.

"That was really fucking close, James," Peter cried as they sped away from the scene. "They almost fried us; you've got to hurry it up!"

"It would help if you'd drive us out of this fucking quake zone," James retorted angrily. "Every time we're jostled, I miss a keystroke and have to start over."

"I'm trying, I'm trying."

In fact the distance they had given themselves from the Pyramid had lessened the violence of the quakes. But the ground was still shaking; the ground was still breaking open. Peter, James, Echohawk and Santino could only imagine how bad it was at the site.

"I'm in!" James said at long last.

The violent shaking of the ground began subsiding.

"Okay, give me the OS; I can send this to anywhere on the Grid," James said.

"Send it to INN," Echohawk commanded, leaning forward. "Everything we have; don't bother filtering it—just send everything!"

"Got it."

As their attention diverted to James's work none of them noticed the black helicopter as it closed on them from behind.

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“Target in check.”

“Fire!”

Another bolt of searing white energy arched from the helicopter’s underbelly. This one hit the Ranger dead-on. Sparks danced across the vehicle’s surface as a black weld burn blossomed on its roof. Smoke billowed from under the Ranger’s hood and it rolled to a gradual stop. And it was truly motionless, for now they were well beyond the earthquake zone of the unearthing object. The helicopter circled around, coming in for a drop-down landing less than ten meters from the crippled armoured troop transport.

“Checkmate,” Jude said.

The inside of the Ranger went completely dark. The console and Grid backbone that James had been using was photonic; the circuit-frying surge of energy from the ion cannon hadn’t harmed their processing equipment. However the electrical power supplies for the devices had been destroyed.

“Oh, fuck!” James exclaimed as the helicopter touched down in front of them.

“How much was sent?” Echohawk demanded. “How much information did you get out?”

“I don’t know,” James said. “I don’t know, Prof! Enough, I hope.”

The four men sat in silence, watching as two more Rangers pulled up: one behind them, one parked beside the helicopter. Troops debarked: seven in all. They were carrying heavy guns, all aimed at the Ranger. Echohawk and Santino saw the familiar figure of Colonel Isaac Jude debark from the helicopter: walking slowly, deliberately, coming to stand directly in front of the crippled stolen vehicle. In the silence imposed upon them by the death of their vehicle’s electric and electronic systems, they could hear the not-so-distant thunder of the violent earthquakes caused by the Object’s unearthing. It was a wonder they hadn’t noticed it before. Watching Jude’s troops advance toward them, each man in the Ranger went through their own silent introspection. Echohawk thought of his daughter Laura; of Meg, his ex-wife. He wondered if he’d get to see either of them again.

Santino’s mind raced with indignant outrage. He’d come up against the American military before; during years of civil unrest among the Aboriginal Tribes of the Americas, as they fought and eventually won the right to establish the Protectorates. Twice Santino had been fired on and had even found himself locked in what would have proven to be a fight to the death

with one soldier had friends not intervened. Paul Santino was a veteran of conflicts with the oppressive nature of the military and so his mind was flooded with both outrage at this latest injustice and a grim satisfaction that this should be the way his life ended: locked in combat with the American military. Like so many of his ancestors before him, it would be White soldiers that would take his life. He vowed he would not go peacefully.

Peter sat with his hands on the wheel, staring with dumb disbelief at the approaching killers. They couldn't possibly mean to kill them, he reasoned. Arrest them, yes. But not kill them. No.

James' eyes were wide, his ears open, his nose breathing deeply of the air. Every sound, every sight, every smell seemed that much more clear to him. These were his last moments. He was terrified both of dying and that his last seconds of life might be spent grovelling, afraid and so far away from those he loved. This wasn't fair. This wasn't how it was supposed to be.

"God..." he heard himself whine: A prayer; a lament; a useless last word.

Jude stopped, standing in front of the Ranger. He began speaking. Behind them, the rumbling stopped and the horizon lit up in a western dawn.

The axiom that those who do not learn from history's mistakes are doomed to repeat them is true. It is also true that those who learn from history's successes can repeat them as well.

When in the closing decades of the twentieth century a billionaire industrialist named Ted Turner created an entire cable network centered on the news he was for the most part considered a fool. But CNN's success led to a host of copycat all-news stations, some of which were still cropping up when the Photonic Revolution sounded cable's death knell. Multichannel access and superfast computers combined with the power of the new World Grid, the successor to the Internet, led to view-on-demand television. The principle was simple: The user could program their consoles to watch whatever show they wanted, whenever they chose to do so.

As Ted Turner had seen the potential of cable so did Joel Dubois see the potential of the new World Grid and view-on-demand technology to fuse into one supermedium. After hiring the best reporters he could and setting up a database of all the world's news services Dubois set about creating software that would allow the viewer to decide what news they watched, calling up

related stories, background information, biographies and a host of other facts at the touch of a keystroke. He then created a Grid spar large enough to accommodate millions of channels of outgoing and incoming information. Critics said that INN would fail because it was too complicated and would overwhelm the viewer or the user with information overkill. Quite the opposite happened.

In the first month it was operational INN received a million subscriptions. That doubled before its second operational month ended. Over the years the Interactive News Network had been refined and was continually being upgraded to keep it at the leading edge. Like CNN before INN spawned a host of copycats, all of which lived in its shadow. But INN also generated subsidiaries, such as the Interactive Sports Network, the Interactive Entertainment Network and the Interactive Arts Network.

What led to INN's greatest success was its up-to-the-minute news format, which was derived from link-up sites to its Grid spar where anyone with new information could send in contributions. To avoid useless news stories from cranks, frauds and lunatics, special context-recognition hardware was designed to prioritize information. Questionable data was put through a screening process that determined all the facts and data that was flagged as higher priority was put through an immediate review. The information was so well filtered that never once in its history did INN have to issue a retraction, despite times when it broke stories that were debunked by the rest of the world's media until all the facts came out. INN had offices in every capital around the globe and could be accessed by anyone at anytime through the World Grid. Its head offices, however, remained in Dubois's hometown of Ottawa, Ontario, where years before Dubois had made his first million by purchasing shares in an upstart photonics manufacturer.

Two hundred employees worked each eight-hour shift, scanning the end-results of their information filtering process for the latest news. The balance of INN's employees were computer, communications and broadcast technicians. There were no paid news anchors. Annanova, a British experiment in virtual news casting had first inspired Dubois to found INN. Expanding on technology developed by the people behind annanova.com, INN had almost no on-air talent beyond a handful of field reporters. Few people outside INN realized that their favourite and often most trusted news anchors were nothing more than digital ghosts.

Stories uplinked to INN literally had to reach the top before being posted onto INN's news site or put out for broadcast. They came in through the

basement where INN had several interlinked Grid access hubs and were filtered through the first tier of computers which separated the stories by keywords and again by category. The second tier of INN's sources looked for story corroboration by checking the uplinks against stories brought in through other news services and versus other corroborating uplinks. If the files were similar they were merged and sent on to another level. If the stories were conflicting both articles were flagged for research. When no corroboration existed the stories were checked for general facts that could be confirmed. Enough corroboration transferred a story to a research system, where live operators made the final confirmation of the facts. The stories were then either dropped as false (most of the submissions), or sent on to an editor who would then decide which stories would receive highest priorities on postings or broadcasts.

The story out of New Mexico had been sent to Richard Mayhew's research station. While reading it over, he began to wonder how in the hell it had gotten so far up the editorial chain. He was about to dump the story when the list of corroborating links began loading and continued to load. First, substantiation came from Concord 3. Then from eyewitnesses and then from an observation satellite sliced into by some kids at Texas A&M. Mayhew checked the source of the broadcast and began looking at the chain of events that was related to the story. Then he linked to the satellite feed and dumped a copy of the story to an optic slip while printing up a quick summary of what he had just seen. Mayhew tore from the research operator's console bank and charged straight for the office of Ruth Tyler, INN's overnight broadcast editor.

"What is it?" Tyler asked, having been caught in the middle of an embarrassingly thorough armpit scratch.

Mayhew smiled; not at Ruth's awkwardness, but for the information he handed her.

"It's the story of the millennium. I mean that, Ruth. I really fucking mean it." Tyler put the slip into her reader and scanned the document onscreen. When the audio began, the voice of James Johnson squawked briefly through the room before Tyler could slip on her earpiece. She listened and watched for a couple of moments. Then she turned her attention back to Mayhew.

"Can we verify its legitimacy?"

"It passed through all the filters," Mayhew said. "It also coincides with that mysterious flare of light from New Mexico, the Grid being down in New

Mexico and the sudden signal loss Houston reported from Concord 3. It's way too elaborate to be a hoax. There hasn't been enough time to dummy up something like this. We're also already getting some sporadic uplinks that corroborate much of the data here."

Tyler was silent a long moment, not weighing the story as Mayhew thought, but in fact pondering the implications of the information she had on her console at that moment. She sighed, feeling her breath shudder in her throat. Just based on what she had read she was in shock.

"Run it unedited on the next three continental news updates," she said, calmly. "Edit it and run it on all globals after that. Then start cross-referencing the information into the interactive format."

She looked at him a long moment, her deep blue eyes wide with a vehement fire.

"Richard? What the fuck are you still doing in my office? *GO!*"

Colonel Jude crossed his arms behind his back, standing with his legs akimbo. He stared down at the desert floor contemplatively one long moment before looking up at the Ranger.

"Gentlemen, let's not make this any harder than we have to. Step out of the vehicle, please."

Suddenly the sky behind the crippled Ranger lit up in blinding blue brilliance. Jude's first thought was *atomic blast* and his first instinct was to duck, shielding his eyes. If he could get back to the insulated interior of the helicopter he'd be safe from the x-ray blast and radiation wave and hopefully they were well beyond the shockwave and firestorm zones. But the light didn't turn from blue-white to red; it stayed blue and stayed fairly constant. There was no echoing thunder rolling in, no blast of wind. When Jude dared look again it was as though the Aurora Borealis had moved several thousand kilometres south and landed on the ground. There was a shimmering luminescence to the horizon and Jude had no doubt that this was coming from the Object, back at the dig site. He keyed a sequence in on the wristband console he wore, linking himself with his troops still at the dig site. If there still was a dig site.

"Knight to Rooks Seven through Twelve!" he called into his headset. "All pieces' status! Repeat: all pieces' status!"

The replies were faint, staticky and full of insane background noise:

"Rook Eight here."

"Rook Nine."

“Rook Eleven reporting in: Rook Twelve is down; she fell into a fissure that opened beneath her.”

“What the hell is going on?” Jude demanded.

Rooks Seven and Ten still hadn’t been accounted for.

“The Object has gone active,” the voice of Rook Nine reported back. “We are now dealing with a Type Seven Omega!”

Jude’s heart stopped. There were no contingencies for a Type Seven Omega. When the Type Seven classification had been established for the discovery of alien encounters or artifacts, there were different sub-classes assigned for each possible category: Alpha for recoverable or securable artifact, Beta for deniable contact and so on up until Seven-Omega: an encounter or artifact seen or experienced by a large group of people, unsecurable, unrecoverable and undeniable. Jude gestured to Rook Two, whose attention was trying to stay focused on the four civilians who were ignoring the soldiers now entirely to stare west at the shimmering blue lights on the horizon, itself.

“Rook Two, secure the prisoners in Ranger Two and let’s proceed back to target zone.”

Jude looked around at his other troops.

“Come *on*,” he shouted, snapping them back to reality. “Let’s go; Rook One, Rook Five, *get the bird ready for dust-off!* Double time! Go!”

Jude walked up to Professor Echohawk.

“Now do you understand, Professor?” he asked. “*This* is what I meant when I told you that you had no idea what you were dealing with. What the fuck is going to happen now?”

Echohawk only smiled.

“History,” was the last thing the old Indian archaeologist said to Jude before climbing into the Ranger.

The door to the brig opened and General Roy Harrod stood in the hatchway. One of his soldiers quick-stepped in bellowing at the prisoners.

“ATTENTION ON DECK! A FLAG OFFICER IS PRESENT, MAGGOTS!” Cohen and Boucher actually saluted. Donnelly stood at attention. Benedict looked up from his relative position over everyone else’s heads. Bloom crossed her arms over her chest. Harrod stepped into the room.

“You and your subordinates have done well for yourselves, Lieutenant-Colonel,” he said.

Bloom regarded him with all the casual disinterest of a cat. Harrod continued speaking:

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“You’ve managed to wrack up enough charges to keep you in prison for the rest of your lives,” he said. “Among the worst charges are that you’ve endangered certain ongoing missions vital to national security and that you hijacked the operation of an international space station.”

“Now *that’s* the pot calling the kettle black,” Benedict said. “Sir.”

Harrod stared at the young Black officer for one long, terrible moment. Benedict was a major, Harrod a general. Certain things just weren’t said, weren’t done. Harrod finally chose to resume his tirade, turning his attention back on Bloom: “Fortunately for you, for even greater reasons of national security we need to keep these operations hidden. We’re going to help each other out, Lieutenant-Colonel. I’m going to let you go. You’re going to keep quiet about the fact that the DIA was trying to cover up the existence of the Ship and anything else you think you believe. Everybody wins. Our operations remain secret and you get to live a while longer. Do yourself a favour, Colonel Bloom. Accept my offer. I could silence you otherwise but it would be much more complicated that way.”

They returned to the site; Rook Five in the helicopter navigating for the Rangers on the ground. The object, now so obviously a ship, was unearthed. A gargantuan luminous gold and black craft, the Ship shone under the brilliance of its own blue lights, laid out in vast trenches across its surface. As they approached it the Ship dominated the landscape around them. Flying over it, Jude remarked that it became the only ground-based point of reference. The violence of its unearthing over, the Ship had begun to sing. There was no other way to describe what it was doing, Jude reflected. All around them, echoing though the desert and across the great plain of the Ship itself a strange, haunting sound resonated. It was at once reminiscent of crystal and of whale song. There seemed to be an almost identifiable progression to the slow, pulsing music, but it remained surrealistically out of reach. Jude sat inside the helicopter. His earpiece was turned up to maximum gain and still he had trouble hearing his surviving troops’ reports over the Shipsong. And in truth, he had even more difficulty concentrating on them. Even his cold soldier’s heart was moved by the never-before-heard alien sounds resounding through the desert night outside. It was an appreciable moment of pure and perfect beauty; something Jude could not get used to, something he would never forget.

Forgotten by their captors by the sight of the massive Ship, Echohawk, Santino, James and Peter made their way to the edge of the drop-off, looking over the almost completely unburied Ship. It filled the horizon from end to end: a massive, luminous golden city. From the edge of the desert surrounding the Ship the drop to the leading edge of the alien artifact was easily several kilometres. The Ship had moved millions, perhaps *billions* of tonnes of earth to reveal itself. The question on Echohawk's mind was what had happened to that earth? The land bridge, a three kilometre wide peninsula that the Ship had not destroyed in its unearthing, connected the outside world to the top of the dome of the Ship and the Pyramid whose accidental discovery had led to the revelation of this millions-year-old secret. The apparent cracks and rivulets across the Ship's surface were glowing blue from within. The Pyramid, now unearthed, sat atop a ringed dais which in turn occupied a great inverted bowl at the very top of the sharply curved dome of the upper surface of the Ship. Random-seeming lights dotted the surface of the Ship, lending more credence to the effect of seeing a city laid out before them. All around them on the peninsula were people, now numbering close to a thousand. Santino suspected that number would continue to swell. Throngs of people were all likewise milling around. A group of young people had driven up in a flatbed truck and were blasting music from a large stereo system. Oddly enough, the music they have elected to play was symphonic. The piece in question is an industrial technodelic version of Beethoven's Ninth. It echoed eerily into the canyon created by the Ship. Echohawk looked back over the crowd and back at the Pyramid below them.

"Gentlemen," he said, raising his voice to be heard over the Shipsong, "from this point forward our world has been forever changed." Santino nodded his head gravely. James turned around, taking a moment to rub his eyes and shake his head once in nervous reaction. Like trying to shake the last remnants of a flash of dream or *déjà vu* from his mind. It was then that he noticed someone watching a Grid broadcast on a console with a large roll-out screen. The console's owner had linked to INN and the report onscreen was about the Ship. James smiled. News as it happened.

"Good morning and welcome to the Interactive News Network. As of twelve-oh-seven this morning, life as we have known it is over. In the New Mexico desert at this hour, near the community of Laguna, an object, almost certainly a ship, with an approximate measurement of thirty-two kilometres unearthed itself. The United States Armed Forces responded almost immediately, in an effort to secure the Ship and to try and keep a safe distance

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between it and the thousands of people that have already shown up at the Site. Video images obtained by INN from sources aboard the Concord 3 space station and at the archaeological dig site that originally discovered the Ship show the unbelievable sight of the unearthing...”

The world that Mankind had always known had come to an end. The Ship had put to death all that they thought they knew of Life. A new era had begun: an era of hope and of fear and of order and of chaos, an era of incredible dreams and unimaginable nightmares.

5

REACTIONS

LINX TO: LAURA ECHOHAWK
FROM: MARK ECHOHAWK
SUBJECT: WHAT ELSE? THE SHIP!

DEAR LAURA,

SORRY I HAVEN'T HAD THE CHANCE TO LINX YOU, RECENTLY. AS YOU CAN IMAGINE WITH EVERYTHING THAT'S BEEN GOING ON, I HAVEN'T HAD MUCH TIME TO MYSELF TO GET MUCH OF ANYTHING DONE. TO MAKE UP FOR IT HERE IS ONE NICE, LONG LINX.

I GOT ALL YOUR LINXES AND I READ AND WATCHED EACH ONE. I EVEN GOT A COUPLE OF QUICK LINXES FROM YOUR MOM, BUT SHE'S BEEN MIGHTY QUIET SINCE EVERYTHING HAPPENED. UNFORTUNATELY WITH WHAT'S BEEN GOING ON, I HAVEN'T HAD MUCH CHANCE TO REPLY.

YOU ASKED WHAT THE REAL STORY WAS; WHAT'S REALLY GONE ON SINCE THE SHIP UNEARTHED ITSELF. WELL THINGS ARE PRETTY MUCH AS REPORTED ON INN BUT I'LL RECAP FOR YOU AS I SEE THINGS: AS THE DEEP

SCAN COMPILED AND WE BEGAN TO REALIZE WHAT WE'D DISCOVERED, THE ARMY CAME IN AND TOOK CONTROL OF THE SITE. AFTER THE SHIP WAS UNEARTHED THEY STUCK AROUND SETTING UP AN ARMED CAMP, VIRTUALLY OVERNIGHT. OVER A THOUSAND PEOPLE HAVE GONE MISSING SINCE THE SHIP WAS UNEARTHED; EITHER BECAUSE THEY WERE LOST DURING THE UNEARTHING OR BECAUSE THEY WANDERED OFF. WHATEVER THE CASE, THE ARMY USED THAT AS AN EXCUSE TO CORDON OFF THE SITE. I DON'T THINK SO MANY HUNDREDS OF KILOMETRES OF PERIMETER FENCING HAVE EVER BEEN PUT UP SO FAST. THE WORLD COUNCIL RESPONDED TO THE AMERICAN ACTION QUICKLY ENOUGH AND THAT'S WHEN THINGS GOT HAIRY.

EVEN BEFORE WAR THREE, AMERICA'S BEEN VERY PROTECTIVE OF ITS SOVEREIGNTY IN THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY. SO WHEN THE WORLD COUNCIL DECLARED THAT THE UNITED STATES DIDN'T HAVE EXCLUSIVE RIGHTS TO THE SHIP DESPITE IT BEING FOUND ON AMERICAN SOIL (NEVER MIND THAT IT WAS IN FACT FOUND ON THE TERRITORY OF THE SOUTHWESTERN PROTECTORATE AND THAT THE PROTECTORATES ARE CONSIDERED TO BE UNDER THE TRUSTEESHIP OF THE WORLD COUNCIL), THINGS GOT TENSE.

AMERICA STILL HAS MILITARY CLOUT AND SOME POLITICAL INFLUENCE AMONG THE NATIONS OF THE WORLD COUNCIL. HOWEVER IT LACKS THE ECONOMIC POWER IT HAD UP UNTIL THE WAR AND CERTAINLY CAN'T STRONG-ARM THE WORLD COUNCIL THE WAY IT HAD THE OLD UNITED NATIONS. BUT NEITHER AMERICA NOR THE WORLD COUNCIL CAN AFFORD TO GO TO WAR WITH ONE ANOTHER. THEREFORE IN THE END THINGS WEREN'T AS TENSE AS THEY SEEMED; THE THREATENED EMBARGO AGAINST THE US WAS BLUSTER AND BLUFF, AS WERE THE AMERICAN POSTURING, THREATS AND ANTI-WORLD COUNCIL RHETORIC WE'D SEEN THE LAST COUPLE OF WEEKS BEFORE THE STATES ACQUIESCED. IT ALL SEEMED TO BE A CRISIS BUT NO FORCES WERE DEPLOYED NO

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TROOPS PUT ON STANDBY ALERT. THE WORLD COUNCIL HAD TO GIVE THE STATES A WAY TO BACK DOWN AND STILL SAVE FACE. THEREFORE, PUTTING THE US MILITARY IN CHARGE OF SECURITY AT THE SHIP AND PUTTING MAINLY AMERICANS ON THE WORLD SHIP SUMMIT IS NOT SO MUCH AN APPEASEMENT AS IT IS A SYMBOLIC GESTURE. THE PEOPLE REALLY IN CHARGE OF THE SHIP RIGHT NOW ARE THE WORLD COUNCIL SPECIAL OVERSIGHT COMMISSION.

ONE QUESTION THAT KEEPS POPPING UP IS HOW WE KNEW THAT THE OBJECT IS INDEED A SHIP. FOLLOWING THE INITIAL SCANS DONE BY CONCORD 3, A WHOLE BARRAGE OF TESTS AND SCANS HAD BEEN DONE, USING EQUIPMENT THAT IN MANY CASES IS STILL EXPERIMENTAL. WE'VE SUCCESSFULLY COMPILED A FULL IMAGE OF THE SHIP, BOTH UPPER AND LOWER HALVES. IT'S ONE COMPLETE, SEALED HULL. THE UPPER SURFACE IS THE MOUNTAINOUS DOME WE'RE ALL FAMILIAR WITH. THE LOWER SURFACE IS PERFECTLY ROUNDED, BUT COVERED WITH HUNDREDS OF OVERLAPPING BLISTER-LIKE STRUCTURES. ALTHOUGH WE HAVEN'T BEEN ABLE TO DETERMINE THE SOURCE OF PROPULSION FOR THE SHIP, WE ARE CERTAIN THAT THE SHIP LANDED AND THEN BURROWED INTO THE SURFACE OF THE EARTH, COMPACTING AND DISPLACING THE GROUND, STONE AND EVERYTHING BETWEEN AS IT CAME TO REST. IT COULD ONLY HAVE DONE SO IF IT LOWERED ITSELF VERY GRADUALLY INTO THE GROUND. OUR BEST GUESS IS THAT MOST OF THE SHIP WAS ABOVE THE SURFACE OF THE EARTH UNTIL THE DEATH STAR SLAMMED INTO THE GULF OF MEXICO SOME SIXTY-FIVE MILLION YEARS AGO.

BY THE TIME YOU READ THIS LINX I WILL BE ABOUT A DAY AWAY FROM ANNOUNCING THAT I HAVE ACCEPTED THE POSITION AS HEAD OF THE SHIP SURVEY EXPEDITION THAT THE WORLD COUNCIL INTENDS ON SENDING TO THE SHIP. I'M ALREADY WHITTILING AWAY AT THE SHORT LIST OF PEOPLE I WANT ON THE SSE. I'M THRILLED! WHO WOULDN'T BE? I'LL BE ONE OF THE FIRST PEOPLE

IN WORLD HISTORY TO SET FOOT INSIDE AN ALIEN VESSEL. I HAVEN'T SLEPT MUCH THESE LAST FEW NIGHTS, JUST BECAUSE I'M SO EXCITED AT THE PROSPECT. I PROMISE I WILL STILL BE AT YOUR PLACE FOR THANKSGIVING. I'M ANXIOUS TO SEE YOU AND TO SEE YOUR MOTHER AGAIN. NOTHING, NOT EVEN THE SHIP, WILL KEEP ME AWAY FROM YOUR TABLE. WHAT YOU DO TO A TURKEY WORDS CANNOT DO JUSTICE.

IN ANY EVENT, I HAVE TO CUT THIS LINX SHORT AND GO TO BED. IT'S BEEN ANOTHER LONG DAY OF INQUISITION HERE IN GENEVA TESTIFYING BEFORE THE WORLD SHIP SUMMIT AND THE OVERSIGHT COMMISSION. I WISH TO GOD THEY'D HAVE LET US TESTIFY OVER THE GRID FROM LAGUNA. MY TIME WOULD BE BETTER SERVED THERE THAN HERE. OH, WELL. TOMORROW I'LL BE ANNOUNCED AS THE HEAD OF THE SHIP SURVEY EXPEDITION AND I'LL BE ON THE NEXT JUMP PLANE HOME AFTER THE PRESS BRIEFINGS. HOME FOR THE NEXT LITTLE WHILE WILL BE LAGUNA, NEW MEXICO.

ALL MY LOVE.

Pope Simon Peter, the Vicar of Christ, Servant of Servants and Earthly head of the Catholic Church sat in his private garden eating breakfast. It was an hour after dawn and the weather was cool. His handlers wanted him to eat indoors but there were still blooms on the many plants he tended here in his private time. Here was his sanctuary. The garden, hidden within the walls of the Vatican and accessible only through the Pontiff's private apartments had long been a refuge of the Popes and the variety of flora in the enclosed half-acre courtyard reflected the different men who had come to occupy the loneliest position within the Clergy. Pope Simon Peter, born Vincent St-Amand seventy-two years before in a small village in Haiti, had the distinction of being the second Black pope and only the fourth Pontiff in the Church's history to call for a Vatican Council. He was the first to open the Council proceedings to the religions of the world; a decision that had earned him criticism and condemnation from more than one Council of Bishops and had doubled the number of death threats he received in any given day for the last three weeks.

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He remembered the announcement well. He'd made it from the balcony of St Peter's Basilica during Mass two days after the Unearthing. The crowd that had gathered that morning had exceeded the capacity of the Square to hold them. Streets had been blocked off and loudspeakers set up so the assembled masses could hear him. He stood on the balcony that morning, making his first public appearance since the Unearthing as a cool rain came down over Rome. Pope Simon Peter spoke into the microphone discreetly hidden in the fabric of his vestments.

"My brothers and sisters in Christ, our world has been changed forever by the events in the Southwestern Protectorate," he had said.

This had been his first official comment on the Ship and because of this an immediate hush fell over the thousands of people below. Pope Simon Peter licked his lips and continued: "There is a new universal truth: We are not the only intelligent life that has graced God's Creation. This news is an awesome revelation. For though it has answered a very old question the Ship now poses others to us now. Questions that are frightening and almost terrible: what is our place in God's plan? Why was the Ship discovered now? What does it mean for our future as a race? And most importantly, what divine message is hidden within the Ship? For I believe that this Ship is indeed part of God's plan for us. I believe that the Lord intends us to learn something, to come to some revelation and that this Ship is the means to that end. But I also believe that this message is intended for all people, for all of God's children. And it is for this reason that the Fourth Vatican Council must be open not only to the leaders of the Holy Catholic Church but to the leaders of all of the world's religions. I have already spoken with Israel's Rabbinical Council and with the Khalif of the Council of Islam and both have confirmed their willingness not only to attend this Council but to assist in organizing it."

His last few words had nearly been drowned out by the uproar from the assembled masses. Many of the Faithful were old enough to remember the terror attacks on the Vatican that had claimed the life of one of Simon Peter's predecessors and utterly destroyed the Sistine Chapel. Many more were those who remembered only that the terrorists had been radical Muslims. Most of these souls so sadly unforgiving, had forgotten the years of the Great Reconciliation of Faith that Pope Gregory, who had overseen the reconstruction of the Vatican, had organized between Christians Jews and Muslims.

"We are *all* God's children!" he called out loudly by way of admonition. "And as such the Ship belongs to us all. Therefore only if we join together can

we hope to understand the mystery of the Ship. Only if we come together as one can we hope to find God's truth to us all. To try and do so separately would be to damn us all to stumble through the darkness, blind and ignorant forever."

And the deed was done. The Fourth Vatican Council had been called and today Pope Simon Peter would oversee the awesome task of finalizing the list of delegates to be invited to the conference. A burdensome undertaking given that between the twin pillars of the Ship's Unearthing and his own announcement that the Fourth Vatican Council would be open to the heads of all religions; the faiths of many Catholics had been shaken in some cases to the very foundations. Conversely the latest statistics from the International News Network showed that overall attendance at religious gatherings was up over thirty percent; broken down religion by religion the Catholic Church was fourth overall in increased attendance behind Islam, the collective banner of the Pagan religions and of all things, Scientology.

Lieutenant-Colonel Margaret Bloom sat in the Base Commander's outer office at Houston Air Force Base. She had spent most of the last several days in the stockades aboard Concord 3 and back dirtside. After the Ship was unearthed they'd dropped her into the deepest hole they could find while the world turned its attention to the Ship. Now that the dust was finally settling they'd pulled her out. Bloom expected it wouldn't be much longer before she saw the inside of another prison cell. She'd resigned herself to spending time behind bars the moment she made the decision to send the survey revealing the Ship to INN. Bloom knew the drill: She'd be called into the base commander's office, he'd chew her a new asshole and then she'd be brought up on formal charges and escorted back to the barracks by the MPs. There'd be a meeting with a JAG officer and then she'd sit back and wait for the court martial. Bloom wasn't sure whether or not she'd be exonerated. She wasn't sure she'd still have a military career when this was over with, either. The loss of flight privileges would be the most heart wrenching, but it was a small price to pay for what she'd accomplished. Who the hell knew? She might still be able to get a job with the World Space Agency. The door to the base commander's office opened. Colonel Hays stuck his head out and looked at her.

"We'll see you now, Bloom," he said, sternly.

"*We?*" she repeated as Hays closed the door.

Bloom rose and stepped into the inner office and found herself looking right at General Harrod.

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“Lieutenant-Colonel, after your...behaviour...aboard the Concord Station, we cannot allow you to represent the United States government or military on an international venture, again,” Hays said. “You violated direct orders from the head of the DIA, used World Space Agency property in an illegal fashion for unlawful ends, incited others to mutiny and put into danger the lives of officers in the field. On top of that you also violated several civilian statutes regarding private domain satellite channels and endangered some very valuable corporate property.”

Bloom heard Hays, but wasn’t listening. Her eyes remained locked on Harrod. He had fled Concord 3 within half an hour of the first INN broadcast about the Ship. Here he was, back again. She knew she’d nuked her career when she’d sent the link to INN. What she didn’t realize was just how personally Harold was taking this one. He wouldn’t be here unless he wanted to make sure she was *completely* fucked. Best then to cut to the chase.

“Am I under arrest, sir?” Her eyes never left Harrod’s.

Hays activated the console on his desk and pulled up a file.

“No, Lieutenant-Colonel,” he said. “I’m afraid you don’t get off that lucky.” Bloom didn’t allow herself to react to Hays’ statement. She simply continued to stare coldly, hatefully into General Harrod’s ice-blue eyes. The man showed no emotion, revealed no expression. He exuded power and a cold, calculating arrogance. He stared at her with a predatory dispassion. She was no threat to him and he would never allow her to become a threat.

“In fact, you have two options,” Hays said. “You may stand for a general court martial and answer for your actions aboard Concord 3—.”

“Which nobody wants because the world still doesn’t know just how complicit the Defence Intelligence Agency was in trying to cover up the Ship’s existence,” Bloom interjected.

“Or,” Hays continued, “you may accept reassignment under General Harrod’s direct command with the Defence Intelligence Agency. It appears General Harrod is offering you a job.”

“I wasn’t aware the general needed another grave digger.”

“Lieutenant-Colonel!” Hays shouted.

“At ease, Colonel Hays,” Harrod said dismissively, as he turned to regard the base commander.

Harrod’s gaze turned back to Bloom. “Lieutenant-Colonel, the fact of the matter is you know far too much to be cut loose and fortunately for you that little escapade of yours skyside aboard C-3 means you’re too high profile to make disappear. Our only option is to reassign you; keep you out of the way.”

“And under your thumb.”

“Precisely, Lieutenant-Colonel,” Harrod said, sounding genuinely pleased and even surprised that she understood, “and what’s more I intend on putting you to work for the DIA. The United States government spent billions training you as a pilot and as an aerospace engineer. The DIA will now reap the benefits of your knowledge while we keep you out of the way.”

“And just how long will I be kept out of the way, General?”

“Until you’re of no further use to the DIA.”

“So my choices are prison...or indentured servitude.”

Harrod rose from his seat and crossed to the door of Hays’ office.

“I’m glad you understand,” he said. “Don’t take too long in making up your mind, Bloom. I’m leaving in an hour.”

Harrod paused in the doorway, turning around. Bloom remained standing at parade rest, facing the chair he had vacated. From the corner of her eye, she watched as Hays turned his attention to the doorway. She was aware of Harrod’s presence; she could sense his deliberate patience, waiting for her to turn around. Finally she did, turning slowly, until she faced the door. Harrod stood in the doorway, his arms folded across his chest.

“Lieutenant-Colonel, don’t be so arrogant as to believe that the truth is on your side, or that you’d survive a court martial,” he said. “There are a lot of places where a person can be locked up and left to rot. Pack a bag and send for the rest of your gear. You can go with me, you can go to Leavenworth, or you can go to Hell. I don’t really give a good Goddamn which.”

“My children, last night an Angel of the Lord came to Me in a dream,” Gabriel Ashe spoke with no emotion, His voice relaxed, flat and almost toneless. “I was taken up to a great mountain that had been split in half. Below Me, lay the Ship...”

As He spoke, Ashe’s followers began to see what He had imagined. Their eyes were heavily lidded as they sat swaying slightly, silently, in the church around Him. Gabriel Ashe’s strange delivery held them entranced; their visions fuelled by the steady mix of hallucinogens that Ashe fed His followers along with His hypnotic sermons. Ashe Himself consumed the same diet. And yet, His mind was more focused than theirs. He knew why, too. For He was the Son of God’s Son: the Advocate foretold by Christ. The drugs allowed Him to see divinity and learn from its wisdom. The drugs allowed His disciples to share in His divinity. And their worship would make Him become the last piece of the Mysterious Holy Trinity. That was why He had founded the United Trinity Observants: So that His Father could see how

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He was loved. And that was why He knew that the Ship was His enemy: For an Angel of the Lord had shown Him how people would worship it. From atop a mountain cleaved in half by the Ship's Unearthing, He was shown just what would befall the world, if it came to pass that the Ship was worshipped in His stead:

"The Ship filled a great valley and shimmered with a strange inner light. The Pyramid that lay at the Ship's center became a temple to their false God. All around the Ship night was made day and the false light drew them all, the siren song of the Ship making their ears deaf to the Word of the Lord."

Ashe remembered what the Angel had shown him in the fever-dream of drugs he had consumed on learning of the Ship. He remembered watching clouds of inky blackness roiling with deadly, liquid grace across the horizon to the East, towards the Ship. He remembered the purple lightning that shot from the clouds, painting the world in blacklight colors.

"The Angel of the Lord showed me how the Prince of Darkness had come, riding on clouds as black as death," Ashe said. "And where the clouds touched the Earth, everything was consumed and the clouds grew. The Angel of the Lord showed Me." The Angel had shown Him much. How the pyroplastic cloud curled about the Ship, locking itself around it on all sides. He had been shown what fate the dark clouds had in store for their victims.

"The Angel bade Me watch, as first all died, consumed by the cloud's touch. The Angel showed Me how the dead would then rise from the grave, their flesh rot, their eyes burning embers of the devil's fire. The Angel showed Me how these monstrosities would serve their evil master, until all of God's creation was consumed."

The Angel also told him that He, Ashe, would be among the first claimed by the Devil, if the Ship was not stopped.

"The Ship is the agent of the Devil," Ashe said. "For it will summon the black cloud of the Prince of Darkness. Even now the Ship calls to Him, to the Evil One."

Ashe remembered how the Angel told him the clouds would come: a seductive evil released from the Ship; one which would be embraced by all. They would consume it and then from within, it would consume them. They would surrender themselves body and soul to the Ship and then to the clouds that would follow.

"The Ship is the agent of the Devil," Ashe said again. "The Angel of the Lord has told Me this. The Ship will beget Armageddon, My Children. Unless we stop it, the Soldiers of the Lord will not number rightly, the number

needed to combat the Devil in the Last Days. We must seize the Ship and in so doing make it a vessel and a weapon unto My Father. So say I, so sayeth the Lord.”

With one voice His congregation responded:

“So say You, so sayeth the Lord.”

“The Lord commands us to rise up as an army against the Ship’s covetous masters,” Ashe said. “The time of our Purpose is at hand. We must prepare to fight, to die for this holy cause. So say I, so sayeth the Lord.”

“So say You, so sayeth the Lord.”

Ashe raised his hands upwards, looking unto the Heavens.

“Lord, let Me be an instrument of Your power,” Ashe said. “Let My flock be an army at Thy command. Let us destroy Your enemies, Lord, so that I may sanctify Your house in their blood. So I do, so doth the Lord.”

“So You do, so doth the Lord.”

“Let the torment of our enemies shine upon you, O Lord and grant us the favour of Your Grace, in this battle against Thine enemies. Let My hand wield the sword of Your might, let My head bear the helm of Your fury. Let My commands be issued in Your name. So say I, so sayeth the Lord.”

“So say you, so sayeth the Lord.”

As Ashe stood silently behind the lectern, his congregation began singing “Onward, Christian Soldier.”

“Praise My Name,” Ashe uttered, as they sang.

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff sat down at his desk, the door to his office locked and the shades drawn. Using a small device he kept on his person at all times, the Chairman scanned the room for monitoring equipment. He opened the bottom drawer of his desk and removed a locked box. The box required him to place his eye over a lens on the locking mechanism before it would open. From within the Chairman took a small console with built in roll-up screen and folding keypad. He set this up on his desk connecting it to a handheld audio linx. The two devices coupled, he rolled out the screen and activated the console. Soon he was connected to a small network independent of the World Grid, known and accessible only by a handful of people on the planet. Eight other faces appeared on the screen before the Chairman, each face in its own separate window surrounding a central image.

“Thank you for joining us, mister Chairman,” the elderly image of the head of England’s MI-6 said. “Now that we are all present we can begin.”

The British Minister of Defence cleared her throat and spoke from the upper left-hand corner of the Chairman's screen, beginning the meeting with an old, now purely ceremonial statement:

"The doors of these chambers are now sealed and those who do not have business with this Committee have departed. The Committee is now in session. Let everything said within these walls remain within these walls."

The Chairman settled into his seat.

"We have several items on the agenda this evening, all of them dealing with the Ship," the British Defence Minister said. "First and foremost, the Committee's influence over the World Ship Summit and the Oversight Commission. It is my understanding that our colleague and my Canadian counterpart at the Ministry of Defence has been appointed to the World Ship Summit. Elizabeth, we will be sorry to see you go."

The Canadian Defence Minister nodded her head, the window occupied by her image on the lower right hand side of the Chairman's screen.

"As disappointed as I am to be leaving the sitting council of the Committee," the Canadian Minister said, "I know that I will be able to continue to serve its purpose from the World Ship Summit."

"How much influence do you have with the Prime Minister regarding your replacement?" the White House Chief of Staff asked, from the middle right of the Chairman's screen.

"Little, I'm afraid," the Canadian Minister replied. "However, the front runner to replace me is someone who is up to the task at hand."

"Farewell, Madam Minister," the British Defence Minister said. "You will be missed."

"Thank you, Madeline," the Canadian Minister replied.

"Moving on," the British Defence Minister said, "it is my understanding that the Ship Survey Expedition's makeup has been finalized and will be announced on INN in the next twelve hours."

"Correct," MI-6 replied. "Professor Mark Echohawk is confirmed as the head of the expedition and I have acquired the list of divisions within the expedition, including archaeology, linguistics, mathematics, biology, engineering and abnormal psychology."

"Abnormal psychology?" the Chairman asked. "I don't follow."

"May I?" the Curator of the Smithsonian Institute interjected from his place on mid-left of the Chairman's screen; the British Defence Minister nodded.

"The function of an expert in abnormal psychology on this mission would

be twofold,” the Curator replied. “First, an abnormal psychologist would, calling on his background, be of intuitive help in understanding the alien mind should the linguists, mathematicians and engineers fail in their tasks of understanding the workings of the Ship. Second, the abnormal psychologist will be essential in monitoring the members of the expedition for signs of psychosis, relating to their proximity of an alien artifact.”

“Is the Ship expected to drive them all mad?” the Canadian Minister asked.

“No,” the Curator continued, “however the reality for most people on the planet is that the Ship is little more than a news event. Only the people directly exposed to the Ship can truly understand how real it is. Those who will be charged with the task of exploring the Ship run the risk of being confronted with this reality even far more directly. This Committee has studied the effects exposure to alien artifacts has on the human psyche. At best, the results are unpredictable. At worst, we’ve seen people go insane. And that from exposure to significantly less important extraterrestrial finds. We’re already seeing an increased hysteria among the general population. We can only imagine what the members of the Ship Survey Expedition will go through.”

TRANSCRIPT

INTERACTIVE NEWS NETWORK NEWSCAST

PLAIN TEXT FORMAT

**PATH: INN<>BROADCAST>>THE
SHIP>>HEADLINES>>WORLD SHIP SUMMIT AN-
NOUNCES SHIP SURVEY EXPEDITION MEM-
BERS><**

ANCHOR

**GOOD AFTERNOON AND WELCOME TO THE
INTERACTIVE NEWS NETWORK. JUST A FEW MINUTES
AGO, THE WORLD COUNCIL’S WORLD SHIP SUMMIT
ANNOUNCED THE FINAL MAKEUP OF THE SHIP SURVEY
EXPEDITION. WE’VE KNOWN FOR ABOUT A WEEK NOW,**

THE UNEARTHING

THAT THE WORLD SHIP SUMMIT INTENDED THAT THE MAKEUP OF THE EXPEDITION INCLUDE EXPERTS IN THE FIELDS OF ARCHAEOLOGY, LINGUISTICS, BIOLOGY, MATHEMATICS, ENGINEERING AND PSYCHOLOGY. NOW, WE KNOW WHO THE PEOPLE ARE, THAT WILL BE OCCUPYING THESE POSITIONS. PROFESSOR MARK ECHOHAWK, THE ARCHAEOLOGIST WHO ORIGINALLY DISCOVERED THE SHIP, WILL LEAD THE EXPEDITION AS WELL AS TAKE CHARGE OF THE SHIP SURVEY EXPEDITION'S ARCHAEOLOGY DEPARTMENT. HE HAS PERSONALLY CHOSEN ALL THE SENIOR MEMBERS OF THE SHIP SURVEY EXPEDITION AND THEY ARE AS FOLLOWS:

They met together for the first time just prior to the first official excursion of the SSE. One by one, they had arrived at the site over the course of the last two days and settled in. Echohawk was surprised by the level of development that had occurred since the Unearthing. A small village had blossomed along the southwest ridge of the crater made by the Ship's unearthing, the ramp just to the east of the village. It was a shantytown to be sure; structures of corrugated sheet metal, tents, in only a few cases actual prefab housing units. Tens of thousands of people had flocked to the site before the Army had managed to get the area under control. The village was allowed to stay, but the Army Corps of Engineers had been brought in to provide sewage, water, and electricity and comm lines. Roads were still beaten dirt and the population had exploded to almost thirty thousand.

To the east of the ramp, curving along the south-easterly hemisphere of the Ship's canyon was Fort Arapaho, the base of operations for the military forces that had taken over the area immediately surrounding the Ship and the base of operations for the Ship Survey Expedition.

Seven strangers sat around a large horseshoe-shaped table. They waited, silently looking one another over, too nervous, perhaps too excited to speak. James and Peter were the only two in the room who knew each other, though they recognized a couple of other faces around the table. Finally Echohawk came into the room and all attention focused on him.

"Hello everyone," he said. "I'm guessing none of you have really had much chance to talk to one another and so probably I'm the only person in the

room everyone knows. So, let's go around the table starting with *you*, Sonia."

The dark-skinned woman on the far end of the horseshoe swallowed hard. She tugged nervously at the side of the *ghata el ras* the traditional Muslim headscarf she wore. She hated public speaking, even to so small an audience.

"My name is Sonia Aiziz," she said, her voice wavering with nerves. "I... I am a linguist from the University of Gaza antiquities department. My specialty is ancient languages. I was on the expedition with Professor Echohawk that discovered the Quipu repository, in Columbia."

"Don't be so modest, Sonia," Echohawk said. "You were essential in discovering and *deciphering* the Quipus we found."

The Palestinian woman smiled and looked away, demurely. She loathed the spotlight, preferring to work from the background. Echohawk nodded to the next person in line.

"Hello everyone," the portly older man said. "I'm Everett Scott, late of the Bombardier Aerospace firm, in Montreal. I'm a design engineer, specializing in spacecraft design. Although I didn't know Professor Echohawk prior to the Ship being found, I understand he's been kept abreast of my work by one of his associates."

"An old friend of mine was involved in the shakedown flights of the DF-104 jump plane," Echohawk said, before gesturing to the next person sitting at the table, a young Asian man about the same age as Peter.

"I'm Doctor Mark Kodo," he said, "and I'll be your biologist. If there's any sign of the beings that built or piloted the Ship, I'll be the one investigating. I guess I'm on this expedition because of my work in the Arctic, where I helped discover the Rothschild Subterranean Oasis and an entirely new and flourishing species of trilobite."

The Rothschild Subterranean Oasis was a network of caves extending deep under the Antarctic ice sheet, heated by volcanic vents. There was little by way of plant life in the caverns; however, Kodo had discovered a species of trilobites, insect-like creatures long thought extinct, positively thriving in the caves, feeding off of mosses and lichens. The trilobites had been cut off from the world for millions of years and instead of dying off had evolved and prospered. The man sitting next to Kodo nodded appreciatively. He was in his early sixties, gaunt, his face weathered and his hair cropped short and spiky.

"I am Professor Michael Andrews," he said. "Until recently I was Dean of Mathematics at Oxford. However...things didn't quite work out. I've published some rather obscure and extensive papers on fractal equations, mathematical constants in the known universe and the laws of statistical

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probability. Given the likelihood that aliens attempting to communicate with lesser species would first try and build a common primer using the periodic table and mathematic sets, I will be helping linguistics decipher the alien script we can expect to find everywhere within the Ship.”

He nodded towards Professor Aiziz who smiled back.

“And I am Doctor Simone Cole,” the woman seated next to James and Peter said. “I’m a trained physician, psychiatrist and abnormal psychologist. I’ve worked with INTERPOL and the FBI, profiling and hunting down many serial killers, including Ludwig Gorsky. My skills as an abnormal psychologist will be applied to trying to understand a little more about the alien minds behind the Ship, as well as serving as heading up the Expedition’s medical staff.”

“He’s James Johnson,” Peter said.

“And He’s Peter Paulson,” James added. “And everyone here’s had a chance to meet us already. I’m the Prof’s head geek and hacker; I have a major in geology, a minor in archaeology and ended up getting involved in all this thanks my skills with a console. I sent the feed to INN about the Ship’s discovery and will be hopefully smuggling around with the Ship’s computer systems.”

“I’m an archaeologist, myself,” Peter said, “with backgrounds in anthropology, geology and mineralogy. I’ll be working mainly with engineering, looking at the metals and alloys used to build the Ship and hoping to discover Peternium, Paulsonium and any other new element or compound that I can tag with my name.”

Everyone laughed or smiled politely at Peter’s joke.

“Now that we all know each other a little better,” Echohawk said, “let’s take a look at what we’re expected to accomplish, as part of the Ship Survey Expedition.” Echohawk pulled out a handheld remote and a display screen rolled down from the ceiling. The thin flexible fabric of the screen instantly powered up and began the presentation that the World Ship Summit and the Oversight Commission had prepared. They worked through it within an hour; covering their mission statement, objectives and rules of safety and conduct expected of the members of the SSE while they were on duty. The presentation was dull, despite the efforts Echohawk made to bring life to lifeless material. Finally, it was done with; the SSE members were visibly relieved to be through the presentation, some even fidgeting in their seats.

“Well, that’s over with,” Echohawk said. “You will of course all be expected to give the same presentation to your departments, now that staffing

is completed. We'll be making our first foray to the Ship the day after tomorrow. That will give you tomorrow to break in your respective crews. Concluding our official business today, we have a special treat. If everyone would accompany me, please."

Echohawk led them from the room, out into the air of Fort Arapaho. The military base was a hive of activity as soldiers scrambled about, preparing the last installations necessary to protect the Ship Survey Expedition and defend the Ship. From what invaders, Echohawk did not know. A barracks building was being assembled from prefabricated sections. The barracks would be six storeys high when complete and the Army Corps of Engineers were hard at work. Echohawk led the Ship Survey Expedition through the bustle to the base's airstrip, where a large helicopter sat waiting. Green and gold, resting on large rocker arms it reminded Echohawk of an insect, especially with the large double blister windscreen in the front. Echohawk, James, Peter, Aiziz, Andrews, Scott, Kodo and Cole climbed into the back of the helicopter, which had two wide benches facing each other, sandwiched between two large observation windows. The airstrip was located near the ridge of rock that dropped off some seven kilometres to the Ship below. From here the Ship was visible below and around them. The Shipsong was distinct, heard not over the noise of activity around them but accompanying it; it was all-pervasive and all-inclusive, turning even the most random sounds into part of its eerie alien symphony. As the helicopter dusted off, half a world away the World Ship Summit was announcing the makeup of the Ship Survey Expedition. As they flew out over the Ship, two billion people logged on to INN, in what would be the world's largest ever recorded number of simultaneous hits to a single Grid spar.

The Ship was spread out beneath them in all its magnificence. Even at the altitude the helicopter had climbed to, it stretched out in all directions, radiating brilliance as the sun reflected from its eastern surfaces, the western end of the Ship blanketed in a crescent shadow, lit only by glowing blue energy conduits that danced across the Ship's surface. While his ex-wife would remember an airbase in Houston, Texas, Echohawk would forever remember the image of the Pyramid, as it reflected the sunlight into a brilliant spear right back into the sky, when he thought about how the world had changed, because of the Ship. For a moment he thought he saw the outlines of massive portals just below the ring on which the Pyramid rested, between the main Pyramid and the ring of secondary pyramids that circumvented the

Ship's arching dome. But it was only an illusion created by the natural curves of the hull of the Ship. They crossed the Pyramid heading northwest, until they came upon the Zuni mountain range. The mountains ended abruptly in a razor-sharp cut along the curve of the dish of the Ship, dropping straight down along a sheer and flawlessly smooth cut in the stone and soul of the mountains. The helicopter curved back around from Zuni and dropped down nearer to the surface. Echohawk leaned to look out the window at the topography of the Ship, as it rushed away beneath them.

"Can we get this door open? Would we decompress or something?"

"At this speed the door stays shut from inertia," the co-pilot said. "We'd have to land to open it. I'm only authorized to land this bird where I picked her up, but we'll do it on other flights. Keep the door open, I mean. Climb on the next one, if you like. One extra ride won't make much difference; we got all manner of people flying today: members of Congress, foreign dignitaries...the press...shit; we'll be flying all day."

"I might just take you up on that offer," Echohawk said.

"We'll be coming up on the falls, soon," Peter interjected.

And they were. The helicopter had rounded away from the Zuni Mountains and followed the rise of the dome of the Ship back down to the south. The dome looked like a small mountain itself, rising gradually from the outer edge of the Ship's disk, curving up almost a full seven kilometres. Ending in a gently rounding slope, backlit from within and resonating in its own alien song, the mountain dome was topped by the plateau on which stood the Pyramid. To their left were the walls of Ship's Canyon, as it had become known. Perfectly smooth, the drop ranged from ten kilometres at its highest, four at its lowest from the surface of the Earth, to the Ship below. A small rain cloud had gathered itself around the Salado Falls, as they were now called. Seven kilometres above, the Rio Salado had been cleaved away during the Unearthing. The water now rushed down, curving out ever so slightly as it left the edge of the riverbed. Only a large stream of white water and the constant rain of spray actually struck the Ship, the rest of the water misted out into the cloud that surrounded the falls. There was some concern that the river would run itself dry this way and talks about the engineering necessary to divert the river before it was too late were under way.

"That must be marvellous to see at night, when the trenches are glowing," James commented, as they approached the cloudbank.

The pilots kept the helicopter a respectful distance from the clouds and the waterfall, but the helicopter lingered, as all were transfixed by the site of a

waterfall that had only existed for a matter of days. Soon, they were on their way back to the landing strip at Fort Arapaho, the Ship even more real to each of them than it had been before. Despite the fact that they had found the Pyramid, despite the fact that they had seen the Ship from the Ramp or the edge of Ship's Canyon countless times, only now did they truly feel its presence. Only now did they understand the magnitude of the Ship's significance.

6

OATHS OF OFFICE

It was a miserably cold and rainy day. A massive storm cell had stalled over the Ottawa valley and showed no signs of dissipating. Cold, hard rain came down, dampening and chilling the air to unseasonable lows. As the newly sworn-in Canadian Minister of Defence left his Ottawa residence for the Hill, the short trip to the waiting car left him shivering. The waters of the Rideau Canal that afternoon were choppy and black, the streets slick and the skies promising more to come. The Peace Tower seemed forbidding to the Minister as they drove toward the Hill along Sussex Drive. The American embassy flashed into view, an eyesore: a steel and glass construct designed to be attention-getting that was completely and deliberately out of place with its historic surroundings. The Minister was reminded yet again of the difference between Canadians and Americans. It didn't surprise him in the least that their political attitude was that they should stand out even in another country's capital. Then it was gone, the US embassy passing out of view and they were turning onto Wellington Avenue, up to Parliament. The Minister looking out at Parliament Hill as they crossed the gates onto the grounds of the Nation's Capital. And then his car was plunging into the new underground parking garage; a misnomer because it hadn't really been "new" since it had been built some twenty years before. His assistants were already waiting for him, as he stepped from the elevator from the garage into the

Parliament Buildings on his way to his offices. His *new* offices, as Minister of Defence.

“We’re still trying to get the offices organized,” Diane, his assistant said, “but we’re going to need another full forty-eight hours. So far, we’ve managed to flag the more important files; here’s a list of everything that needs your immediate attention, your direct attention and your constant attention.”

She handed the Minister a handheld display, its screen alive with filenames.

“Secondary and tertiary concerns are going to the Deputy Minister and to the rest of the staff. You have a Cabinet meeting at eight, Cabinet meet-the-press at nine, a meeting with the heads of the Armed Forces at nine thirty, Parliament and then a meeting with the Solicitor General and the heads of the RCMP, CSIS and the NIS about the Montreal situation at two thirty.”

“When do I get time to be brought up to speed, personally?” the Minister asked. Diane consulted her data pad.

“Sometime over the Christmas break,” she said. “In the meantime you’ll have to play catch up. Don’t worry. I have everything under control and we’ll spoon-feed you until we can get you sat down long enough to get up to full speed. We’re even covering anticipated questions from the Opposition during Question Period.”

“I couldn’t do it without you, Diane.”

“I know.”

Later he was sitting behind his desk, the doors to his office closed and Diane on guard at her desk in the outer office. The linx hadn’t started chiming yet. It was seven thirty and the Minister had already been at work for nearly an hour. The rain outside was hitting the window with a cold, cruel rattle, making it impossible to see out. The windows were misted and the water was running in slick rivulets down the windowpanes. The wind whipped up assailing the building with more rain. It was cold out and damp. His offices, lit by a desk lamp and windows with curtains thrown wide, were dismal and dark, made all the more oppressive by the Gothic architecture and the weather. The Minister contemplated how much nicer this place would look when the sun was out on a nice, crisp October afternoon. As a gust whipped a screaming spray against the windows again, the Minister wondered how he was going to make it through such a long and miserable day. He turned his attention back to the two consoles on his desk. One was blank, while the other displayed a summary that he was supposed to be studying. He needed tea. It was too damn early in the day to be trying to filter through government

nonsense without a good, strong cup of tea. He reached for the other console, meaning to contact Diane when it chimed, apparently of its own volition. Diane appeared onscreen, her earpiece discreetly hidden under her hair.

“Minister, you have a linx from the British embassy,” her voice said over speakers hidden on the desk.

The clarity of the sound was such that she could well have been in the room with him. The Minister arched an eyebrow and shrugged, slipping on his own earpiece, forwarding the second console’s audio into the unit.

“Put it through in here,” he said.

Diane nodded and vanished from the screen a moment later. The screen remained blank for a few more seconds before the image of the British Ambassador to Canada appeared onscreen in a short cascade of pixels. The Minister himself didn’t immediately recognize the man, but identifier software that was part of the communications parcel on his government console was able to name him, displaying that text at the bottom of the screen.

“Mister Ambassador,” the Minister said. “Good morning. I must say, I didn’t expect to hear from *your* offices. Let alone from you, sir.”

“Good morning, Minister,” the Ambassador said. “No, I don’t suppose you would have expected a linx from me. However, neither protocol nor security concerns would permit me to see you in person.”

“Security concerns?”

The Ambassador shook his head in an apologetic, self-effacing gesture.

“I’m sorry, Minister. This won’t be much of a welcome to the job,” he said. “And usually you would be afforded more time to settle into your position as Defence Minister before I contacted you. However, given the nature of the ongoing situation in the Protectorates to the south, time is of the essence. I had to contact you as soon as possible.”

“Regarding what, may I ask?”

“Regarding a package that you will receive late this evening. The package will arrive from the British embassy, by a special secure carrier. It will be a document pouch, the contents of which you are required to read only when you are alone and only from a secure workstation.”

The Minister was annoyed by the sudden cloak and dagger nonsense.

“And the topic of these secure documents?”

“That is something I will be unable to discuss with you, Minister, until such time as you have read the contents of the document pouch and contacted me on channel QU137. It’s a secure channel and the linx will be routed to me no matter where I am.”

“This is ridiculous,” the Minister objected. “I’m not in this job an hour and already the spychaser nonsense has started.”

“This is a very serious matter, Minister,” the Ambassador said, gravely, “and you’ll better understand and appreciate that, when the carrier arrives, tonight. We’ll speak then and I’ll answer any questions you have.”

The image of the British Ambassador to Canada froze and depixillated, leaving the Minister both dumbfounded and annoyed. He toggled the intercom.

“Diane, would you be so kind as to bring me the largest goddamned pot of tea you can find? I have the feeling I’m going to need it.”

Echohawk strolled into the briefing room, sipping from a coffee mug so large it was nearly a thermos. He relished the bittersweet coffee’s heat and energizing caffeine as it pumped from his mouth to his senses, through an expanding warmth in his belly.

“Good morning everyone,” he said. “Well, we’re all familiar now with each other’s backgrounds and with the nature of this expedition. We’ve all had a chance to see the Ship from the air and now our skills as an expedition team will be put to the test: Today, we will be allowed down to the Pyramid and with luck, we might actually get a look inside.”

He thumbed a button on the remote. The thin fabric screen lit up with a view of the Pyramid as seen from the Ramp, the land bridge that the Ship had allowed to remain between it and the outside world. The image had depth of field and proportion creating the illusion that the screen was a window overlooking an actual scene, instead of a liquid crystal display. The view slowly tracked in as the Ship Survey Expedition watched.

“This footage was taken two hours ago, by a remote-controlled drone using a Cannon Magic Mirror 3D enhancement camera,” Echohawk explained. “It rolled to within ten meters of the Pyramid at the top of the Ship and recorded these images. Take a close look: it’s about to zoom in on the base of the Pyramid facing the ramp.”

The image onscreen changed again as the telephoto lens on the drone switched focus to pull in close to the pyramid. They could all clearly see that there was a depressed archway in the Pyramid’s surface some five meters high and just as wide. The back of the archway was sealed, but all indications seemed to point to this being a hatch.

“The Army’s recorded similar archways on all the other exposed pyramids along the Ship’s dome,” Echohawk explained.

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“I expect we’re looking at the main doors into the Ship,” Andrews said.

“I would argue that you’re right,” Scott replied, “but we could just as easily be seeing thruster ports.”

“I agree,” Andrews replied. “However, thruster ports don’t usually have control panels put to either side.”

“What?” Scott and Aiziz asked together.

Andrews took up a laser pointer from his position at the horseshoe-shaped table.

“Here and here,” he said, pointing the laser beam to either side of the image of the arch onscreen. “Professor Echohawk, can we get a zoom in on those locations?” Echohawk consulted the remote he was holding. A moment later, the image did zoom in to one side of the arch. There was a long, recessed panel beside the arch. It was filled with what appeared to be a number of rectangular tiles, all of which had some device inscribed upon them.

“Can we get a better view of those tiles?” Aiziz asked with urgency. “Can we see the inscriptions on them?”

“Unfortunately no,” Echohawk said. “This is already an enhancement of the original image. We’ll have to wait until we get out to the Pyramid, itself.”

Aiziz stared long and hard at the indistinct image before her.

“Well, then, what are we waiting for?”

They rode over from Fort Arapaho to the Pyramid in a small convoy of all-terrain transports. The long, multi-wheeled vehicles drove out in a row; the SSE heads and their small entourage of assistants in the first two vehicles, an Emergency Medical Response unit directly behind them, a communications wagon behind that and finally, two cargo haulers that carried all the equipment and even survival gear they would need for their forays into the Ship. Echohawk, Scott and Andrews sat together in a knot of conversation.

“I argue that the arched depression is a door,” Scott explained, “because on a vessel this size, you’d probably have a network of antenna and sensor arrays across the entire hull. Same thing with weapons, assuming it had any and because of the sheer size of the thing, manoeuvring and propulsion would have to be spread out over the whole surface of the Ship, especially if it was able to make planetfall.”

“Are we sure it landed?” Andrews asked.

“It couldn’t have crashed,” Scott replied. “It wouldn’t have stayed together this well and there’d be some evidence of a crash trail, or a much larger impact crater in the local geography. No, the Ship dropped right out of

the sky and nestled itself into the ground.”

Having been married to a fighter jock, Echohawk knew a little about physics and a little about aerospace engineering. His engineering studies at university had been one of the factors involved in his introduction to Margaret Bloom in the time of history that Echohawk had begun referring to as *What Couldn't Have Been That Long Ago*.

“So the ring of smaller pyramids we’ve witnessed would also be doors?” Echohawk asked.

“Most likely, yes,” Scott replied. “Assuming we don’t get there and discover the Pyramid’s not an access point at all. The whole Pyramid network could be an elaborate array of some kind. Although I expect it isn’t.”

“In all likelihood there are several other points of access to the Ship, as well,” Andrews noted. “Escape hatches, cargo bays...docking bays, that sort of thing.”

“No doubt,” Scott agreed. “This is why we can also count on there being several layers of hull. The Ship will be much like an onion.”

“In order to reduce the risk of explosive decompression,” Andrews said. “The two main problems with a vessel the size of the Ship being accessibility and safety. The inner sections of the Ship closest to the outer hull will probably be quite barren, then; lots of bulkheads and hatches, or the equivalent of such in alien design.”

“Are you acquainted with engineering?” Scott asked, with hopeful curiosity.

Andrews gave his head a quick shake, pulling a cigarette from his breast pocket.

“No,” he said, handing a smoke to Echohawk, “I’m an expert in the laws of probability; the mathematical likelihood of certain things occurring. For instance, I’ll wager that the Pyramid on top of the Ship will be the only way in we’ll be afforded and that it won’t be immediately accessible to us.”

“What makes you say that?” Scott asked.

“Well, perhaps Professor Echohawk would be kind enough to tell us how long the dig had been going on before the orbital scan was performed?” Andrews asked, by way of reply.

“About three weeks,” Echohawk said. “Not including the time that the Laguna Band was working the dig, themselves.”

“And how long after the deep scan did the Ship begin unearthing itself?” Andrews asked.

Echohawk looked off to where James, Peter and Kodo were talking.

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“James,” Echohawk called. “James! How long after the orbital scan started did we start recording tremors?”

“I’d have to go back and checked the seismography,” James replied, “but I think the initial tremors started about ten minutes into the scan.”

This seemed to satisfy Andrews to no end; he smiled broadly.

“The Ship only unearthed itself after it was scanned from a high-orbit, with a multi-spectral deep scan and yet, efforts had been ongoing to expose it for quite some time before that: There were Doppler seismology, MRI and PET scans used on the object while it was still buried. You used precision blasting, laser cutters and picks and shovels to dig it up. However, the Ship only began to unearth itself after it was scanned from orbit.”

“You’re saying it was waiting for an orbital scan?” Echohawk asked, incredulous.

“Many theorists involved with the search for intelligent extraterrestrial life assume that only space-faring cultures or cultures about to become spaceborne would be targeted for first contact,” Andrews explained. “We know that the Ship was buried at the end of the Cretaceous, by the so-called death star meteoric impact. Likely, the Ship was damaged and needed to repair itself. But fully restored and still buried, why didn’t it just leave? Why not unearth itself then and take off?”

“It must have been instructed to stay,” Scott realized.

“Exactly,” Andrews said with a smile, his unlit cigarette dancing in the corner of his mouth, “and why stay, unless it was waiting for something here? Some sign of intelligence, perhaps? A space-faring intelligence, aware of its presence?”

“Then it only unearthed itself in response to our actions,” Echohawk said.

“Most probably,” Andrews replied. “This is why I believe that we’ll find that the archway in the Pyramid is indeed a door and that that same door is sealed.”

“I don’t follow,” Echohawk said.

“No, but I think I do,” Scott said. “An alien race looking for signs of intelligence from another species and using the Ship’s presence as an interactive tool to determine that intelligence would set up certain tests.”

“The land bridge we’re driving across, for example,” Andrews said, “leads directly to the Pyramid, which until recently was the only portion of the Ship to be partially unearthed. And also the highest point on the Ship.”

“And the runes to either side of the archway would be another test,” Scott said, his eyes glistening with dawning realization.

“And when we get there, we’ll find out just what form that test will take,” Andrews concluded.

Paul Santino stared at the console screen before him. Since the Ship had been unearthed the Laguna Band had discovered that it had lost several hundred of its own out in the desert, during the Unearthing. Laguna had also suffered an increase in crime, pollution and traffic. The new highway extension being put down was supposed to take most of the traffic away from Laguna, but the fact that the Band Council had had to shut down Laguna’s bars, nightclubs and even its bowling alley as a result of the influx of people coming to gawk at the Ship wasn’t helping the local economy. The jail was full of rowdies, drunks and even a handful of soldiers from the newly constructed Fort Arapaho. Vandalism, traffic accidents, littering were all up. The problem was that in the Village, as the shantytown that had formed near the Ship had been christened, had almost no entertainment. There were shops and a couple of ramshackle restaurants, but it was Laguna that had the multiplex, the entertainment complex and all the bars, nightclubs, pool halls and other recreation facilities. This meant that the resources available for a modest desert community were now being used by an entirely new community. And it was up to Santino as Chief of the Laguna Band to try and figure out how to solve the problem. The Protectorate Council sure as hell wasn’t offering up any assistance. Suddenly Santino was struck by an idea. He slipped a linx headset into his ear and keyed open a communications line on his console. Moments later, he was connected with the loan officer of the Aboriginal American’s Bank of the Protectorate head offices in Pueblo, Colorado.

“Chief Santino!” the loan officer, one David George exclaimed. “How can I help you, today?”

“Hello Dave,” Santino replied. “I guess you must be aware of the current situation we have, out this way.”

George smiled.

“It’s kind of hard not to be,” he said.

“Well, that’s why I’m calling. We have a unique business opportunity presenting itself. The Village that’s sprung up around the Ship is all homes and shops. I understand they have a Taco Bell and a couple of coffee joints, but little else. In fact, we had to shut down some of our businesses because they were being overrun by Villagers.”

David George nodded his head.

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“I haven’t talked this over with the Council yet, but I’m positive they’ll agree,” Santino explained. “I’d like to propose that the Band guarantee business loans to Laguna businessmen to set up bars and clubs in the Village. The Village is leasing the land from the Laguna Band Council, so we have no worry about purchasing problems. We’re looking at construction and setup costs, only.”

“Interesting,” George replied. “Let me talk it over with some of my people here and get back to you after you’ve thrown it out to the Band Council.”

Now it was Santino’s turn to smile.

“Will do,” he said. “Thanks, Dave. I’ll linx you back, this afternoon.”

As Santino ended the linx, a message flared to life across his console screen:

YOU HAVE 1 NEW TEXT LINX WAITING.

(1)VIEW NOW (2)VIEW LATER

Santino selected to view the message. He read it through once and then directed his console to verify its authenticity by tracing it back to the sender. When that was completed Santino read the message again. Then he requested hard copy and holding the paper print-out in hand read it a third time.

“Jesus,” Santino rasped, stunned.

After the Ship unearthed itself in his back yard he’d not believed anything could possibly surprise him. How wrong he had been. The message read:

Chief Paul Santino
Chief of the Laguna Band Council
Laguna, Laguna District
Southwestern Protectorate

Dear Mr. Santino,

His Holiness by the Grace of God and Jesus Christ our Lord, Pope Simon Peter requests your attendance as a special advisory delegate to the forthcoming Vatican Council.

His holiness believes that as Chief of the Laguna Band and an

accredited Shaman of the Acoma people, your insight to this most pressing matter of the Faith and of all Faiths will be invaluable. That you live in proximity to the Ship and were present during the Unearthing has also been heavily considered in your favour, as a delegate to this Council.

The Fourth Vatican Council will begin in a few weeks' time and we request that you reply to this invitation by the deadline listed below, either by reciprocal World Grid linx, or by postal service, to the address below.

We thank you, Mr. Santino, for your attention to and consideration of our invitation and pray that you will see fit to join us in Rome for the conference.

Yours respectfully,

Br. Simon Gage
Delegate Liaison Vatican IV

There was no longer any question. They were face to face with a door that almost perfectly matched a measurement of three meters by two meters. The tiles to either side of the door were strange, rectangular runes, each rune carved with a different alien symbol. Complicating things further was a second set of glyphs, these circular and divided into three different sub-types: One type was perfectly round, the other two oval; one oval along the horizontal, the other along the vertical. Round, oval, tall or wide, each glyph-type had only five characters: An empty "ring" glyph, another with one quarter full, a half-glyph, three quarters filled and a full one. Aiziz and Andrews were all over the symbols which were arranged in six different groupings: one for the runes, three for what were evidently numeric glyphs and two combined. The two combined rune groupings were to the left of the door, the four separate sets to the right. Aiziz pulled a small handheld device from her pack. It consisted of a small console screen and a laser pen. She switched the device on, adjusting the width of the beam to its widest and began sweeping it across the surface of the door. Each pass recorded part of the alien script into the device, layering the next pass onto it, flawlessly.

"I've never seen writings like these," she said. "There are certain similarities to ancient languages that I've studied, but it's unlikely those

similarities are anything but coincidental.”

Echohawk approached, studying the scriptures on the door.

“I doubt that we’ll be doing any comparative studies with Earth languages.” He paused, realizing what he had said, and chuckled. “Now, *there’s* a phrase I never thought I’d use: ‘Earth languages’.”

“Funny thing, the way reality catches one up, isn’t it?” Andrews remarked. “Earth languages...alien languages...I doubt that comparative study will yield an interpretation of these symbols. But I do expect that there will be some kind of universal primer. Not here on the door of course, but inside the Ship itself.”

“The primer will do us little good inside the Ship if we’re locked outside,” Aiziz said, “unless you know how to decipher this and get us in.”

“There’s actually no need for us to decipher this information right now,” Andrews said. “All we need to do is open the door. And the aliens that built this Ship have left us everything we need to do so right here.”

“What do you mean?” Echohawk asked. “How can we open the door if we can’t make sense of the inscription on the door?”

“I said earlier that we’d be faced with a combination lock,” Andrews replied, “and that is essentially what we have here.”

“How, exactly?” Aiziz asked.

The other members of the SSE were pausing in their tasks to regard Andrews.

“It’s simple really,” Andrews said. “I daresay that the symbols to either side of the door would indicate the aliens who built the Ship have a base-five numerical system. Look at the round glyphs. They cannot be anything but number sequences. The runic text accompanying the glyphs is most likely irrelevant to the task at hand anyway.”

“I don’t see why,” Echohawk said.

“This door was designed to be secured but I doubt it was designed to keep others out,” Andrews said. “In fact I’d go so far as to say that it was meant to be opened by us.”

“By us?” Echohawk asked.

“I think I see where he’s going,” Aiziz said.

“By us,” Andrews confirmed. “We all agree that the Ship was running a program when it unearthed itself. Correct?”

Everyone nodded in agreement. Andrews continued:

“The Ship executed that program and unearthed itself, giving us deliberate access to the Pyramid via the Ramp. The Ramp leads to the door before us. Aliens intelligent enough to engineer the Ship would probably

realize their language would not necessarily be known to us. Therefore they must have left us a mathematical puzzle that we could solve. The sets of runes and glyphs along the doorframe are that puzzle. It is therefore quite unlikely that the runic script we see is a set of instructions. I'll defer the question of what that message must therefore be, to Doctor Aiziz. That they are connected is evident. The individual runes and glyphs are laid out to the right of the door and to the left we have two sets of combined runes and glyphs."

"Each of the two combined sets is laid out differently," Aiziz concluded, "though both resemble alphanumeric keypads. If they're an input device, the test Professor Andrews is speaking of can only be a sequential pattern-recognition test."

"And once we determine the pattern and sequence we'll have access to the Ship," Andrews concluded.

Lieutenant-Colonel Margaret Bloom had again spent the last few days in a holding pattern. She'd been shipped out to DIA headquarters at Bolling Air Force Base in DC, been assigned to barracks and had been left there to rot. She'd spent days drifting, waiting to be called to Harrod's office for some sort of assignment or duty. Nothing. Bloom had found herself spending her time drifting between the rec room and its game consoles Grid connections and vid screens and the Officers' Club with its pool tables, dart boards and where her rank bought her a thousand dollar credit line at the bar. She had access to the airfield but no flight privileges so she oftentimes found herself hanging out with her fellow fighter jocks, including some old wing mates who had become instructors. Her linx was always in her ear, always standing by for the call that never came. Finally this morning Bloom had received word. She'd been in the rec room in a simulator game, heavily involved piloting a deep space fighter craft called a *Starfury*, hence the name of the game, when her linx chimed.

"Shit!" she swore absently, pausing the game in mid assault on an enemy frigate. She put down the control pad for the game, pressing a switch behind her ear on her headset.

"Bloom here."

"Lieutenant-Colonel," Harrod's voice came, grating in her ear, "report to my office immediately."

"I'm on my way, General," she said.

At last; things were moving, again.

“Sit down, please,” Harrod said.

He didn't look up from the central console on his desk. He keyed a switch and behind him a wall-screen rolled out of its recess. Its flexible fabric rippled as some unseen bump on its roller repeatedly hit the groove of the track it was in. The screen drifted to a halt and flared to life. Displayed on it was Bloom's service record.

“I've been reviewing your file, Lieutenant-Colonel, trying to decide what is to be done with you,” Harrod said.

He looked up at her briefly then resumed reading from his console.

“I've kept you here on hold while I did some checking into your background beyond what's in your service jacket. Needless to say, what I discovered surprised me a great deal. It's amazing to me that you've been promoted up through the ranks to where you are. Apparently however, your skills behind the stick are seen as redeeming a record that's been spotted with incidents where you've challenged your superior officers. Not to mention the number of times you've been court-martialled for assault, disobeying direct orders and...other offences.”

Bloom said nothing. She'd let Harrod bait her once too often already. He continued.

“Despite your problem with those in authority over you, you've handled your own authority quite well. You're also one of the top aerospace engineers the Air Force has. These things have counted in your favour so far and they are also among the reasons you simply didn't disappear en route to Bolling. You can still be of use to your government.”

“How?” Bloom asked, at long last.

“Lieutenant-Colonel, as you are aware the DIA is not simply another intelligence and espionage agency like Homeland Security, the NID, the CIA, the NSA, or ConsOp. We are also one of the most important military research and development agencies that the United States controls.”

“And if the rumours are true,” Bloom said, “the DIA also operates one of the largest, most heavily equipped shadow armies in the world.”

“Our primary concern right now is the research arm of the DIA,” Harrod retorted, “and more specifically your place in it.”

Bloom took a moment to look around, studying her service record on the large screen behind Harrod as the console cycled gradually through three-page sets.

“And what place would that be exactly, General?” she asked. “What is my assignment? And where?”

“Lieutenant-Colonel, the Defence Intelligence Agency monitors thousands of research and development projects in both government and the private sector that are aimed at improving our nation’s defence capabilities. The government projects are done at one of four facilities under the DIA’s direct authority. Would you happen to know which facilities I’m referring to?”

“I’m honestly only aware of three,” she said. “Los Alamos, of course; Black Ridge in Texas, which was established after White Sands was nuked during the war and the Cheyenne Mountain facility, which was turned entirely over to research in the 1970s when the Pennsylvania Avenue bunker complex was completed.”

“The fourth is the facility we’ll be en route to shortly,” Harrod said. “You may have heard of it, though doubtless never in any official capacity: the Groom Lake Special Research Facility, in Nevada.”

Bloom had to pause a moment. The name was familiar but she didn’t know why. Then it dawned on her: *Nevada*.

“Area 51,” she said, incredulously.

“No,” Harrod replied, “Area 51 is a parcel of land bordered to the north and west by fence, to the south by Area 46 and Area 52 to the east. It is part of the perimeter of the Groom Lake facility. Forget everything you’ve ever heard about Area 51, Colonel. The truth is much stranger than the fiction.”

“Isn’t it always,” Bloom mused, eyes locked on Harrod’s, not knowing whether or not to be surprised, shocked or to have expected anything less from the DIA in general and General Harrod in particular.

“Take a look at this, Lieutenant-Colonel,” he said, keying a sequence on his console.

Onscreen, Bloom saw her first pictures of the Bugs.

“They were discovered in a hillside in the Alberta Badlands after the end of War Two, in nineteen hundred forty-six. They have been the source of a lot of advances in military technology for a very long time. They’ve also been the source of some of the most confounding mysteries the DIA has ever faced.”

Bloom was looking at images of two waspish craft as they appeared while being pulled out of the hillside. One was smashed and damaged beyond repair. There was the suggestion that they might have once been gold and green in colour, once been quite vibrant. The scale on the screen gave them twenty-three meters in length. The craft were insectile in appearance, with flowing lines from the aft section, narrowing towards the middle before blossoming in an elliptical forward segment. The “head” of the craft seemed to be joined to or supported by the rest of the Bug by tapering nacelles that

stretched from the mid-section of the craft almost to the tip of the “nose.” Bloom suspected the forward section of the craft was either a sensor or equipment array of some kind, possibly made to store ordinance. The pilot—if any—would be housed midway through the craft with the large rear section given over to engines and power supply. The destroyed Bug’s aft section was crumpled. The other one had damage across one side but seemed mostly intact. The images changed, showing the two Bugs in a hangar: the damaged one being disassembled and components from both being examined and extracted.

“I was planning on recruiting you for this project before the incident aboard Concord 3, Lieutenant-Colonel. You simply forced me to change methods and the timetable. However this project is too important to hand it to someone who has a problem with their commanding officer. You and I both work for the same government for the same reasons: to defend this country and in our particular fields to improve upon this country’s defences. The benefits to you will outweigh the inconvenience of being recruited. And this project is not at cross-purposes of my intention of keeping you the fuck out of the way. I can deposit you elsewhere, Bloom. Probably somewhere you wouldn’t even work as hard as you will at the Facility. But I will not put you to work at the Facility unless I know you will respect my authority. The choice is yours.”

She’d heard the phrase “through the looking glass” used before. Now Bloom was beginning to understand the true context of it. And she also understood that she wanted this. She wanted the Bug more than anything else on earth.

“I’m in,” she said, meeting Harrod’s for the first time since entering his office, her eyes bright with want, with desire. “I’m in, General.”

Harrod nodded his head and keyed a new sequence into his keypad. The images on the large screen changed. Bloom was now looking at a single Bug, though this one was far from damaged. It stood proud on very insect-like struts, glistening. Its upper and lower sections were bisected from stem to stern by a narrow band of brilliant blue energy.

“We built one?” Bloom asked.

“No,” Harrod replied. “This is the second Bug. The first one was beyond salvage and so we’ve spent countless decades trying to reverse engineer it, occasionally going to the second Bug to see what we could understand. The second Bug has been our control craft, left almost completely untouched except when absolutely necessary. However after the Ship unearthed itself,

the second, more salvageable vessel began to..." he seemed about to say *heal*, "repair itself. This image, taken today would appear to be the end result."

"Holy shit..."

"Yes. Your job will be to learn as much as you can from the active Bug."

"Does that include...no, never mind," she said.

"Does it include what?" Harrod asked.

She looked at him, hopeful, embarrassed and angry with herself for feeling like a kid being given a new bike for her birthday.

"Does that include...*flying*...the Bug, General?"

Harrod sat back in his chair, a poorly suppressed smile on his lips. He knew he had her then. And she knew it, too. She hated herself because she knew she truly didn't care.

"Possibly," he said. "Once a proper risk-analysis has been made. I take it you want the assignment?"

"Hell yeah," Bloom rasped.

"We leave for Nevada in thirty minutes."

It had been a long day and the rain hadn't let up. The Minister was watching INN and he'd moved his console over to the coffee table by the bay window in his office. It was cold and dark out now, the rain turning to sleet. Bitter October weather. It had been a long and difficult day, the escalating Montreal crisis keeping him at the office far longer than even he'd expected to stay on his first day. He was reclined on a couch on the wall adjacent to the window, watching the news system's latest broadcast. His back was a screaming web of cold, dull aching pain and on his console screen a news anchor was explaining that the leader of the United Trinity Observants had set up an open church in the Village around the Ship and the reporter relaying the information back to the studio was discussing the alarmingly large crowds that kept coming to the services.

"These services are held every three hours and always presided over by Gabriel Ashe," the reporter said. "And he uses each sermon to attack the Ship, calling it everything from the tool of the Devil to the Temple of Death."

The Minister used a laser pointer to select a viewing of one of Ashe's sermons. Onscreen Gabriel Ashe appeared behind his pulpit staring blandly out at the audience, his manner and expressions belying calm, serenity, almost apathy. However his eyes were manic, shifting constantly, the pupils dilated, the whites bloodshot.

"And yea did an Angel of the Lord speak unto Me," Ashe said in his

dispassionate monotone delivery. “And this Angel did say that the signs of the end are all around us, plainly visible to all who wish to see. Are we not here now gathered in a place where the night has been made into day? Are people not already fighting over who shall possess this golden idol? The earth has opened up to reveal the gates of the Ancient Prison.”

Ashe delivered his sermon in a flat lifeless voice. And yet the audience was held in sway. The Minister was disturbed by the image. Ashe continued:

“The Ship is the forbear of grievous evil, My children. And it has offered itself up to us as a new God, an idolatrous obscenity, a graven image to be worshipped in God’s stead. This Ship is an affront, My children. Whatsoever displeases Me displeases My Father. The Ship is an obscenity. The Angel of the Lord showed Me. I was taken to the Valley of the Pyramid where I was shown the future. The Angel of the Lord showed Me how the people would flock here, worshipping the Ship and turning away from God. The Angel of the Lord showed Me how the Antichrist would come in boiling black clouds; how those who worshipped at this unholy altar called the Ship would summon the antichrist, the destroyer, the cancer of the soul. We must stop the Ship. We must keep it from claiming the souls it needs to open the way for its hideous creator. So say I, so sayeth the Lord.”

The image paused and there was a curt ping from the console. The Minister toggled his earpiece.

“Yes, Diane?”

“Minister, there’s a courier here to see you.”

The Minister froze a moment. He hadn’t thought of the British Ambassador’s cryptic linx all day. He’d forgotten somehow; not simply put it out of his mind. So another mystery was about to be solved.

“Send him in, Diane.”

He shut down his console, got up and straightened his shirt and tie. The courier knocked on the door to the inner office twice before stepping in. The courier wore a suit but the line looked a little bulky for his frame. The Minister suspected the courier was probably wearing body armour and wondered again at the nature of what was in the metallic case shackled to the courier’s wrist. The courier put the case on the table and opened a panel on its side. He pulled out a reader, the chain shackling him to the case giving him enough reach to use both hands.

“Minister, I’ll need to confirm your identity with your eye print,” the courier said his voice accented British.

“Of course,” the Minister said, taking the reader from him.

The reader had a binocular-like device on its side. The Minister brought this up to his eyes. The light changed gradually from red to green. He handed the reader back to the courier.

“Confirmed,” the courier said a moment later.

He replaced the device and opened the case. Inside was a sealed diplomatic pouch. The courier took a second reader from within the briefcase, detached a trackpen from its side and began filling in a small form displayed on the second reader. He then turned to the Minister.

“Please verify, Minister, that the seals on the pouch are intact and sign this.”

The Minister studied the pouch and took the reader from the courier, signing it and returning it to him. The courier scrolled to another part of the form. He noted the date and time and then handed the pouch over to the Minister. The Minister took it and then the reader was proffered again.

“Please sign that you have received the package, Minister.”

The Minister did. The courier packed up the device, bid the Minister good evening and left. The Minister toggled his inter office link.

“Diane, you might as well go home. Lock up behind you. I’ll set the alarm when I leave.”

“Sir, try to get some sleep tonight.”

“You too, Diane. Sorry I kept you so late. Knock off early on Friday. Say around 10:00 A.M. Any later and I’ll have to fire you.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Thank you, Diane.”

The Minister heard her leave a moment later. He sat down at his desk, looking at the envelope before him. The first thing he’d noticed after taking receipt of the package was how light it was. He opened it. A lot of packing material held a single hard-sealed letter. It was labeled in angry red letters with the inscription:

TOP SECRET: DEFENCE MINISTER’S EYES ONLY!

The Minister opened the envelope. The letter inside was printed on real paper as opposed to a reprintable magnetic sheet and was written in the precise, deliberate hand of the former Defence Minister.

Minister,

You have come to this office because either I have retired or been replaced. Whether I have been replaced through death, election, or cabinet shuffle is unimportant. Whether we are from the same party or not is irrelevant. We are both mandated by this office to protect the lives of Canadian Citizens. For this reason I must ask that you pay close attention to the words in this letter. You must follow these instructions precisely, because to do otherwise would be to put the lives of all Canadians and indeed the lives of everyone in the world in danger. Secrecy is of the utmost. If you will not abide by these conditions this letter must be destroyed and the case returned through the same messenger that brought it. Instructions on how to contact this messenger are printed on the last page of this letter. I urge you to stop now and consider the importance of the rest of what I have to say and your ability to commit to it before you read any further.

If you are reading further you should know that you are bound by the First Sealed Clause of the Official Secrets Act. At the end of your first day as Defence Minister I trust you have already been made aware of the Sealed Clauses of the Act. If not read no further until you have been. You are now one of nine people who at any given time sit on a secret international body known as the Committee. From Great Britain the head of MI-6, the British Ambassador to Canada and the Defence Minister. From Canada, the Defence Minister, the Minister of Natural Resources and the Solicitor General. From the United States the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the White House Chief of Staff and of all people the Curator of the Smithsonian Institute.

In order for the Committee to sit, two thirds of its members must be present. An informal group of councillors made up of former chairs of the Committee advise us. The Committee was founded just after World War Two, in 1946. During a joint British-Canadian archaeological dig in the Alberta Badlands a ship of alien origin was unearthed. It had been there at least sixty million years.

“Now, doesn’t that sound familiar?” the Minister murmured.

The Committee's sole purpose is to catalogue, where possible acquire and study any and all artifacts of alien origin. We have been able to adapt many technologies from these artifacts for use here on Earth. Others still remain a mystery. You were instructed earlier by another member of the Committee to contact them after you had received this package. At twenty-three fifty-nine hours tonight use whatever method described to you by that person to contact them. If you have already missed that window repeat at one fifty-nine and if necessary again at three fifty-nine. Cease all attempts to contact for the night, should the last contact not be made. Resume contact again at twenty-three fifty-nine tomorrow night. If you fail to meet a final rendezvous time of twenty-three fifty-nine the day after tomorrow we will assume you have defaulted and I will resume my post on the Committee. If you keep your appointment you will be fully briefed on the Committee and the organization it commands. If you stay with the Committee, Minister then I congratulate you and promise to pray for you. Because nothing that can be said to you will prepare you for the burden of what it is we do. Dispose of this letter in the manner your contact specifies and good luck to you.

The Minister checked his watch. It was a quarter to one. Looked like he'd have a little bit of a wait and plenty of time to reflect on whether or not he wanted to make the contact. He sat back and pondered this latest turn of events in his life. If he'd had all this to do over again, he thought, looking at the cold rain dropping down from the black sky, he would have told the Prime Minister to go to hell. He still had the option of not calling, of leaving the Committee to the former occupier of this office. It would require no effort on his part; all he'd have to do was not send a link on channel QU137 and he'd be free. But the Minister *knew*. He knew with a certainty that weighed heavy on his heart that he could no more refuse the Committee than he could have refused the Prime Minister when he was first offered the Defence portfolio. He was imminently curious. Although the Ship had removed much mystique from the prospect of aliens coming to Earth; alien artifacts would for a long time to come be exotic; ancient artifacts all the more so. The Minister had too many questions following the letter he'd read to refuse. He also had a duty to the Canadian people. He had been given this portfolio and the Committee was, although not what he'd been expecting, part of that portfolio. The

THE UNEARTHING

Minister counted down the time remaining until he was to contact the British Ambassador. Time stretched on almost agonizingly; the combination of the late hour, the long day and the news he had just read swamping his system. He was alert and exhausted all at once and he doubted he'd be able to get much sleep tonight without herbal assistance. He just hoped that there was a joint left in the pack at home because at this hour there wouldn't be anyplace he could buy another pack. The RDCBO, the Recreational Drug Control Board of Ontario, would be closed until nine in the morning. He'd need some relief tonight—this morning really—if he were to get any sleep. Finally it was time to place the call. And now the Minister found he still wanted to think about this one. Whether or not he was certain he was up to the challenge. But even as he was second guessing himself, he was keying the channel address into his console. It only took a moment and the British Ambassador was onscreen, looking at him.

“Welcome to the Committee, Minister,” he said.

The most important acts of a civilization, be they atrocities against life or acts of compassion beyond understanding, are always done in the name of the greater good. And no one who acts in the name of the greater good believes they are wrong. That is why right and wrong are so often indistinguishable.

THE GREATER GOOD

Gabriel Ashe knew this was a Dream the same way He always knew He was Dreaming. His last memory was of taking High Communion, a cocktail of narcotics hallucinogens and dangerous stimulants. It was a combination of drugs that would have killed lesser men. It brought Him instead closer to bliss, though not always peacefully. Ashe didn't remember if He'd partaken of the flesh. He probably hadn't unless the Angel of the Lord had demanded a sacrifice. For this was indeed a True Dream, sent to Him when he took High Communion. He would know soon enough. He was in a dark desert, the sky overhead black with thickly flowing clouds moving slowly across the horizon. Flashes of purple lightning backlit the clouds occasionally spearing the earth, searing it, making it scream. And of course the shining light in the darkness of this most unholy night was the Ship. It reigned in the valley below Him like an evil king. He was standing on the precipice of the Shorn Mountain, the sheer drop to the Ship kilometres below seeming to fall on forever. How long would He fall if He was pushed and the Angels weren't there to catch Him?

“Do not test the Lord your God, Gabriel Ashe.”

The voice as always, preceding itself slightly, echoing in reverse, turning Him to face the direction it came from to watch the Angel appear. To Gabriel Ashe it seemed that the Angel unfolded from a rift in the air in front of His

eyes. One moment there was nothing then a bubble the shape of the Angel and then the form of the Angel filling the bubble ballooning into existence.

“They seek to break the great seal on the Ship,” the Angel said, turning to look down upon the infernal vessel. “It goes against the will of the Lord for this to happen.”

“I will stop them,” Ashe said, “if you will but tell Me how.”

The Angel inclined its head towards Him.

“Ask,” the Angel said, “and ye shall receive.”

And Gabriel Ashe received.

He woke hours perhaps even days later, back inside the compound bought and built in a matter of days by the United Trinity Observants. Just behind their Open Church in the Village that had grown up around the Ship. Ashe didn't bother trying to guess how long he had been in the Dreamstate. He was never sure and it never really mattered. It had been long enough though. He could tell by the dried blood everywhere. Apparently he had taken a sacrifice for the Angel. Once He would have found this disturbing. But that had been before His Baptism, before His Father revealed Himself to Ashe. Now he saw this as what it was: the law of the Lord. The girl's body was torn open, her eyes gone an opaque white, no longer seeing; the terror and pain of her final moments glazed over in a dull expression of death. She and Ashe were naked both, their clothes discarded as her life had been. He didn't remember offering the sacrifice and wasn't sure if He'd partaken of her flesh before or after rending it for the sake of the Angel or if He'd fucked her at all. No matter. The Angel had once again shown him the way. Ashe found His legs and unlocked the door of His private suite. His trusted Apostles were there, their faces as always nervous and uncertain.

“Take the offerings and burn them,” Ashe said, “in the proscribed place and in the proscribed manner. I must cleanse Myself, break My fast and speak to the Congregation and the Open Church.”

“As you say,” His Apostles complied, heading into the room to take care of the remains of the faithful departed inside.

The Open Church of the United Trinity Observants was the public face of Gabriel Ashe's cult. It was here in the Congregation's new home in the Village, that people came to hear the Word of the Lord Most High Jesus Christ from the lips of His Son Gabriel Ashe. Like most of the other buildings in the Village the Open Church was built of corrugated tin and polywood

beams. There was little to distinguish the Open Church from most Christian houses of worship; a large crucifix stood behind the altar, a pulpit stood off to the left and pews surrounded the altar on three sides. Certainly this surface similarity to most Christian sects is what drew so many from the Village to Ashe's sermons. The rumours of sex and drugs in Ashe's cult doubtless attracted many others, but Communion was reserved from the Converted and all most people received at the Open Church was prayer and Ashe's disturbing, charismatic sermons.

"My children, the allies of the Ship are now making ready to open the great seal and descend into the belly of the beast. This should never have been allowed to happen, but it has. The Devil has won this battle. The Ship is idolized as a great treasure unto the World. Even the supposed leaders of the World's religions are seduced, gathered in the capital of idolatry, Rome, to discuss how the lies they preach can be changed to include the Ship. When their lies are disproved, My children, the liars invent fresh lies."

Ashe studied each face. He counted many possible new converts among the audience tonight. And His heightened perceptions allowed Him to see His enemies out there as well. A dishevelled young man who's body belied physical strength and health under the ratty hair, dusty clothes and five-day growth of beard. . . . A woman in a suit, tie askew, hair undone, evidently weary from a day's work; her eyes betrayed an alertness that did not correspond to the dark circles that surrounded them. There were others but not enough for Ashe to be concerned. He had not done anything yet for them to strike. Their suspicions were all unsubstantiated and they had never successfully instituted a raid against His church. He continued his sermon, marking each face of His enemy. When they went over the video from tonight's sermon he would concern himself with these people again.

"We have lost the battle to keep the Ship sealed to all but Me, but we have not lost the war against the Devil, My Children," He said. "We can still and yea, we *must* save the world from itself. We must find some way to shut down this site, to force the world to desert the Ship. Let us pray now to the Lord My Father, Jesus Christ."

TRANSCRIPT
INTERACTIVE NEWS NETWORK NEWSCAST
PLAIN TEXT FORMAT

PATH: INN<>HEADLINES>>THE
SHIP>>UPDATE><

ANCHOR

GOOD MORNING. TOPPING THE HEADLINES THIS MORNING IS THE ANNOUNCEMENT FROM THE SHIP SURVEY EXPEDITION THAT AFTER SEVERAL DAYS OF INTENSIVE STUDY OF THE ALIEN TEXT FOUND AROUND THE DOOR AT THE BASE OF THE PYRAMID, THEY BELIEVE THEY HAVE DECIPHERED THE CODE NECESSARY TO UNLOCK IT AND GAIN ENTRY TO THE INTERIOR OF THE SHIP.

PATH: THE SHIP<>SHIP SURVEY
EXPEDITION>>ALIEN TEXT>>INTERVIEW WITH
PROF. MARK ECHOHAWK><

ECHOHAWK

THE ALIEN TEXT FOUND AROUND THE DOOR INTO THE PYRAMID CAN BE DIVIDED INTO TWO SETS OF CHARACTERS. PROFESSOR MICHAEL ANDREWS

PATH: SHIP SURVEY
EXPEDITION<>BIOGRAPHICAL DATA
>>ANDREWS, MICHAEL, PROF.><

PROF. MICHAEL ANDREWS, SIXTY-TWO, ASSIGNED BY PROFESSOR MARK ECHOHAWK TO THE SHIP SURVEY EXPEDITION IS A THEORETICAL MATHEMATICIAN WHO WAS UNTIL RECENTLY THE DEAN OF MATHEMATICS AT OXFORD UNIVERSITY. ANDREWS PUBLISHED A PAPER THAT DEFINES THE PREDICTABLE STATISTICAL PROBABILITY OF

THE UNEARTHING

PATH: ANDREWS, MICHAEL, PROF.<>ALIEN
TEXT<<INTERVIEW WITH PROF. MARK
ECHOHAWK>>

ECHOHAWK

PROFESSOR MICHAEL ANDREWS IDENTIFIED THE NUMERIC GLYPHS, THE FIRST SET OF CHARACTERS AND CONSEQUENTLY THE BASIS FOR THE SHIP BUILDER'S BASIC NUMERIC SYSTEM. OUR LINGUIST, PROFESSOR SONIA AIZIZ HAS IDENTIFIED THE SECOND SET OF CHARACTERS, SOME FORTY-SEVEN DIFFERENT RUNIC SYMBOLS, AS THE PRIMARY CHARACTERS FOR THE BUILDER'S WRITTEN LANGUAGE. THE SYMBOLS ARE AS YET INDECIPHERABLE TO US BUT PROFESSOR AIZIZ HOPES THAT WHEN WE GET INSIDE THE SHIP ITSELF WE'LL FIND A PRIMER THAT BRIDGES THE GAP BETWEEN THEIR MATHEMATICAL LANGUAGE AND THEIR WRITTEN LANGUAGE. THEN WE WILL TRULY BE ABLE TO BEGIN UNDERSTANDING MORE ABOUT THE SHIP.

Bloom shut down her Grid connection and retracted the video boom of her mobile console back away from her left eye. She took one last drag from her cigarette before dropping the stub to the ground and crushing it out under her foot. Break time was over. She made her way past saluting subordinates to the secure underground hangar where the (healed) repaired Bug sat, humming its own counter-harmony to the Shipsong. Bloom stood under the Bug. It balanced on four insectile struts a little more than two meters off the hangar floor; there was just enough space for her to walk under. Her subordinates gathered around her as she switched on the camera on her headset. She'd be breaching the cockpit of the Bug in just a few minutes.

Since the unearthing this Bug had gone from damaged and inanimate machine to being fully operational and active. The engineers had been all over the machine like ants; they'd examined the outer hull of the craft, opening what few access ports there were and trying uselessly to cut open the Bug's skin for a look within. The hatchway into the twenty-three meter long Bug led to a series of three crawlspaces and a round, sealed room that Bloom could only guess served as the cockpit. Two of the crawlspaces led back to the

engine compartment where even now techies were looking at alien machine components, trying to understand their function. The third crawlspacelid past the cockpit along to the front of the craft and the sensor node. After being given a brief tour of the Bug by her new staff, Bloom had been brought up to speed by the engineer immediately subordinate to her a fellow by the name of Brubaker.

“The dead Bug’s given us a lot of insight over the years; a lot of our scanning and imaging systems came from what we found in the sensor node in the forward section of the craft,” he explained. “Stealth shielding came from the outer membrane of the Bug’s hull, liquid crystal video and three-D imaging technology from the cockpit...a lot’s come out of it. But with the power and propulsion systems in the aft of the Bug completely destroyed and the second Bug inactive until now, all we were really able to do was catalogue parts.”

“No attempts were made to reproduce the power or propulsion systems based on what was found in the second Bug?” Bloom asked.

“Several times,” Brubaker replied. “However we’ve never been able to duplicate its power supply. There are also several types of material, including some radioactive elements that we’ve never been able to synthesize. And a lot of those materials have changed since the Bug went active.”

“Changed, how?”

“Well the outer skin of the Bug’s become impenetrable; we can’t cut through it. And a lot of the internal systems and relays have changed; liquids flowing through conduits where there were none before...relays between systems suddenly made of a different material...we’ve brought in a biologist to examine the Bug because we think that it’s at least partially based on organic technology.”

“You think the Bug’s alive?”

“At least partly, yes.”

Bloom nodded and consulted the engineering study logs on the Bug on the data pad before her.

“Tell me about what happened the last time someone tried to access the cockpit area,” she said. “The report wasn’t too clear.”

“We had someone climb up into the cockpit as soon as the Bug had finished...repairing itself. As you know the cockpit is a small area; a sphere roughly two point five meters wide, accessed from the rear. As the tech climbed inside the access hatch sealed automatically and the chamber started filling up with an unknown liquid.”

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“The report said the chamber flooded and tried to drown him.”

“It’s a little confused,” Brubaker said. “When the floor started rising he made for the hatch. He described a thick, yielding liquid substance that tried to form itself around him, amoeba-like. When he got out of the chamber though, he was perfectly dry.”

“Before the Bug was active there was never anything like that reported,” Bloom said. “In fact the cockpit was just bare chromatic grey walls.”

“That’s right.”

“And there’s been no other... attempts... made in other parts of the Bug, to grab anyone.”

“Also right.”

Bloom nodded her head.

“That’s what I thought. Fine; there’ll be a team meeting first thing tomorrow. Once everyone’s gone over the Bug and studied the systems connecting to the cockpit I’ll be climbing in.”

Now Bloom pushed open the hatch that led into the small cockpit. She wore a small atmosphere canister on her back connected to a face mask. Climbing inside, Bloom put the mask on and opened the valve from the canister. She stood, looking around.

“I’m in,” she said into her mike. “I’m stepping towards the center of the floor.”

She was calm. Bloom fully expected she knew what would happen next. The floor seemed to liquefy around her feet, slowly rising up.

“The floor’s moving now,” she said. “Climbing up...”

The liquid rose to her knees and kept climbing. As it reached her hips Bloom raised her hands instinctively. She felt herself beginning to float. She was nervous but not overly worried. She had techs on the other side of the chamber door to get her out if need be. The chamber was filling quickly now, but she was no longer rising. Bloom judged her position to be about halfway between floor and ceiling. The liquid was warm; nearly body temperature. It was like being in a hot bath. Suddenly the liquid reached her neck and went up around her head. She felt a moment’s panic as she realized she couldn’t move. But there was a space between her head and the membrane and it seemed as though fresh air was passing through the space. Bloom found she had use of her arms again. She pulled her mask off and inhaled fresh air.

“The liquid’s encased my body,” she said, a little uneasily. “It’s—I can’t describe it. It’s like there’s a bubble around my head. I can breathe and see

clearly. The liquid's not interfering with my vision at all; there's no ripple, no distortion." She said, "I can't move very well, but I'm fine. Whoa!"

Suddenly, control panels materialized in the environment around Bloom's hands. There were two control sheaves, one near each hand and a panel covered in Shiplanguage runes and glyphs between them. Displays around the periphery of her vision were unintelligible in Shiplanguage, but obviously status readouts.

"Tell me this is recording!" Bloom called into her mike.

"We're getting the images," Brubaker said. "We're not believing them but we're getting them."

The cockpit walls rippled first losing their colour then their opacity. From Bloom's perspective the entire hangar suddenly became visible around her. There was the barest ghost-image of the Bug around her. Beyond that she could see out into the hangar and at her staff collected around the access to the Bug. She could see her own camera's POV reflected back on the console screen one of the techies was holding.

"Cool," Bloom said.

She turned her attention back to the control panel before her as well as the control sleeves to either side of her own arms. She recognized the layout though it resembled nothing she'd yet flown.

"I get this," she said. "These are the flight controls. The sticks must control pitch and altitude, direction..." She felt with her feet. "There are pedals down here. I think I could fly this thing. All we'd need to do is map out the control panel, but I think I could *fly* this thing!"

Gabriel Ashe stared out at His Congregation. Here were His true disciples. Here were those whom had chosen to follow Him: those who had understood His revelations, those who understood His importance. And these were the ones He loved most: those who had been with Him since the Beginning or very near to it. Only they and two each that they had chosen from among the Congregation that they trusted. They were here tonight to prepare for war. To prepare for jihad.

"I am the Promise Kept, I am the Spirit Made Flesh," Ashe said. "I am the Body Made Whole. And I have gathered you here so that we may do the Lord's work."

Ashe looked out upon His flock and began the Recitation: "*Before He was taken up to Heaven Jesus said to the faithful: 'When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power and you all will become witnesses*

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unto Me and preach the Good News to the ends of the earth.' When the day of Pentecost came all the believers gathered together to pray. Tongues of fire filled the room they had gathered in and rested upon each of them. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in tongues as the Holy Spirit took possession of them."

He turned to the altar. He had prepared Communion for them earlier and had placed them here on a silver tray. The very tray, the Angel had once told Him, upon which the head of John the Baptist had been presented to King Herod. Three pills each in twenty-five cups: one an extremely high-powered opiate, one a hallucinogen and one stimulant. One set of pills for each Disciple before Him and one set of pills for Him.

"Here is the Spirit of the Lord made ready to fill us all with the His power. But only the Faithful may receive this Communion, for only the Believers are Holy." At once and as one His Disciples began reciting the Creed of the Observants:

"I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of Heaven and Earth and in Jesus Christ His Only Son who saved the world from sin in death and in dying restored life. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Son of the Son of God, promised to us when the Spirit of Christ descended on his Apostles. I believe in the Divinity of the Son of Christ, in His power to make God whole so that the Lord may return to Earth and in the Everlasting Glory of the United Trinity, Amen."

When they had finished they approached, kneeling along the communion rail that surrounded the altar. The pills were designed to be fast acting and dissolved under the tongue. Ashe placed the pills into the waiting mouths of each of His disciples, saying the words "The Spirit of Christ" to each. Seconds later the drugs were taking effect. Ashe heard one of His supplicants moan as though in the throes of pleasure. Another sounded as though he were in agony. Another was laughing. But all had Received the Gift. He took His own dose last, His eyes rolling into His head, His heart trip hammering, His breath turning to fire and ice. When he looked out at His Congregation He saw that they were as He had left them, slumped around the Communion rail or staggering back to the pews. He saw ribbons of color weaving through the room, making the image before Him all the sharper all the clearer. He saw the world as His father meant it to be: pure and under His control.

"And now we are full of the Lord," He said, His voice a clear hypnotic monotone. "And now you can be open to His Word as I speak it. So say I, so sayeth the Lord."

"So say you, so sayeth the Lord," His congregation replied, those having

returned to the pews now sitting, but unable to stay still.

Others had paired off indeterminately, lying against one another, fondling, rocking, but paying Ashe rapt attention. Almost all were paying Him full attention. Only a few did not. One was too busy convulsing, his body unable to handle the dose, the other one passed out, one hand under her blouse, the other twitching and flopping against the rail, as if both autonomous and spastic. Another appeared to be choking on his own vomit. None of them had taken Communion with a pure heart. Any that survived, Ashe would order killed.

“We must strike out at our enemies,” Ashe said to those remaining. “The time has come for us to act. We are called upon to Soldier for My Father, to Soldier for Christ. We may be called upon even to be Martyred for Him. But if His will is not served the Trinity will not be united and the Devil will rule Heaven and Earth. His will is that we strike out against the Ship and those who serve it. My will is that we strike them. My will is that we smite them in the Name of My Father. My will is the will of the Lord.”

“Your will is the will of the Lord.”

“Lord Jesus My Father, let My people be an army unto You. Let them strike in the Name of Your will. Let their every attack bring death and their every death be a sacrifice unto You.”

“So say you, so sayeth the Lord.”

They sang “Onward Christian Soldier”, then, with perfect clarity and coherence. He looked out on them, contemplating them: His soldiers, ready to march into war for Him, ready to kill in His name, bearing His Father’s standard before them as they butchered His enemies. The song ended and they turned to Him expectantly. He would not leave them wanting.

“My children...My Soldiers, we must now plan for these attacks. We must now prepare ourselves to fight, to die, in My Father’s name,” He said. “And I will give you a war to fight, a cause to die for. I will give you the salvation not just of Mankind, but of Heaven. I will give you the war against the Devil, the war for the Ship, the war against those who serve it. If you will not fight for Heaven, what will you fight for? If you will not die for God, then who will you die for?”

“We will die for the Lord our Living God,” His congregation responded, even as they were lost in thrall to the drugs: hallucinating, convulsing, engaged with themselves or others, still they knew the words:

“We will die for Our Saviour Lord Jesus Christ and for His Only Son.”

“Then let us begin making our plans.”

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The transports rolled their way across the Ramp, pulling up in front of the Pyramid. Even after the dust had settled from halting the vehicles the members of the Ship Survey Expedition took a moment before deciding to step out towards the Pyramid. The Shipsong seemed a little louder today, the sun's reflection off the gold of the Pyramid and the Ship just a little brighter. But finally the sound of the Shipsong became less haunting and more taunting and one by one starting with Andrews, they stepped from the vehicles. Echohawk began giving instructions to the subordinate members of the Ship Survey Expedition to begin setting up a small base camp including the necessary communications equipment for the SSE going into the Ship to stay in contact with the surface. The support vehicles were turned around facing back the way they'd come, in case a quick getaway became necessary. Doctor Cole shouldered her medical kit and the two EMTs that were to accompany the SSE did likewise. Aiziz and Andrews had their equipment, as did Doctor Kodo and Professor Scott. James and Peter stood ready, both wearing headsets equipped with cameras and viewers. James panned his camera over the expedition as the base camp's toilet facilities, mess tent and medical center were set up, speaking lowly into the microphone cradled against his cheek. Peter scanned the Pyramid, standing a short distance away from the rest of the expedition. Echohawk looked over his team members one last time, ensuring everyone was ready.

"Well all right," he called. "Let's go see if we can get in the Ship."

They approached the Pyramid, the sound of Shipsong wrapping itself around their footfalls. Andrews stepped up to the panels of runic script and numeric glyphs and pulled out his notepad, switching the device on with the pressure of his thumb. Andrews and Aiziz had determined that there was a hidden pattern in the blocks of text, repeated quite clearly; twelve characters: seven runes and five glyphs were scattered throughout the message. Andrews moved to the keypads to the left of the door, studying his display.

"Well, here goes nothing," He said.

He found each rune and glyph he was looking for and keyed them in sequentially. Each rune yielded after the slightest pressure and slid effortlessly into the back of the keypads. Andrews repeated the sequence on the bottom keypad. When he reached the last rune he paused looking into James' camera with a grim smile.

"Let's see what happens now," he said, pressing in the last glyph.

Everyone, Andrews included, stepped back from the door almost unaware they were doing so. From somewhere in the Pyramid before them there was

a loud, echoing thud. This was followed by a rumbling from the door or the mechanism behind it as it cracked away from the rest of the surface of the Pyramid and began sinking into the ground on a diagonal drop that matched the angle of the Pyramid. A gust of old, stale air escaped the Pyramid, blowing past the members of the SSE who were stepping cautiously back towards the opening in the Pyramid. The door dropped fully into its recess, stopping with another loud thud. The members of the SSE crossed this threshold into the Pyramid.

The interior was black, bare and devoid of any marking or design other than a large golden circular dais, raised up in the center of the room. A meter in through the door this ring rose from the ground wide enough to step onto before dropping back down to the floor on the inside. The expanse of floor inside the ring filled the Pyramid's cavernous interior and was grey in color, not the same rich black of the rest of the Pyramid's interior. As they stared at this new phenomenon a small black dot appeared dead center on the grey floor inside the golden ring.

"What do you make of that?" Echohawk asked Scott, as the engineer bent to examine it.

A breeze was blowing and it took Scott a moment to realize that it was coming from the black dot which was in fact a tiny hole. Before he could report this to the others the hole suddenly opened a little further and the floor inside the ring dropped so that it curved in from the dais to the hole now undulating at its center. With the widening of the hole the breeze seemed to get stronger as well. As they watched the hole in the floor get wider from pockmark to pothole to pit, collapse back a bit and then get wider still, they realized that the undulations were coming from the grey floor, itself.

"What are we looking at?" Echohawk asked, mystified.

"It's behaving almost like," Kodo stammered, stepping forward for a better look, "like an arterial valve."

As he finished speaking the hole opened completely, the grey floor disappearing entirely. They knelt around the edge of a precipice looking down a long, black pit. The wind gusted violently and the members of the SSE were forced to back up from the force of it. The wind peaked and then levelled off as a weak gale. Echohawk stepped cautiously back towards the opening, squinting against the wind. Scott, Kodo and Aiziz all wanted a better look at what was going on and joined him. As they reached the lip of the hole, a rushing whine could be heard coming up behind the still-gusting wind. The

noise grew louder and textured with other subtle sounds as the source of the fray approached. Echohawk peered down the hole, which was blacker than he could gauge. He caught movement somewhere below then lost it in the shadows and wind. When he caught it again he realized it was much closer and still coming.

“Get back!” he yelled.

A half-second longer to react and he’d have been too late. Kodo, Aiziz, Scott and Echohawk fell backwards, barely in time to get out of the way. A massive golden egg rushed out of the opening, halting as it crested the dais. The peak of the thing stood nearly as high as the Pyramid’s roof. The ceiling and floor of the crystal and gold object were apparently composed of the same alloy as the outer hull of the Ship. The ovoid object seemed to be some form of conveyance, evidenced by both its transparent walls and that these same walls split open facing the SSE. The inside could hold two dozen people and equipment; perhaps more.

“Now what?” James asked.

“I think that would seem obvious,” Echohawk said. “We call in to base camp and then climb aboard.”

“Are we certain that it will be able to bear our weight?” Andrews asked. “Presumably it hasn’t had passengers since it was buried here.”

“Based on everything we’ve seen so far,” Scott replied, “I think we’ll have to make a leap of faith and assume that it does. This Ship was meant to cross interstellar distances. We can assume that it was built with longevity in mind. Just because ninety percent of our consumer goods are designed with built-in obsolescence doesn’t mean the Ship will be as well.”

“I suppose not,” Andrews said, though he didn’t sound entirely convinced.

Aiziz settled the matter by climbing into the lift and stepping to the back. She waited expectantly, a bemused look on her face as one by one the others joined her inside. They looked around at the transparent walls of the conveyance. The golden floor and ceiling were flat and highly polished. The black walls of the Pyramid’s insides stood silent guard around them. They looked at one another, each of them wearing an expectant, nervous face. There were no buttons on the inside of the egg-like lift car; no apparent way to direct the lift. Then the door into the lift slid shut, the seams of the portal disappearing, leaving them inside an immaculate crystal bubble.

“Mimetic crystal?” Scott mused aloud. “I wonder how—.” He was cut short as with a sudden lurch, the lift started moving.

It dropped half a meter, stopped and then began to slip more slowly, fluidly, down the shaft beneath it. Soon they were surrounded by the darkness of the tunnel, the lights from their headset cams the only illumination provided them.

“Everyone make sure your headsets are recording,” Echohawk advised, unable to conceal his excitement.

Their progress downwards soon became evident as they passed through rings of blue light; each transition seeming to push them a little faster on down the channel. Although they felt no acceleration they began rushing past the luminous rings more frequently until they were launched from the outer hull into the vast interior of the Ship. It was golden and aglow, open before them in all its majesty. As far as they could see all around them in the gap between the inner and outer hulls was the ancient, secret interior of the Ship.

“Allah keep and protect us,” Aiziz murmured, looking out at the wonders spreading out below them.

The inner hull was several kilometres below them, held to the outer hull through a massive airframe. Black girders the size of villages, each of them honeycombed and a kilometre wide stretched out like the arms of an umbrella along the inside surface of the outer hull, reaching for the large disk of the inner hull. Everything else inside the Ship was golden but for the shimmering blue trenches along the surface of the inner hull. The tube their lift car was traveling through was transparent and undulated to accommodate them as though they were being swallowed. Other transparent tubes carried massive flows of energy up to the thick outer hull. From what they could briefly ascertain there seemed to be whole decks if not entire stations ringing the outer hull. More access portals like the one moving them along ran to and from these stations and the inner surface of the Ship.

“There’s more than we could see in a thousand trips up and down this lift,” Andrews said, his voice hushed. “You’d have to bloody fly through here to see it all.” Like the others, he was now looking down at the looming inner hull. The tube carrying them descended straight into its topmost level, a large cylindrical outcropping. Their arrival at this destination was imminent.

“Next stop, wonderland,” Echohawk said.

The lift car nestled itself into the center of a large, round chamber. The walls were golden, divided into a mosaic by a thousand fissures of strangely deliberate shapes. A band of blue energy ringed the chamber halfway up the rounded walls. The crystal car split open and there was a quick rush of air as the atmosphere of the inner chamber equalized with that of the car.

“What are the odds that we’re breathing anything toxic?” Kodo asked.

“Possible,” Cole said, “but not probable. I hope not, anyway.”

Quickly, nervously, she drew breath and then exhaled.

“In all likelihood, the Ship sampled our atmosphere long before we entered,” Andrews said, “and endeavoured to match the interior atmosphere to our own. Otherwise we’d probably have been asphyxiated on the lift. No, my guess is the environment throughout the Ship has been adjusted to be ideal to support us.”

“Whatever the case may be,” Cole said, “we can breathe it.”

As the SSE exited the car they noticed two sealed doors leading from the chamber. There were no panels on the doors, no visible way to open them. However, a large black slab of stone dominated the back of the room behind the lift car. On it was inscribed hundreds of runes, glyphs and other symbols. To the left of it was another elaborate iconic and runic keypad. Aiziz and Andrews tore towards it as one.

“It’s the primer!” Aiziz exclaimed, grabbing equipment off straps on her utility pack.

She was laser-scanning the images on the primer before anyone else reached her. Andrews studied the primer before walking around to the other side. The black stone on the reverse was bare but a panel stood out from it, a little more than chest-high. It was again covered with runes and numeric glyphs, as well as the stranger new symbols.

“This time I think we’ll find it’s not quite so easy to proceed,” Andrews said. “I doubt the combination to the doors will be anything as simple as a hidden pattern.” He returned to the primer.

“You expect we’ll have to input the response to some question? Some test of our understanding?” Aiziz asked.

“Precisely,” Andrews replied. “The primer will give us a rudimentary idea of their language. There will also be mathematical sets, values such as less than, greater than; units...equation values as well, perhaps...true/false values...I would expect the periodic table will also be represented here.”

“Then they’ll be expecting us to respond to some abstraction,” Aiziz said. “The atomic weight of caesium less the atomic weight of lead or some such.”

“Most probably.”

“Then you and I have much work to do,” Aiziz said, with a smile.

James and Peter recorded as much information as they could, Cole and her EMT team stood watching and waiting to be needed or not and Echohawk Scott and Kodo were studying the lift tube that had brought them here.

“What do you make of it?” Scott asked.

“Its behaviour was too organic,” Kodo said. “The way the lift gate opened in the floor of the Pyramid, the way the tunnel seemed to swallow us...it’s indicative of biomaterial.”

“Yes...but that would mean that the Ship’s organic components have been alive how long?”

“A long time,” Kodo said in awe, “a very...*very* long time.”

“I’d like to get up to look at that airframe.” Scott said. “We have to find a way out there.”

“In good time, Doctor Scott,” Echohawk said. “I don’t want to risk having you climb the lift shaft.”

Scott looked at him dejectedly. He had been looking at the gap between the crystalline lift car and the shaft that had conveyed them here with hungry eyes.

“Of course not,” he said, resigned.

“Take note of the dimensions of the stone,” Aiziz told Andrews as they made a detailed study of the artifact. “They may have some significance to the primer. We don’t know what cultural significance the size and shape of things had for the Builders.” Andrews looked at her, wryly.

“I’ll leave you to make your own jokes, Doctor Andrews,” Aiziz added.

There was painfully little else that could be done inside the Ship until the primer had been decrypted. After mapping the room extensively, the SSE returned to the lift all of them wishing to stay longer if only to be within the Ship.

“Have you noticed?” Kodo asked as they boarded the lift. “The Shipsong; we only hear it outside.”

“There are no doubt countless thousands of noises inside this monster,” Scott replied. “I suspect the lift, the lift tube and this chamber are all remarkably well soundproofed. I’d bet that besides air circulation, we won’t hear much inside the Ship.” They were left to ponder Scott’s statement as the lift sealed and began rising. Everyone’s attention was then given over to the business of witnessing the spectacular display of the airframe between the inner and outer hulls of the Ship: The airframe itself, the conduits running between inner and outer hulls, the apparent stations and towers; there were thousands of details to absorb. None of them were identifiable except by anthropomorphic assumption that similar forms would have similar functions from one civilization and species to another.

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“We’ll be studying this thing for centuries,” Echohawk said. “Thirteen generations from now we still won’t understand half of what we’re looking at.”

“Thirteen generations after that we’ll probably not be that much closer to full understanding either,” Aiziz added her voice reverent, hushed.

Echohawk had used similar tones. No one else, it seemed, dared to breach the silence. They all felt the same reaction: that they were in the presence of something far greater than themselves, something that had been built by hands and minds so far removed from their own experiences that they could never hope to empathize. They were humbled by the greatness of the Ship, its majesty, its outright supremacy. The society that had created it must have been exponentially more advanced than Humanity was now long before Humanity had existed. Now millions of years later, mankind would be fortunate indeed to ever even hope to approach the Builders in the scope and scale of their technological dreams.

They were all too excited to sleep. Even after an exhaustive day spent briefing the press and the World Ship Summit on what they’d found, making more sorties down the tunnel to the First Chamber in the Ship to gather what seemed to be an endless string of images from the inside of the airframe. Aiziz and Andrews had spent the day first cataloguing the symbols found on the codex and then trying to make sense of the representations therein. James and Peter had busied themselves compiling data collected for the benefit of those not directly involved with the expedition. Scott and Echohawk with the engineering aspects of the Ship; how could it be so large and yet so stable? Was it built in orbit or on the surface of some low-gravity world? How were the biological components integrated? Kodo had collected small samples from the lift gate and the tube that had carried them into the Ship and was enthusiastically pursuing them in his lab.

If the linx from Santino hadn’t come when it did, if he had waited until the following day to contact Echohawk and the SSE, things might have ended differently.

“Hello Professor,” Santino said. “How are things over at Earth Base One?”

“Earth Base One?”

“You haven’t heard?” Santino chuckled. “That’s what everyone’s started to call your camp at the bottom of the Pyramid.”

“I haven’t been near a console unless it’s to give an interview,” Echohawk said.

Santino nodded his head.

“I can understand why,” he said. “I’ve been at my console working for most of the day too; putting some affairs in order.”

“Really? Why?”

“I’ve been asked to join the North American Aboriginal delegation going to Rome for the Vatican IV talks on the Ship. And I’ve decided to go. It seems my brief stint as a medicine man earned me some notoriety. It might also have to do with some of the material I’ve published over the years on native beliefs.”

“Congratulations Chief.”

“Thank you,” Santino said.

“We should all get together before you leave, to celebrate.”

“My people had the same idea. I’m being dragged out tonight as a matter of fact.”

“Why don’t I round up the SSE and we’ll all meet?” Echohawk suggested. “Christ knows that after the day we’ve put in we could all use a break.”

They’d stayed out celebrating much later than anticipated. The members of the SSE and Santino’s Band Council had closed the restaurant they’d settled into and then the bar adjacent. The horizon was already coloured with the first lights of dawn when they finally staggered outside. Of course by then the partygoers’ herd had been culled. Everyone from Santino’s council excluding Police Chief Sharon Raven had left early, begging off because of work the next day. As had Kodo and Doctor Cole. Aiziz and Andrews had paired off and parted earlier that evening and wouldn’t be seen again until the following day. That left Echohawk, Scott, James, Peter, Santino and Raven to greet the day in the parking lot of the Laguna Tavern.

“James,” Echohawk said, “you want to linx for some cabs?”

James, who had been in the tavern’s smoking section with Peter and Kodo getting high for most of the night didn’t hear him.

“James?” Echohawk asked, chuckling.

“What?” James asked, dumbly.

This struck Peter as eminently funny and his cackling laughter soon had Raven and Santino joining in.

“James!” Echohawk said, trying to suppress his own laughter and sound authoritative. “Call us a fucking taxi!”

“You’re a fucking taxi!” James said, clueing in on the joke.

Peter and Santino were leaning against one of the cars in the parking lot, their intoxicated laughter making it impossible to stay standing.

“Stop...” Raven begged, her face flushed. “Stop...I’ll piss myself...”

She raised her hands and fumbled for her headset buried somewhere in her purse. She searched for it, thinking about when she was a teen and the headsets had first come out. Bulky contraptions by today’s standards, everyone who owned a headset back then wore them constantly in a vulgar display of status. Now you could never find one of the fucking things when you were looking—At first she thought one car had slammed into another. Then Raven thought what she’d heard had been a set of two small explosions, possibly firecrackers or fireworks. She looked up. Everyone looked stunned, staring at Echohawk. But that wasn’t precisely right, she realized. They were looking at him, at Doctor Scott who was lying on the pavement and at the man who was standing in front of them holding a handgun. A wisp of blue smoke danced from the gun’s barrel, painfully visible under the sodium arc lamps in the bar’s parking lot. Raven started to reach for the throwdown gun she kept in a holster in the small of her back, fumbling drunkenly with the holster-strap. Echohawk was clutching his chest, the front of his shirt damp with blood that was running rapidly down his belly and groin. The man with the gun fired again, freezing everyone before they could react. Echohawk staggered and fell. The man smiled and began screaming a song as he turned the gun on himself:

“*Onward Christian Soldiers, Marching off to WAAAAAAR!*” he wailed, putting the gun to his temple.

Police Chief Raven heard him scream “*Memento Mori!*” before pulling the trigger and blowing off the other side of his head. The gunman’s death seemed to finally galvanize everyone. James moved to Echohawk, ripping open his shirt to apply first aid. Raven dumped her purse out on the hood of the nearest car and slipped on her headset to call emergency services. Peter rushed back to the bar to do the same and Santino was working Doctor Scott. But in both cases it was too late: There was a neat hole just off-center in Scott’s forehead, a gaping exit wound at the back of his scalp. He was dead. And as James worked to control Echohawk’s bleeding, the archaeologist gave a shuddering, convulsive cough which sprayed James with blood and then was still. Sirens sounded in the distance, fast approaching. Sharon Raven identified them by their wails: an ambulance and two police vehicles. But it was too late. The shooting victims were dead and the shooter had gone on to face celestial justice far beyond the reach of any mortal law.

INTERLUDE

RAIN OF TEARS

She'd woken up at five ready to start the day. Bloom was primed and ready for the first test flight of the Bug; she'd barely slept the night before and was aching for this day. Launch was scheduled for seven. She was showered, dressed and leaving for her pre-breakfast run when none other than General Harrod appeared at her door.

"General. To what do I owe—?"

"I'm sorry I have to be the one to tell you this, Lieutenant-Colonel," he said. "I know how you feel about me and you know how I feel about you. I wish I wasn't the one who had to bring you the news. Christ knows you deserve to hear it from someone who could be more sympathetic." Harrod sighed and gave his head a curt shake. "There's no easy way to say this. There was a shooting in Laguna early this morning. I don't have all the details...but...I'm afraid your ex-husband is dead."

"No," she said, not really believing the denial as it passed her lips. "My God...I have to call Laura."

"I've arranged for a private channel to be made available to you," Harrod said, showing what Bloom would have normally seen as uncharacteristic sympathy. "And the test flight will be postponed so you can attend the funeral." He stepped past her and switched on the console on the small desk in her quarters.

“I’ll leave you be,” he said. “Your paperwork’ll be waiting at the Company Clerk’s office. Lieutenant-Colonel, for what it’s worth, you have my condolences.”

He let her be after that. She sat down at the terminal, inputting Laura’s linc address manually. Seconds later, Laura Echohawk’s tearful image appeared onscreen.

“Mom...”

Bloom looked at her daughter’s tear-streaked face, noticing not for the first time the blend of features she’d inherited from Mark and from her. Laura’d missed out (at least as far as Bloom was concerned) on her mother’s blonde hair, instead favouring her father there with jet-black tresses; she had her father’s eyes, his sharp cheekbones and his ruddy complexion as well; and she had that same intense, all-seeing gaze that Bloom had first fallen in love with in Mark Echohawk. Laura had her nose, though and her mouth and chin. Bloom found herself confused and alarmed that she was sitting here, staring at her Laura’s image, looking to find the traces of her ex-husband in her daughter’s features, searching her and trying to find him...as if to confirm that he’d lived, that he’d touched their lives, that part of him was still alive.

“Oh, baby...” Bloom sobbed.

“How did it happen? Why?”

“I don’t know,” Bloom said. “I don’t know what happened. I only just found out.”

“My roommate told me,” Laura said, with no small trace of bitterness, “she saw it on INN. Why the *fuck* did they know, before we did?”

“I don’t know, honey,” Bloom said. “I wish I knew. I really do.”

“When will you be here?”

“Before noon your time,” Bloom said. “I promise.”

“I need you, Mommy,” Laura said, breaking down, the grief too much for her to bear any longer.

Bloom was breaking down, too; she and Mark had parted amicably they’d stayed close friends...and ended up in bed together after the divorce far too often not to have laid claim to an ongoing relationship with one another. Mark’s death shocked her...wounded her. And she was wounded all the more seeing her daughter in such anguish, to be so far away...too far to make this better, to at the very least wrap her arms around her little girl and give her what comfort she could.

“I’ll be there soon,” Bloom choked out. “I promise...I promise.”

She put her hand against the screen and they sat there, as together as

possible given the distance between Bloom's secret Nevada location and Laura's Los Angeles apartment and cried awhile. It was ten to six and the day had barely begun.

They gathered together in the main shelter in base camp. The eyewitnesses to the slayings had given their statements and now they and rest of the SSE sat together inside the small cafeteria, sharing coffee and the cold comfort of one another's company. The military presence had been increased to the point that a small occupation force was guarding the Ship and the surviving members of the Ship Survey Expedition. James realized that they *were* survivors, now. He looked from face to face. The *surviving* members of the SSE shared similar expressions of shock, pain, of loss. Only Doctor Cole wasn't there; she was working closely with the investigation into the assassinations but had promised to join them as soon as she could. James had studied with Echohawk and Peter the better part of four years; they'd both lost a mentor, a friend. Of the members of the SSE theirs was probably the most personal loss. Sonia Aiziz and Michael Andrews hung back slightly from the rest of the group; still at the same table, but nonetheless shrouded in the conspiracy of two of a new couple. Aiziz was talking Andrews listening, nodding sympathetically.

"I was his assistant at the time," she was saying. "We'd been searching for what had been described as an Incan treasury. It was a treasury, all right... but not what we expected. There were tens of thousands of Quipus sealed inside the chamber. Quipus were Incan visual communication that used strings knotted in different positions in different sequences to relay meanings. We spent weeks trying to decode them, to learn the language. For years everyone had assumed that the Quipus were merely a form of accounting, but we learned otherwise. Scholars are still discovering epics that put Homer, Shakespeare, Tolkien and Jordan to shame and music to humble composers from Bach and Beethoven, to Van Dyk. And if Mark hadn't picked me for the expedition I wouldn't have been there when the discovery was made. I wouldn't have the career I do today... I wouldn't be part of the SSE today, if it weren't for him."

She stifled a sob and drew closer to Andrews.

"I only knew the Professor by reputation," he said. "And even then only fleetingly. But from what I knew of him he was the best choice to lead this expedition and he was a good man."

He looked uncomfortable. He was at a loss for words and knew he was

damning the man with faint praise.

"It seems so strange," Aiziz said. "Here we are, talking about Mark...and we've so little to say about Doctor Scott."

"I know," Andrews agreed, "but what can one say about someone they barely knew? Any death such as his is a senseless tragedy. And I'm sorry he's gone...but I didn't know him well."

The hoary old line suddenly occurred to him and Andrews could hear himself saying in a loud Scottish Brogue: "*Everett Scott, we hardly knew ye!*"

"None of us did," Mark Kodo said, sipping from his mug and snapping Andrews back to the present. "None of us really took much time to get to know him, either. Not that we had that much time...we've been together for only a few days."

"We should have done more to know him," Andrews said. "Perhaps then we'd at least be able to feel his loss as well. In my case I should have done more to know them both better."

There was silent assent to Andrews' statement although for the most part the members of the SSE understood that it was a moot statement. Scott was dead, his remains returned to Montreal where his family was laying him to rest. They could not mourn for a stranger, but they could regret having not tried to know him. Ahead of them was Echohawk's funeral, in Los Angeles. Presently Doctor Cole entered the cafeteria and made her way to their table.

"Hello everyone," she said. "I'm not going to be able to stay long I'm afraid. I just came by to let you know that I'll be scheduling sessions with each of you over the coming days. We have to discuss what's happened, in context of the Expedition and how each of you has been affected by it."

"Wait a minute," Kodo said. "Most of us are heading to LA for the Prof's funeral."

"I know," Cole said. "And there's no reason the sessions can't start when everyone gets back."

"Assuming we come back," James said, bitterly. "I don't know if the Expedition's worth what happened."

"And better that Professor Echohawk and Doctor Scott died for nothing?" Aiziz asked with the slightest edge to her voice. "We owe it to them to continue this work. We owe it to Mark's memory, especially."

"Here, here," Peter added, dryly.

James looked down into his coffee for a long moment before nodding his head.

"You're right," he said, his words a sad affirmation. "The bastards who

did this want us to leave. You're right."

"If any of you need to speak with me in the meantime, I will be available for most of this afternoon," Cole replied, a smile touching her lips.

"Thank you, Doctor Cole," Andrews said. "Are you sure we can't convince you to stay for a coffee? One of the things we've come to realize is how poorly we knew Doctor Scott and we'd hate to repeat that mistake again, with *any* member of the Expedition." Cole smiled again; a weak, sad smile.

"I think perhaps I will."

Bloom embraced Laura when they met at the airport terminal. They held each other tightly, both their faces damp with tears.

"Mom," Laura said, "it's so good to see you."

"I'm here for a while," Bloom said. "Don't worry."

Bloom drew back to look at her daughter and smiled, her face a mix of mourning and joy and being with her daughter again.

"Let me get a look at you," she said and Laura smiled.

"You cut your hair. It used to be so much longer."

"It kept getting in the way," Laura said distractedly, running a hand absently through her shoulder-length tresses. "And it was a bitch to dry after a shower." They put their arms around one another's shoulders and headed out to the parking lot.

"The funeral home's made all the arrangements," Laura said. "When they couldn't reach you aboard the Station they contacted me. Where were you by the way? I thought you were supposed to be skyside another three or four months."

"I was," Bloom said. "I got...reassigned. I wish I could tell you about it, but I can't."

"Top secret, huh?"

"Top secret, yeah."

They reached Laura's car; a battered canary-yellow hatchback she'd bought from a desert car dealer a couple of years before. Bloom stowed her carry-on in the trunk. Laura gave her another tight hug, snuffling back more tears before they got in, powered up and drove out.

"Have you heard anything else?" Laura asked as they drove. "Do you know what happened?"

"Only what I heard on INN," Bloom said. "I linked to their spar on the plane. I'm hoping to reach James or Peter when we get back to your place. They were with him when...when it happened."

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“I know. James called. They’re coming in tomorrow.”

“Are you okay with seeing James again?”

“I’m fine,” Laura said. “James and I were over a long time ago...and I think he and I are okay. Not as okay...not as okay as you and Dad...were...but, we’re okay.”

“That’s good,” Bloom said her voice hushed. “That’s good to hear.”

Laura reached for her hand and they linked fingers, squeezing each other’s hands and reassuring, comforting one another with their touch and their presence.

“Oh, Mom...why did it have to happen?”

“I don’t know, baby. I don’t know.”

They arrived back at Laura’s apartment in West LA without further incident or discussion. They reached Laura’s landing and soon she had unlocked the door and they were inside.

“You can have my room,” Laura said. “The couch folds out in the living room, so it’ll—.”

“Be fine for me,” Bloom finished. “I’ve slept in barracks, on some of the most uncomfortable beds in the world, Laura. Aboard C-3, I had to try sleeping in two-thirds of a Gee; the sofa bed will be fine.”

To punctuate this statement she threw her bag onto the couch. Laura shrugged and continued down the short hallway.

“Allison’s cleared out for the day,” Laura said, “to give us a chance to settle.” Bloom followed Laura to her daughter’s bedroom. Here she saw fresh evidence of how much alike she and Laura were: the room was an eclectic mix of styles and the general contrasts in chaos reminded Bloom of her pre-military youth: dimly lit from dark curtains but brightly painted. The bookshelf and music collection were neat, ordered but the desk and dresser were cluttered, messy. The bed was neatly made, but the floor was scattered about with tissues, dirty laundry (some of it scraps of clothing Bloom would never have thought Laura daring enough to wear), wads of paper and dirty dishes.

“Can I smoke inside?” Bloom asked.

Laura turned to regard her mother and smiled, weakly.

“Yeah. Tobacco or pot?”

“You have joints?”

Laura fished a pack off of her desk and an ashtray from the floor by her bed.

“I bought a pack last night,” she said, the smile suddenly fading.

“What? What’s wrong?”

“Last night...” Laura replied. “God, last night seems so far away...another lifetime.” Laura choked on a sob and looked at her mother.

“I guess it was another lifetime, wasn’t it?” she said.

Bloom went to her, hugging her tightly. There were fresh tears from Bloom as well as her daughter. Mark was dead. He was *dead*. They hadn’t seen each other in months, nearly a year and the last time she’d spoken to him it had been concerning the New Mexico survey. She and Laura cried themselves out, holding each other. It was a short tear fall and Bloom knew that like rain squalls before a storm, the real downpour was yet to come.

Bloom woke early the next day, still working on the strange schedule kept at Groom Lake: Eighteen hours of work for three days, two days’ rest and three more eighteen-hour work days. The days started at five in the morning. The sun wasn’t even in the sky and Bloom was taking her morning run. Forty-five minutes later, she was back at Laura’s, showering. The schedule helped. The routine helped. It kept her distracted, kept her from thinking, kept her from remembering how she’d loved him so much, yet how at the end of their marriage she’d found she just wasn’t in love with him. It had broken her heart to admit it and broken his more when she’d told him. They’d been together fifteen years; fifteen glorious years. She had been in love with him once and for quite a long time, too. They’d met while she was still a cadet and he was a sophomore at Colorado State. The sex had been good and he’d proved himself to be quite the conversationalist. What had started as a beautiful friendship had blossomed into love. But he had always loved her more than she loved him. She regretted it but that was the truth. She’d wanted him to mean more to her, especially since he’d given her Laura. But she hadn’t been able to. She didn’t love him enough to stay married to him but she loved him too much to lose his friendship. He felt the same about the friendship and he’d found it easier to adjust to staying friends with her than she’d dared hope. She’d expected him to hate her but he couldn’t. He fell into his work and discovered that archaeology was indeed his true love. She missed him. Oh, God did she miss him.

There were grim tasks ahead of her that day. Echohawk’s remains (as if the saccharine objectification used by the funeral director could make them forget it was Mark’s body) had arrived and for the sake of formality the

immediate family had to confirm his identity. After that there were lines to send more to reply to and other matters, other problems to deal with. The members of the Ship Survey Expedition were coming in and although it would be good to see them and therapeutic to hear eyewitness accounts of what had happened neither Laura nor Bloom really wanted to deal with them. But the business of dying was tedious one for the living and there were things that needed their attention.

They went to the funeral parlour together. Laura drove and Bloom smoked, the tobacco hurting her throat but calming her. She wanted to quit before they had to clone her new lungs. Although when Mark had had the surgery three years back it hadn't slowed *him* down. She laughed; a single "huh" and a smile crossed her lips when she thought of his resilience, his determination to return to work.

"What?" Laura asked.

"I was just thinking of your dad."

"Oh," Laura said, smiling. "He was great."

"He was."

They pulled into the funeral home's parking lot and were soon inside. After words of consolation from the funeral director, words that Bloom knew were well meant but suspected were also well rehearsed they were taken to see him. They went down a flight of stairs behind a door marked "Staff Only" and into a small room that was softly lit and tastefully decorated in mind of being comforting as well.

"Please wait here," the director said. "I'll bring his remains out to you in a moment."

Then he was gone through another door that whisked open silently, sliding into the wall. Laura drew closer to Bloom and her mother put an arm around her waist.

"You don't have to be here, if this is too hard," Bloom said.

"It'll be just as hard for you."

"Laura, you don't have to live up to some standard—."

"I know. But I need to be here with you as much as I need you to be here for me."

"I feel the same, baby."

The door opened again and the funeral director came out. Behind him one of his assistants wheeled out a utilitarian black plastic coffin used simply to transport the dead to the funeral home.

“Oh, God...” Laura whimpered.

Bloom drew her closer, her daughter clinging to her.

“Whenever you’re ready,” the director said.

Bloom looked at Laura. Her daughter nodded and Bloom nodded to the director. He turned to the coffin and worked some hidden latch. Bloom’s insides fluttered, a fearful anticipation spinning her stomach. The lid of the coffin opened and there he was. Mark had a sheet drawn up to his chin, his eyes closed, his skin pale with death. It was his stillness, his *inanimate* presence that got to her. Her throat suddenly closed painfully, her eyes hurting from the pressure of tears building up in their ducts behind them, her mouth tightening in an effort to keep her composure. This time, it was Laura who was bearing up better:

“That’s him,” she said, her voice raspy, hurting.

“Would you like a moment alone with the deceased?”

“Yes,” Bloom choked.

The funeral director made his way from the room, his assistant preceding him.

“Just press this button,” he said, pointing to a small white push plate in the wall beside the door, “when you’re done.”

“Thank you,” Laura said.

The director left and uncertainly, hesitantly, Bloom and Laura let each other go, approaching the coffin and Mark’s body with ginger footsteps.

“Oh Mark,” Bloom said.

She ran her hand down the side of his face, the outside two fingers of her hand just grazing his cheek. It had been her gesture, her touch. Her sign of love to him, going back to the very first night they’d lain together. He’d looked down at her, his face flushed, his eyes full of affection and her arousal had been deepened by that look. She’d been moved...so moved by what she’d seen in his eyes that night. Looking at him now she began to understand he was gone...that he’d never laugh again...never speak again...never smile that cocky, boyish, “I’ll always abide” smile again...never make love to her again. She knew damn well that after the divorce he’d slept with other women. She’d slept with other men as well. But they both always knew they’d always been able to turn to each other when they were in need. They always knew the other person would be there. But not anymore. He was gone, he was gone.

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Laura touched his shoulder gingerly, before pulling away. She could gain no comfort, no solace from touching him, from seeing him. It only served to remind her that her father was gone. They'd never debate politics of philosophy again...never discuss archaeology, or her love, art history again. Gone were the summer fishing trips, the Kings games, the long, written linxes he'd send her from his digs, the long linxes she'd write him, talking about work, about school, about life in general. They'd been close. She'd always felt closer to her mother, having become an Army brat and moved from base to base, but Laura and her father had formed a distinct friendship as she grew up. He'd accepted her as and treated her like an adult, never once the condescending patriarch. She was happy with the arrangement, her mother being the one she could turn to for parental comfort and guidance, her father the one who was a friend and an advisor of sorts. Now that was over. Now he was gone.

"Why?" she sobbed, crying again.

It was a broad question. Why was her daddy dead? Why now? Why like this? Why couldn't she keep from crying? Why did she want to stop crying at all? She looked at her mother who looked at her. They'd been alone with their grief. Now, they needed each other, again.

When they'd recovered, the downpour over but the storm not quite done, they summoned the funeral director again. He explained that his assistants would prepare the deceased now and told them when visiting hours would be. They thanked him, took his platitudes in stride and then left, heading for their next promise to be kept at the airport, with the SSE. Bloom knew that she'd had her hard cry now. There'd be more tears of course. Perhaps tonight, perhaps tomorrow night as well. She knew the flood of emotions would come again at the funeral, but she also knew that the deluge, the painful storm of tears, of acceptance of loss was done. Mourning was now becoming healing. Cold comfort, but it was nonetheless something to cling to, in the ocean of tears.

"We have a little time before their plane touches down," Bloom said. "Do you want to have a coffee and something to eat first?"

"Yeah," Laura replied. "God knows I could really use a cigarette."

"Know somewhere with a smoking area? In *this* town?"

Los Angeles' antismoking bylaws were notorious, making it illegal to smoke anywhere besides someone's home or car. There were few exceptions to the ban.

"Oh, yeah," Laura said, "I know a place."

The boarding ramp pulled away from the jump plane and it taxied out to the launch field. The surviving members of the SSE sat together aboard the plane. Everyone was silent, talked out. There was nothing new to say, no new emotion left to express with regards to Echohawk's death and it was still far too soon to really change the topic without seeming forced. James looked out the window as the plane finished taxiing. Below, struts were coming up from the launch pad and connecting magnetically to the underbelly of the jet. The landing gear was then retracted and the plane readied for launch. All this was audible inside the plane as a series of thunks and thuds. A moment later the horizon outside James' window tilted sixty degrees as the plane was elevated into launch position. The humming cycle of the plane's power-up for takeoff was heard. The "FASTEN SEATBELTS" sign stayed on and with a thunderous roar the plane launched into the sky. In less than an hour they'd be in Los Angeles. James watched as the Ship retreated away beneath them, still dominating the horizon even as the jump plane reached its low-earth orbit cruising altitude and levelled off. As the plane banked he watched the Ship retreat across the horizon; he got an impression on what it must have looked like in flight. James wasn't just leaving behind the Ship; he felt as though he were abandoning Echohawk's life as well. It felt wrong to be going, as if in their departure from this place they were making the Prof more dead. The man had died in his arms. James had never seen anyone die before. He hoped to never see anyone die again. One minute Mark Echohawk had been laughing, smiling, alive. In the next he was meat; all traces of the man he'd been were gone. James was still trying to make sense of it. He thought he'd felt...sensed *something* when Echohawk died, but he couldn't be sure. Was it some spiritual fare thee well, a comforting goodbye from the great beyond? Or was it James' own hysterical mind, trying to cushion the blow of Echohawk's death and the inevitability of his own? He didn't know. He couldn't be sure. James had been raised Catholic; raised to believe in the afterlife. He'd also been raised to believe that a faithful person should have no doubts, especially when someone died. And yet he had doubts. He had nothing but doubts. James looked to his faith when Echohawk died and had found it lacking.

They met the flight from New Mexico under the scrutinous eye of security and a not too small and always-hungry division of media. The World Ship Summit had arranged for both transportation and accommodation in Los Angeles for the SSE, but running the gauntlet at LAX, even with the

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assistance of security, was daunting. In their exuberant haste to report the facts, several media outlets identified Bloom and Laura as “Unidentified Persons” accompanying the Ship Survey Expedition on their way to meet with Echohawk’s surviving family members. Only INN had the facts straight on the identities of the two women during those crucial first moments when news broke. Further to that only INN and a handful of other news organizations had the good taste to restrict their presence in the airport to the officially set-up media zones. It was agreed, for the sake of their privacy, that Bloom and Laura would accompany the SSE to their hotel. The staff of the hotel would be better equipped to protect Laura’s her mother’s and the Ship Survey Expedition’s privacy before and after the funeral. And Laura refused to return to her apartment once Bloom threatened to use her sidearm on any reporter so tasteless as to assault the sanctity of her daughter’s privacy at home.

They were together in the sitting room of one of the small suites the World Ship Summit had arranged for the SSE’s accommodation in Los Angeles. James and Peter sat across from Bloom and Laura. Aiziz, Kodo and Andrews stood to either side of the group, drifting in and out of focus on the narrative going on in front of them, at times wanting to hear what was being said, at other times wishing not to have to hear it, at all.

“I want you to tell me exactly what happened,” Bloom said, intently, calmly, trying to be clinical, analytical.

She tried to pretend that Mark’s life was just another plane crash; that the specifics of that crash would lead her to some insight, to some understanding of what had happened and why. Peter took a breath and hesitated.

“I still don’t really know what happened,” he said. “It was like the guy appeared out of nowhere. We never even saw him coming...we were all pretty out of it and just trying to get back home.”

Laura shuddered and suppressed a sob.

“Laura, you don’t have to stay, if—.”

“I need to hear this,” she said, tightly.

Bloom said nothing else. She knew exactly how Laura felt. The news would be horrid, the details would be traumatic but she needed to hear for herself what had happened. Bloom felt exactly the same way.

“I actually saw him walk towards us,” James said. “He got out of a car...Christ only knows how long he’d been sitting there. I didn’t think anything of it as he walked up to us. I didn’t even realize he was reaching for

a gun until he started shooting...Scott was dead and then the Prof went down.”

He choked back tears; not out of shame, but so he could say what he had to say. Bloom was crying, as was Laura, Peter and Aiziz. Kodo and Andrews were choked, throats lumped and sore, their faces tight. James continued.

“I went to him...trying to help...trying to stop the blood...Oh, God, there was so much blood...but I couldn’t. I couldn’t and he...died...”

He broke down then, the memory of Echohawk coughing up a great gout of blood, the look of confusion and pain in his mentor’s dying eyes too much for James to bear.

“There was nothing you could have done, James,” Bloom said. “He was shot twice in the chest at point blank range.”

She choked on the words, shuddering as she recalled James’ description of Echohawk’s final moments. Over the next few minutes, everyone preoccupied themselves with regaining their composure; Aiziz was helped by Andrews’ comforting rubbing of her shoulders, Laura with a tight squeeze of Bloom’s hand, James by staring at the floor between his feet.

“Oh, fuck,” someone sighed at long last.

“Yeah,” Bloom said, identifying Peter’s voice.

They all looked tired, she reflected, worn out. No surprise there, actually and she knew she must look much the same, if not worse. Such was the way of funerals; strained faces, tired from loss, tired from pain, tired of both.

“We should go out and get something to eat,” she said, “or at least send up for room service. The visitation tonight’s not until seven.”

And she knew that before long she’d be coordinating linxes from members of Mark’s family, of hers, all of them flying in for the funeral, tomorrow.

“Is there anything we can do, Meg?” Peter asked.

“You can get on some headsets,” she said, Peter’s offer seeming to come in answer to her prayers, “and help me organize the hundred or so people we’re expecting.”

“I’d be happy to,” he said.

Bloom had no doubt he would be. Dealing with a funeral was always easier if you had something to do with it; be it making calls, ordering flowers, or any of the dozen other tasks left to survivors to deal with. It was a headache she would appreciate help with and didn’t want to put Laura through more than necessary.

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Everything got busy after that. Between arrivals at the airport, rail stations and by car, linxes to make, more to answer, information to be given out, Bloom, Peter and James and Laura spent most of the rest of the afternoon working on funerary arrangements. That night was a blur of faces. Faculty associates from the university; Echohawk's family, including a younger sister, a nephew, Echohawk's stepfather and cousin; Bloom's family, mutual friends, Paul Santino and others from the last weeks of Mark's life... they all blended together for her forever after in dreams as one unfocused, sad androgynous face wearing black. After everything that had happened today Bloom didn't have the capacity to recognize everyone there.

It was really only the following day, when Mark was buried that she was finally focused again, finally over the worst of it. The last hurt would be watching him being lowered into the ground. She knew after that it would all be letting go and that before would be grim anticipation. She'd been through the worst of the pain already. What Bloom remembered most about the day was its silence. The noises that were heard were all incidental; all background. The alarm going off at five, audio preset to an all-news channel. This last deliberate so as not to tune in to any music that might be out of place today. Getting up out of bed, getting into the shower, the shower's spray hot, cleansing but not warming. Not today. She felt as though she'd never be warm again. Dress uniform, medals over the left breast, rank insignia firmly affixed. Hat tucked under right arm. Breakfast; something light. Tea over coffee to keep the stomach from any potential upset. A cigarette after the last of the tea. The smoke inhaled deep and stinging into her lungs, outlining them in a shadow of pain. Feel more alive. Remember that under the costume of mourning that a human being was waiting to come back out. Life yet to be lived; her own. Let the nicotine take root in the blood. Exhale one blast through the nose for old times' sake. Time to face the day. Back in the kitchen for another cup of tea. At the breakfast table, Laura and her roommate. Pale-skinned girl, short, wavy red hair. Comely enough that she pulled off black in a way that Bloom admired, but in a way she also knew would be morbidly inappropriate at a funeral.

"Hello Allison."

The words out of her mouth, the tea poured, she made her exit. On their way in Laura's car to the funeral parlour. There, a chance to see Mark one last time, laid out in a proper casket but poorly made up. His skin shaded too pale for his Apache background. The stench of flowers, cloying, sweet, forever

the scent of death; pee-sweat scent of lilies overpowering. Now a chance to spot who was here; some strangely conspicuous in their absence. Shaking hands, comforting embraces, more words about the loss. Sympathetic nods and a few private moments with Mark's body, time to reminisce and regret, before it was time to proceed with services. The pain beginning to surface again, that particular tightness in her throat as the casket was closed; the realization she'd had her last glimpse of him, ever and then shuttled from the funeral parlour to the hearse. Getting into the limousine that would follow the hearse to the funeral home with her daughter and other members of Mark's family. Mark's stepfather looked broken. Laura and Bloom shared a quick glance. They'd want to keep watch over their Pops. The solemn ride in silence to the church. The service Catholic, interspersed with readings in Mark's native tongue. Eulogies, three: one by Mark's closest colleague from the university; another by Mark's stepfather and one from Laura. All of them touching, beautiful. Laura's bringing fresh tears to Bloom's eyes. And then from church to cemetery and the graveside service. The final farewell, the last words by the priest and then Mark's body being lowered into the ground. It hit her then as Mark's funeral concluded, as she knew it would. Watching as the mourners each took an handful of earth and dropped it down onto the coffin, as at last it came her turn to do the same, looking down that narrow, deep hole at the coffin. Inside, his inert body, eyes closed, lifeless and still, while above the living shovelled earth in on top of him. It was over for him, his end like all their ends would be: sealed in a box and buried. The storm ended inside of her, with one last downpour. She cried, her heart wrenching with each sob, unable, unwilling to stop the tears. Laura walking with her, crying as hard as she; both of them clinging to one another for support. Even as she cried, though, Bloom reflected that the tears this time weren't as bad a deluge as when she'd first seen Mark's body, but still rain enough to drown her heart. Laura helped her back to the car and leaving Mark's grave, somehow made it all the worse; it felt as though she were abandoning him, without quite being ready to say goodbye.

CONTINUATION AND CONTRAST

“Paul Santino?”

Santino looked in the direction of the voice. It was reassuringly American, especially to someone who had just re-discovered travel in Europe. As an undergrad Santino had toured the Continent with a girl he’d been seeing at the time; he’d not been out of North America since. Any desire Santino had to visit foreign lands was satisfied with either a trip to the backwards little Canadian province of Quebec or to Mexico. He scanned for the source of the voice in the maddening crowd of tourists, Clusters of priests and priestesses in Catholic vestments, European business commuters and frenetic families going to or from Rome on holiday or other travel. Santino knew he was being met but he no longer knew if he was in the right airport, let alone the right terminal. They’d buried Mark Echohawk the day before. Except that wasn’t necessarily right, considering he was seven time zones from home and hadn’t slept since leaving Albuquerque. It had been, he reflected, one hellishly long day, indeed. There was a break in the crowd. A young Black man in some sort of uniform... Catholic vestments. Not a Priest’s costume, the young man must have been a Novice.

“I’m Brother Simon Gage,” he said, shaking Santino’s hand.

A monk. Santino had forgotten about Catholic monks.

“On behalf of the Roman Catholic Church,” Gage continued, “I’d like to

welcome you to Vatican City.” He shrugged. “Well, we aren’t in Vatican City just yet. This is Rome, actually.”

“Hi,” Santino said, blearily. “How far is it to...to wherever it is I’m staying?”

“That depends entirely on the traffic,” Gage said. “At this time of day...probably half an hour.”

“I thought someone from the Aboriginal Council was going to be here.”

“I’m the Liaison to the Aboriginal Council for the Catholic Church. As hosts we have to look after all the delegates,” Gage replied, leading Santino back to their car. “You should have actually been on a diplomatic flight but as I understand there was a problem getting clearance into New Mexico.”

“A jet from the Vatican’s missionary services would have made a tasty target, Brother Simon,” Santino said. “The attack that killed Professors Scott and Echohawk was most likely the work of a terrorist cult.”

“The United Trinity Observants,” Gage said knowingly, helping Santino stow his luggage in the sedan the monk had led him to. “I saw the reports on INN. What happened was tragic. I can understand now why authorities wouldn’t let us out west.” They climbed into the car which was soon powered up and fighting to leave the airport parking lot.

“To be honest, Elder Santino, Even if you weren’t part of the delegation, I think you’d have been invited to the talks.”

Santino hated the “Elder” honorific. He’d been a Shaman once, but not for long. He’d made a better scholar than practitioner.

“How so?” he asked, politely.

“You were *there!*” Gage said. “When the Ship unearthed itself. You saw it *happen!*”

“I didn’t actually see the unearthing, but I suppose you’re right,” Santino said. “I’ve been to the Ship. Well, closer than most before the blockades went up. I’ve been too busy to go since the Expedition started. Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to sleep from here, to wherever.”

“I understand perfectly,” Gage said, as the car shot from the airport out onto the street. “Have a good rest and leave the driving to me.”

Santino closed his eyes and allowed the silent rushing of road noise to work with his exhaustion and provide him some rest.

The Minister finished his coffee, staring out the windows of Wilfrid’s, the café/bar just off the lobby of the Laurier Hotel. The view was not the most auspicious; he looked out across the divide where Rideau Street became

Wellington Avenue, out at the old rail station which had long since become the Ottawa Convention Center. He often came here for a late lunch or a cup of coffee; the Laurier was only a few minutes' walk from Parliament Hill and as such a convenient getaway. Far better than trips to the food court at the Rideau Center or the fast food shops down Bank Street. Not that the Minister didn't enjoy a sub from Quizno's or a Taco Bell now and again. But Wilfrid's was, to him, an oasis of calm and elegance in his otherwise hectic days. The Minister put his coffee cup down and sighed. He was going back to work, but that wasn't what troubled him; when the Minister got back to his office, he would be going directly into a meeting of the Committee.

He was learning fast as a Committee member. The Minister supposed that one had to. His initiation into the Committee had been very thorough, conducted by his British counterpart.

"You'll find that the Committee is anything but a normal government agency," the British Minister of Defence had told him when they had met as part of a NATO conference. "First off, we don't answer to any branch of any of the three governments who make up our membership," she'd explained. "Our organization is of benefit to our respective governments, but to protect them, plausible deniability has to be maintained."

"Is that the only reason?"

"All governments are partisan," she explained, "and the Committee is not. Were partisan politics to come into play, the Committee would be rendered useless. Simply put, none of us can trust our governments with the secrets of the Committee."

Trust was a major issue for the Committee, the Minister had discovered. One of the first things he'd learned was how little anyone on the Committee trusted anyone else. He of course trusted his fellow Canadians on the Committee; he'd known the Solicitor General since they'd both been junior backbenchers and the Minister for Natural Resources was another Party veteran. It seemed almost everyone trusted only their fellow countrymen. Beyond that the Canadians trusted the British within reason, but resented their patriarchal attitude. The Americans were viewed with a double-edged sword: They were, of course, Canada's closest neighbour and single largest trading partner; Canada and the US were also partners in the North American Union. But the Americans were also politically domineering, forever trying to grasp once more the reigns of international power that they had held until after War Three's disastrous conclusion. A strange mix here: both England

and America had each had their time in the sun as the rulers of the world. Canada's traditional role had been as the world's Peacekeepers and as a moral leader, never interested in power. Canada and England had helped to lead the way towards founding the World Council and the United States had bowed to Canada's suggestion that Cuba, the Dominican Republic and others long considered "undesirable" by Washington be let in to the North American Union. And now, working with representatives from Canada's two most important allies, the Minister still felt somewhat suspicious of his fellow Committee members. It wasn't that they weren't men and women of character, or ideal. They were. But their agendas, or more precisely the agendas of their respective governments, were another matter. Both England and the United States were interested in the Ship. The States out of some hope that the territorial advantage of having the Ship on homeland soil would give it influence on the World's political stage once more. The English were more interested in access to the Ship than control of it. They wanted second pick at the technologies inside the Ship. That meant shared residuals from whatever the States got first plus exclusive rights to whatever was found that the Americans overlooked or discarded. The Committee reported to itself. Only its members knew it existed. And its members were all fully aware how their work could benefit the citizens of the countries they represented. At the very least they knew how to use the Committee to their own personal advantage, in the name of their countries. The Minister hadn't yet determined which of the two categories he fell into, but he nevertheless understood that where working with the rest of the Committee was concerned he knew it would help if he came to understand which of the two categories the rest of his colleagues fell into. And to that end he was learning quite quickly.

His secure console in place on his desk, his door locked and the antisurveillance sweep of his offices complete, the Minister sat down at his desk. Onscreen eight small windows surrounded a central window. On each the face of a Committee member. The head of MI-6 spoke the traditional opening to Committee meetings and as he did his image was brought to the central window. The Minister had been briefed on him early on after becoming head of National Defence. He was ruthless, cunning and almost fanatically loyal to the Crown. With the opening phrase delivered, the head of MI-6 launched straight into things:

"We have a unique opportunity before us," he said. "The assassinations in Laguna enable us to put operatives into play in both direct and indirect

contact with the Ship Survey Expedition.”

The Minister had read the briefing. At least one position on the Ship Survey Expedition needed to be filled. Echohawk’s role as archaeologist had become mainly academic once it had been determined the Ship was fully active. The aerospace engineer was the more important member of the team. Likewise, the Pentagon would want to put someone new in charge of security at the Site. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff would be in a position to make recommendations for the former and to hand pick the latter if he wanted to. The Committee would take full advantage.

“We have several candidates in mind,” the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs said. “The files are on call on your consoles.”

They accessed their consoles, calling up four candidate biographies at a time.

“I notice you haven’t suggested any British engineers, mister Chairman,” MI-6 chided.

“Or Canadians,” the Solicitor General added. “I can think of one or two who would fit the bill.”

The Minister scanned the bios. He already knew the Americans wouldn’t budge on their “suggestions”; best to pick the least of available evils. He scrolled through the list, read over the notes and almost scrolled past someone he’d have not expected to be on the list at all. But when he re-read the name he knew he had to act.

“I would suggest Lieutenant-Colonel Margaret Bloom,” he said.

Bloom’s reputation preceded her in Defence circles. Legendary pilot, veteran of a number of campaigns, she was also an engineering ace and it wasn’t long before she was test-piloting the latest and greatest on both sides of the border. Under North American Union treaty she worked an exchange. She had test flown the prototype for the Bombardier DF-104 Phoenix orbital relay fighter and had helped in its subsequent redesign. She’d also saved a young woman from rape at the hands of some drunken Marines, taking all four of them on in a knife fight and had been subsequently acquitted at court martial. Bloom was an American hero, but she was everything good about that ideal. She’d take on her own if they were wrong. She was fifty-five, with another good ten or fifteen years of flying ahead of her. An intelligent, perceptive pilot and engineer in her prime.

“Not only is she Echohawk’s ex-wife,” the Minister continued, “which, in itself will assist us with both public perception and accessibility to the Ship Survey Expedition, but she is also top in her field. And...working as an

engineer in one of the Committee's double-blind research facilities? Is that accurate, mister Chairman?"

"Yes, it is," the Chairman Joint Chiefs replied, consulting his console. "Yes, it is. She's at...our Groom Lake facility."

Onscreen, it seemed to the Minister as though MI-6 was eyeing him, studiously. It was an uncomfortable sensation. The Minister'd heard stories about this gentleman; how perceptive he was, how highly skilled...how merciless and accomplished a killer he had been in his youth. The current head of MI-6 had proven himself countless times as a field operative and as a tactician, baptized in blood during War Three. As a member of the Committee, he was cool, diplomatic and always completely aware of what was going on around him. At once, the Minister felt like a target, a supplicant to interrogation and someone easily dispatched. MI-6's gaze made the Minister feel mortal, indeed.

"I second the new member's suggestion," MI-6 said at last. "Any other suggestions? No? All in favour of Lieutenant-Colonel Bloom, then?"

As the votes were cast the Minister realized he'd made a gamble suggesting Bloom. On more than one front: he was now responsible for her. He also had to wonder who else here had a stake in Bloom's candidacy, if anyone and who didn't. They had voted for Bloom unanimously save for the Chairman of the Joint Chief's abstention.

"I have a recommendation for head of security also," the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs said. "He did some work for us when the Ship was found."

"Do tell, mister Chairman," MI-6 urged. "Do tell."

Bloom's leave expired two days after the funeral. Mark's close family stuck around for most of the first day and the Ship Survey Expedition left only on the morning of the second. Laura had hoped to be able to spend more time alone with her mother, especially now that her father was gone. Laura rose early that day, snapping awake when the door closed as Bloom left for her morning run. She got up, showered and made coffee. Within minutes of the aroma from the coffee machine hitting the air Allison was up, familiarly dressed in an oversize T-shirt and ratty bathrobe. One of the things that had endeared Laura to Allison above all the roommates she'd had in the past was that Allison always woke up if she smelled coffee brewing. Something left over from her childhood, she explained, when her father used to make breakfast every morning, brewing the coffee first thing at five. Now no matter what time it was or what condition she was in from the night before, she

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would be up and in the kitchen at the first scent of coffee.

“Morning,” rasped Alison.

She said nothing else until the coffee was brewed. Once she’d fixed herself a cup and had put half of it away, she came more awake.

“How are you doing today?” she asked.

Anyone else asking the question would have made Laura resentful. But it was the same question Allison asked her nearly every morning and held particular meaning after the events of the past few days.

“Better.”

“That’s good,” Allison said. “It’s a start. Good coffee.”

“Thanks,” Laura said with a smile.

Her father had taught her to make it when she first started living on her own. His trick was to put a dash of cinnamon and nutmeg in the coffee grounds before brewing it. Allison had a cigarette with the last half of her coffee and then headed for the shower. Laura’s mother came back from her run around the time Laura was sitting down to breakfast. Allison was out of the shower and making her own breakfast as Bloom fixed herself some coffee. They talked idly for a while, Bloom having a quick breakfast while Laura and Allison finished theirs. Bloom headed for the shower. Another coffee and then they were getting their day ready. Allison was off to classes, Laura to bid farewell to the SSE and her mother.

Airport greetings and farewells were becoming too commonplace for Laura’s tastes. Last night it had been her grandfather uncles and aunts. Today it was her father’s colleagues from the Ship Survey Expedition, two dear old friends and her mother. She turned her car into the parking lot and she and her mother stepped out and headed down to the terminal where they were to meet the SSE and bid them farewell. When they met up with the Ship Survey Expedition they found them sitting in the terminal waiting area talking amongst themselves. As Laura and Bloom approached the SSE stood. James and Peter were the first to greet them, followed by Aiziz, Andrews and Kodo.

“It’s been good seeing you guys again,” Laura said. “I just wish it had been under happier circumstances.”

“So do I,” Peter said. “So do we all.”

“Actually you may be seeing me around, at least for a little while,” James told Laura. “I’m staying in LA to wrap up the Prof’s affairs at the university. I know the material and where it is in his office. I should stay behind...at least to take care of that. It’s also not just his teaching: there’s speaking

engagements, conferences and a whole slew of shit that has to be dealt with by someone who...who knew his itinerary.”

The others agreed with the wisdom of this, but from the look in his eyes James knew that Peter suspected there was more permanence implied in James’ tones than in the words he’d used. There was something else in James’ eyes; a loss, a trauma, a doubt...Laura couldn’t name it, but something said that the university was the simplest excuse as to why he wasn’t returning to the Ship. She’d find out why, later. If Laura had asked, Bloom could probably have told her the reason: James’s face bore marks she recognized well. During the Australian Conflict Bloom had been stationed in the Philippines with the Allied World Army. She’d had friends among the ground forces and had seen many of them with that same look. It was a look that said: “I’ve seen too much bloodshed. I’ve had enough violent death.” It was a look Bloom associated with combat veterans who’d seen one too many of their comrades killed in action. It was a look that said no force on Earth would bring him back to the place where those horrors were made real for him.

“I understand,” she told James.

The look he gave her before nodding his head told her that he knew she did.

“There’s still time to reconsider, James,” Aiziz said. “We’d benefit a great deal from your presence at the Site.”

“I know,” he said, “but there are things here that need to be done.”

The finality of his attitude ended further comment. The flight back to New Mexico began boarding shortly after that, leaving just enough time for final farewells. Then Bloom, Laura and James found themselves together.

“Have you got a place to stay, yet?” Laura asked him.

“I have a guaranteed spot in Campus Apartments as part of my contract as your dad’s TA,” James said. “At least, I will have for the next little while. After that, well, I’ll be looking for a job and a place to stay.”

“You aren’t going back to the Ship Survey?” Bloom asked, though in truth she suspected she knew the answer.

James looked away and swallowed hard against a lump in his throat.

“I don’t think so,” he replied, his voice heavy.

He said nothing more, waiting for Laura while she and her mother bid each other farewell. Then they walked together back towards the parking lot.

“James, why don’t you stay with me and Allison?” Laura offered. “At least until you figure things out. You can have the couch.”

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“I don’t know,” James said. “I guess. It’s been a while since you and I really got together to shoot the shit.”

Laura smiled.

“It’s settled,” she said. “Let’s get some lunch.”

“Tower to Moon Dog, over,” Bloom said into her mike. “Report.”

“The floor of the cockpit’s rising up under me,” Captain Harriman’s nervous voice came back. “You’re sure this is safe, over?”

“Roger that,” Bloom said. “Report back when the controls have gone up.”

“Roger.”

Bloom toggled off the commlink between herself and the pilot that General Harrod had given the Bug to. It still stung, because up until the funeral the Bug’s first flight had been all but hers. Her mind drifted back to the day before when she’d returned to the Facility after burying Mark.

“Lieutenant-Colonel,” Harrod had said, returning her salute as she reported in. “Welcome back.”

“Thank you, General,” she’d replied. “When has the test flight of our Bug been rescheduled for?”

“Captain Harriman’s being briefed on the controls, now.”

“Harriman?” Bloom repeated. “General, I don’t understand.”

“Given the circumstances, Lieutenant-Colonel, it was decided to replace you, as pilot.”

“General, Harriman doesn’t have half the flight time I have,” Bloom had said. “And I’ve seen his jacket, remember: I’ve flown over a hundred different kinds of aircraft. He’s done what? Ten? Fifteen? The Facility built a Bug prototype just prior to War Three, General. At the time the pilot who took it up had *more* experience than I did. He died in the ensuing crash. *I’m* the best pilot here. I should be taking the Bug up.”

“You just came back from burying your husband,” Harrod replied.

“My *ex*-husband sir, though I loved him dearly. I assure you I am ready to fly this mission. I *want* to fly this mission. I need this.”

Harrod regarded her a long time before shaking his head.

“I’m sorry, Lieutenant-Colonel. I can’t authorize you to fly this one. You know the regs.”

“With all due respect, General, *fuck* the regs!” Bloom snapped.

“Lieutenant-Colonel,” Bloom heard the danger in his voice, “tread lightly. I’ve explained to you: Harriman is flying this one. We’ve had him training for this since the cockpit layout was determined. You’ll be in the

control tower acting as his flight monitor. You'll talk him down if anything goes wrong."

"Anything goes wrong, General, and there won't be time to talk him down."

"Moon Dog to Tower," Harriman reported in, giving his call sign. "The control panel's materialized. I'm adjusting my display boom to lock onto the console."

Harriman had been supplied with an eyepiece that overlaid the translated runes onto the control panel before him. He sat cradled in the protective restraints of the cockpit, adjusting the eyepiece on his headset console so that the overlay was perfectly set. The display "locked" itself to the console in front of him. Harriman could look away from the Bug's control panel and the display would likewise scroll away from in front of his eye. The translation team at the Groom Lake Facility had worked no small miracle while Bloom had been away. Working with runic icons they'd found in the dead Bug and retracing circuit pathways from the cockpit of the living Bug had allowed them to interpret most of the flight controls. Samples of runic script had been found in both vehicles years before and the Facility's respective teams of engineers interpreters and investigators had had decades to begin unravelling the mystery of Shiplanguage.

"Roger that," Bloom said.

Air traffic reported in. Their airspace was clear.

"You are cleared to leave the barn," Bloom said.

Bloom watched, feeling jealous, depressed, angry, empty all at once. She studied the displays around her as a dozen people worked consoles monitoring every nuance of this test flight. The Bug taxied from the hangar out onto the tarmac. She could see it from here out of the control tower's windows: a green and gold object reflecting the morning's sunlight.

"The Bee has cleared the Hive."

"Roger that, Moon Dog," Bloom replied. "Throttle up and take her into the sky." Almost immediately the Bug rose on a near-vertical. Bloom felt the windows start to rattle a fraction of a second before the sonic boom hit. Alarms were pinging and people were exclaiming harried status reports from their consoles. Bloom heard the hollering whoop coming over Harriman's mike and felt that twinge again. She watched her readout. Impossibly the Bug was up to Mach 3 and climbing rapidly. She watched, stunned, as the Bug pulled a turn so steep that it should have been sheered in two.

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“This can’t be right!” one of the operators called. “He didn’t even pull any gees on that turn!”

“Tower to Moon Dog!” Bloom exclaimed. “Reduce your speed! Reduce your speed!”

“Oh, man, this is *incredible!*” Harriman exclaimed as the Bug slowed and halted. He was almost five kilometres above sea level. The Bug was hovering effortlessly.

“Moon Dog, what happened when you executed that turn?”

“Nothing, Tower; *Nothing!* I can’t *believe* how this craft handles! And you should *see* the view from here!”

Bloom could imagine. Harriman was hanging inside a spherical imaging chamber that rendered a perfect three-dimensional image of the Southwestern continental United States directly below him.

“Tower, I want to take this thing higher,” Harriman called. “I think I can get up into high orbit.”

“Negative, Harriman,” Bloom called. “I don’t recommend—dammit!”

Harriman wasn’t listening. A test pilot born and bred he, as Bloom would have done, was doing what he wanted to do: taking the Bug into orbit.

“Moon Dog!” Bloom called angrily. “Moon Dog! Abort! Return to base!”

She didn’t like being in this position: bellowing orders she knew wouldn’t be obeyed to a hotshot pilot who was doing what they wanted to do, orders be damned. Part of her had to admit she would rather have *been* the pilot. The other part was planning Harriman’s dressing-down and the indefinite suspension of his flight privileges.

“Moon Dog to Tower, do you copy?”

“Copy, Moon Dog. Over.”

“Are you reading my display? What is that?”

Bloom hit a switch on her console. She was now seeing what Harriman and the video operator three chairs down from her were seeing. Something on the display screen of the Bug was being tracked. What Bloom could only describe as crosshairs was sliding across the starscape overhead.

“Are you reading my display?” Harriman asked. “The Bug’s tracking something. It’s... Cancel that, Tower. The Bug is tracking my eye movement across the screen.”

“Hit the toggle key labeled *manual target*,” Bloom replied.

“Roger that.” Harriman found the key on the console and stabbed it.

Suddenly the crosshairs locked on one of the distant stars and brought the image forward. Harriman pulled back in his restraints as he watched a planet rush towards him.

“What in the fuck?”

“Moon Dog, you are on VOX,” Bloom came back. “We’re reading the image. You’re looking at...the Planet Uranus.”

“Say again?”

“The rune must have been mislabelled,” Bloom said. “You probably triggered some sort of onboard telescope.”

“Roger. How do I shut it off?”

“Hit the toggle switch again,” Bloom said.

The planet receded and Harriman’s view shifted back to the orbital starscape of Earth.

“That did the trick,” Harriman said.

“Good. Now, bring her back in, *slowly* and try some more manoeuvres,” Bloom said. “That’s an order, understand?”

“Yes, Mother,” Harriman said. “The Bee is returning to the Hive. Engaging afterburners.”

She watched his view shift to the console. Harriman keyed the engines.

“What the hell?” Harriman muttered. The image suddenly broke up into static and then cleared.

“What the *hell*?” Harriman said, more alarmed.

Static again...dissipating, leaving behind a much less well-defined image.

“Tower to Moon Dog. Do you copy? What is your status?”

“OH MY GOD!” they heard Harriman scream.

Then static; horrible, silent static. They were stunned into silence a long moment, before Bloom turned to the monitor stations.

“Get me telemetry. I want everything we have. I want to know just what the fuck happened, out there.”

And in the back of her mind, for the first time Bloom wasn’t sure she was so envious of Captain Harriman, anymore.

TRANSCRIPT

INTERACTIVE NEWS NETWORK NEWSCAST

PLAIN TEXT FORMAT

**PATH: INN<>HEADLINES>> INVESTIGATION INTO
THE LAGUNA MURDERS><**

THE UNEARTHING

ANCHOR

GOOD MORNING AND WELCOME TO THE INTERACTIVE NEWS NETWORK. THE NAME OF THE ASSASSIN OF PROFESSORS SCOTT AND ECHOHAWK HAS BEEN RELEASED. FRANCIS GEORGE FRANCK, AGE THIRTY-NINE, FORMERLY OF PHOENIX, ARIZONA. ACCORDING TO AUTHORITIES FRANCK HAS BEEN A MEMBER OF THE UNITED TRINITY OBSERVANTS FOR THE LAST TEN YEARS. INN REPORTERS IN ARIZONA WERE UNABLE TO LEARN MUCH ELSE ABOUT THE MAN, WHO KEPT MAINLY TO HIMSELF BEFORE JOINING THE CHURCH OF THE UNITED TRINITY OBSERVANTS. AUTHORITIES ARE NOW WORKING ON DETERMINING WHETHER OR NOT THE UNITED TRINITY OBSERVANTS WERE DIRECTLY INVOLVED IN ANY WAY WITH THE ASSASSINATION DESPITE DENIALS ISSUED BY THE CULT AND DESPITE THE CONDEMNATION OF FRANCK'S ATTACK BY GABRIEL ASHE, LEADER OF THE UNITED TRINITY OBSERVANTS.

PATH: <>RELATED STORIES>>THE SHIP>>WORLD SHIP SUMMIT NAMES NEW HEAD OF THE SHIP SURVEY EXPEDITION><

ANCHOR

THE WORLD SHIP SUMMIT HAS ANNOUNCED WHO WILL BE THE NEW HEAD OF THE SHIP SURVEY EXPEDITION: COLONEL MARGARET BLOOM. BLOOM IS ONE OF THE TOP TEST PILOTS IN THE UNITED STATES AIR FORCE AND IS REPUTED TO BE ONE OF THE BEST AEROSPACE ENGINEERS TO COME FROM GOVERNMENT SERVICE IN YEARS. BLOOM IS ALSO THE EX-WIFE OF THE LATE PROFESSOR MARK ECHOHAWK, WHO WAS AT THE TIME OF HIS DEATH THE HEAD OF THE SHIP SURVEY EXPEDITION. THE EXPEDITION ITSELF IS SET TO RESUME LATER THIS WEEK, ONCE THE NEW HEAD OF SECURITY AT THE SITE AND ADDED PATROLS HAVE BEEN PUT IN PLACE.

There was a moment of disorientation when he woke up. Looking around as the apartment began coming into focus, James realized where he was and how he had come to be here. The sofa bed creaked beneath him as he shifted into a sitting position and memories of the previous evening found their way from memory storage to his conscious waking mind. He and Laura had stayed up most of the night talking, occasionally joined by Laura's roommate Allison. They smoked up and spent a lot of time talking though James found it awkward talking around Allison at first. He soon discovered that she was both sympathetic and insightful. In Laura and Allison both James had found peers, people he could talk to who could empathize and not analyze. Allison stayed silent or was absent for much of the dialogue about Echohawk, for it could not include her. Laura was his daughter, James one of his graduate students and his primary assistant. Allison had met him all of three times. But Echohawk and his death weren't the only subjects they discussed nor, were James' and Laura's reactions to it (which were polar opposites: Laura was finding her own faith strengthened, where he was rapidly losing his). But they also reminisced about their early years together, discussed school life.

James climbed from the bed, which creaked and groaned beneath him. Even the sofa bed had a story: Laura had bought it from a grizzled old man of indeterminate age, who'd claimed to have owned it along with he'd described as "the world's most comfortable waterbed" for almost a hundred years. Despite the implausibility of that statement, Laura claimed to have believed him.

James made his way into the kitchen and began to rummage for breakfast. As alike in age and background as James Allison and Laura were, James had one set of experiences with which they could not yet hope to compare: He had seen the Ship up close and personal. He had survived what almost certainly would have been his own extinction by the hand of one killer and witnessed the death of his mentor at the hands of another. He had entered the new historical age just ahead of them. The coffee began percolating as he made this reflection. He admired the old-fashioned coffee percolator that Laura used. It made a better brew; a richer tasting coffee than a drip brewer. The scent of coffee soon brought the sound of a door opening and closing. Moments later a bleary-eyed Allison shuffled into the kitchen.

"James," she said, clearly not expecting him.

Habit dictated that it was Laura she expected. She squinted and looked at the wall display.

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“Fuck,” she said. “It’s only four.”

“I still haven’t adjusted to California time,” he said. “It’s five, to me.”

“James, five o’clock is still too early.”

“You’re up. It’s four.”

“The coffee, James; the smell of coffee always gets me up.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“S’all right,” she said, sitting down. “I’ll be happier when I’ve had a cup.”

She lit a cigarette. He joined her as the coffee brewed.

“James?”

“Yeah?”

“You really have to learn to sleep in.”

Bloom crossed the threshold into General Harrod’s office and saluted sharply. He gestured for her to sit down.

“Our teams finished putting together what happened, out there,” Bloom said, sliding an optic slip across his desk. “Based on observations from satellites, space and ground-based telescopes and telemetry, what we came up with is pretty surprising.” Harrod took the slip and dropped it into the reader of one of the consoles on his desk.

“Summarize,” he said.

“How much do you know about wormholes?”

Harrod stared at her a long moment and shrugged.

“We did some work on the subject at Cheyenne Mountain,” Harrod said. “They’re a class of quantum string, as I understand it. Theoretically, one could be stretched open and form a gateway between two different points in space and time. Practically, however, it’s impossible.”

“Basically,” Bloom replied. “The physics are beyond me. But it looks like the Bug was able to open a wormhole between Earth and Uranus.”

“How?”

“If we still had the Bug here I still couldn’t tell you,” Bloom replied, referring to her notepad. “We didn’t even think it was possible to open a wormhole. The chain of events is like this: What we took for a targeting computer is in fact part of an elaborate navigational system tied directly to the Bug’s engines. When Harriman tried to key off the image of Uranus and power up the afterburners, he in fact started the sequence. His cameras and a nearby observation satellite recorded a flash of light near to the craft. The image you’re looking at now is particularly interesting.”

On Harrod’s screen was the view from the satellite. The Bug was a green and gold speck just outside of Earth’s domineering form. The surrounding

space was black, but there appeared to be an area even darker, ahead of the Bug. The visual was very poor; light and colour seemed to bleed out from the image.

“What happened?” Harrod said. “This picture is shit.”

“What we’re looking at is light from the nearby objects being drawn towards the event horizon of the Bug’s wormhole,” Bloom explained. “The next series of images records the Bug’s engines driving it toward and then into the wormhole.”

Harrod watched the stills.

“We have video on this?”

“It’s still being analyzed,” Bloom explained. “What we have here is groundbreaking; revolutionary. An electromagnetic flux was recorded everywhere we have monitoring systems in the solar system. The Aurora Borealis was recorded over Utah, in broad daylight. By a stroke of luck, a science experiment measuring the solar system’s gravitational field recorded a micron-wide super gravitational string extending away from the Earth and out towards Uranus.”

“And what happened to the Bug? To Harriman?”

“We’re still collecting images from Uranus from one of the Earth orbital telescopes. We recorded a flash of extremely bright light in orbit around Uranus and it looks like it occurred a few seconds after the Bug disappeared from Earth orbit,” Bloom explained. “But we can’t say for sure what happened. We don’t know. Harriman’s a good pilot. If he’s still alive and I think it possible that he is, he could even get the Bug back home. We hope.”

“In any event, Lieutenant-Colonel, the whole matter is no longer of your concern,” Harrod said, with finality.

“What?” Bloom exclaimed, anger and outrage boiling up within her.

He glanced up at her and regarded her for a long moment.

“You seem to attract attention, Lieutenant-Colonel,” he said. “Early yesterday morning the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff contacted me. It appears you were recommended to the World Ship Summit by someone in the Pentagon. The World Ship Summit has asked that you be assigned to the Ship Survey Expedition.”

“What? Me?”

“Your work as an aerospace engineer seems to have qualified you for the position,” Harrod explained. “Someone from the Pentagon will be coming in this afternoon to collect you and brief you. You are going to the Ship Survey as an officer of the United States Armed Forces. As such, there will be

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certain... directives you will be expected to fulfill.”

“Yes sir.”

“You have the rest of the morning to get your gear together,” Harrod said. “Dismissed.”

Bloom found herself back at Space Command in Houston, recent site of what she had thought would prove to be the end of her career. She was ushered into a different office in a different wing of the Administration building across the small courtyard from Colonel Hays’ office. The corner of her mouth turned up in a sneer at the thought. He’d be shitting himself if he knew she was here. When her new control stepped into the office from a door behind the desk Bloom nearly shit herself as well. No lesser person than the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff presented himself to her. She rose to her feet, saluting immediately. His station alone demanded it. Here was the man who had ordered General Harrod to Concord 3; the man who’d ordered her flight group into Australian airspace fifteen years before. The Chairman had kept his position through four consecutive presidential administrations spanning two parties. He was a hero of War Three, a trusted advisor to three presidents, a respected and trusted public official and cunning, so very cunning.

“Lieutenant-Colonel,” he said. “Please, sit down.”

He opened a file which held an optic slip and a sealed envelope. He placed the slip into his console and watched the screen a moment, keying something with deliberate precision into the console.

“Given your reputation and record,” he said, “I suspect you’d rather not stand on ceremony.”

He slid the envelope across his desk. She opened it. Inside were two gold clusters.

“Therefore, consider yourself promoted to full colonel.”

Bloom actually gasped. She’d held the rank of lieutenant-colonel for the better part of ten years. After her second career court martial before that, she’d never expected to advance farther than major. Being promoted up to lieutenant-colonel had been a shock. That she was now a full colonel, with the privileges and duties implied therein, was inconceivable. More so, the detached analyst in her head remarked, than even the existence of an alien Ship that measured nearly thirty-two kilometres across.

“I...I’m...honoured...”

“More thanks than I was told to expect,” the Chairman said. “Colonel

Bloom, I want to make something clear. Although you are assigned to the World Ship Summit, although the Ship Survey Expedition will probably be your command under them, you are still an officer in the United States Air Force. And as an officer of this Air Force, you will report your activities to my office, through General Harrod for the duration of your tenure. You will report all discoveries made about the Ship and you will be expected to carry out any orders you are given through this office; even if those orders are in conflict with orders given you by the Ship Survey Expedition. The worst you'll face from them is expulsion from the SSE. Disobey me and you will face your last court martial. I'll make the charges of hijacking an orbital station look like a jaywalking conviction. Your primary concern is the national security of these United States. Is that understood?"

"Yes sir."

The Chairman turned back to his desk and keyed a command into his console. A printer on the other side of the desk began shooting out sheets of paper into a tray facing Bloom.

"Among the burdens of command associated with being a full colonel are certain facts, certain pieces of information and certain orders kept secret from the lower ranks," the Chairman explained. "The file printing now contains a summary of that information. For now absorb the basics. As you've recently come from a posting at Groom Lake, I'll assume you know the penalties for divulging top-secret information. You'll be briefed in full later. You can take the printout to the study behind me. The printout stays in there when you are done."

Bloom collected the papers as they finished printing. The Chairman continued speaking.

"For expediency's sake we have to get you to New Mexico as soon as possible. You'll be briefed in full on that information, therefore, after you've set up your command. I've decided that your command will also incorporate Site security, so the SSE will be moved into the base there. Fort...Arapaho, I believe it's called. Congratulations, Colonel."

"Thank you, sir," was all Bloom could think of to say.

Life is in constant motion. It is always evolving, forever changing. With change comes adaptation. With adaptation, comes learning. The price of failure to adapt has always been death. No greater change had happened throughout Human history than the discovery of the Ship. No greater opportunity for Humanity to learn, to grow. No greater potential for Humanity to fail, to die.

DISCOVERIES

Major Jack Benedict sat down at his desk in the offices of Fort Arapaho. He was reviewing reports by Laguna Police Chief Sharon Raven, who had been assisting the military police with their investigation into the slayings of Professors Echohawk and Scott. Francis George Franck had indeed been a member of Gabriel Ashe's cult but there was nothing beyond that to tie the United Trinity Observants to the killings. Benedict finished reading Police Chief Raven's report and closed down the screen. There was a note at the end of the report requesting that he linx her once he was through. Benedict slipped an earpiece into his ear and keyed in Raven's linx address. An instant later her image appeared onscreen in three-quarter profile. She looked at the screen momentarily before turning her gaze away again. Background noise filtering in over the linx made Benedict realize she was driving.

"Major Benedict," she said. "Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Did I catch you at a bad time?" Benedict asked.

"No, right now we're just patrolling around town," she said. "I had to get away from my desk for a while. You read my report?"

"Yeah," Benedict replied. "Ashe's one clever son of a bitch."

"Then you agree he's behind this?"

"Him or someone high up in his organization," Benedict said. "Looks like Francis George Franck was basically riled up by Ashe's preaching. I'm

willing to bet that was the idea.”

“We have to find some way of getting him,” Raven said. “We can’t prove that Franck was given specific instructions by Ashe; no witnesses who would speak up. I know the Feds have people inside his organization, but they aren’t talking. What about the gun used in the attacks?”

“Bethesda’s got the gun,” Benedict replied. “No serial numbers and the ballistics registry’s turned up negative.”

“The ballistics registry is voluntary.”

“Thank you, NRA.”

“Even if the gun shows up in the registry we’d only be able to tie it to the original owner, if any and trace it back through any crimes it was used in. While that might give us a chain of suspects to follow back to the person who supplied Franck with the gun, there’s no guarantee that it would lead to someone in the United Trinity.”

“More good news,” Benedict added. “I just caught a newsflash from INN. The World Court has turned down Washington’s request to expel the United Trinity Observants from the World Ship Preserve.”

“They’re going to wind up regretting that decision,” Raven said.

“What makes you say that?”

“Experience,” Raven said. “I used to be a Fibbie; worked with ViCAP, the Violent Criminal Apprehension Program. Groups like this almost always wind up causing or being the cause of worse and worse trouble.”

“Wonderful,” Benedict growled. “I’m sure that’s just the sort of thing the new base commander’s going to want to hear.”

“Yeah...I heard she’s coming in today.”

“That’s right; Colonel Bloom.”

“I read in your jacket you two served together a few times.”

“A few times; she was my wing commander in Australia and she was Station Commander aboard Concord 3.”

“What can you tell me about her?”

“She’s a hard-ass. She’s had two court martials; one for disobeying direct orders during the Australian Conflict, the other for assault with deadly intent. She was exonerated both times and the record expunged.”

“Impressive.”

“She’s always had a problem with authority and despite a natural command ability of her own, she’s avoided it as much as possible. Even dodged squad leader when she was still a fighter jock. But when she is in charge, she’s the best you can have.”

“I thought she was commander of C-3.”

“Orbitals always have temporary command staff,” Benedict said. “And they’re almost always flyers who need to be kept busy when they’re grounded.”

“Is that what you think she’s doing here?” Raven asked. “Killing time?”

“No. She’s an engineer. Most flyers have some engineering skills. She has a lot of them. She’s going to roost.”

“Any idea why Bloom was selected?” Raven asked.

Benedict was tempted to tell her what he really knew.

“Apparently, Bloom’s attracted the right kind of attention,” was his reply instead.

Santino’s group had been assigned to work on the problem of how creation beliefs would be affected by the Ship’s presence on Earth these past sixty million years. It was a burdensome question for many reasons. Although some religions, such as Catholicism, had long ago accepted that the creation stories and myths were for the most part allegorical tales not to be taken literally, Humanity’s exalted status among God’s creations was now called into doubt. Had God been revealed to the aliens who built the Ship in some other manner? If so in what way? What was *their* place in the grand scheme of things? The problems inherent here lent themselves to other religious aspects being explored, such as Gaianism, Messianism and Reincarnation, which although anathema to Catholics, Muslims and Jews, was an integral part of Hindu, Buddhist and some Aboriginal belief systems. The free flow of ideas thrown about the room became more heated and more confrontational as the morning wore on into the afternoon. A debate waged after lunch after it was suggested the Ship may have been some kind of seeder vessel designed to populate barren worlds; a terrifying possibility that had generated a long argument. All the world’s beliefs would become invalid, useless, if that was the case. In the silence that followed that exchange it seemed to Santino that his fellow delegates had more questions than they had possible answers for. It wasn’t that they were attempting to fit the Ship in to their creation myths, or explain the Ship away. Their task was to discover how the Ship affected the lessons taught in the creation stories; to determine whether those lessons remained valid or not. Many faithful of most religions had been thrown into crisis by the Ship; many more were questioning outright not just the validity of their chosen religions, but the very existence of God. The expressions on the faces of the delegates gathered around this table and

no doubt every table in every conference room reserved for the purposes of Vatican IV showed that even the leaders and scholars of these religions were not entirely immune to the same doubts, the same questions.

“I think that the worst thing,” Rabbi David Abrams announced to the group during that ponderous, introspective silence, “the absolute worst thing about this whole business is that the Scientologists are having a field day.”

Everyone laughed; a needed ejaculation of mirth that broke through the theological tension felt by everyone. The mood was lightened by the exchange, but from the general “let’s talk about everything but what we’re supposed to be talking about” murmur of conversation filling the room convinced everyone that little else would be accomplished today. Not that they’d expected to wrap up their committee’s business on the second day of the conference. Nevertheless it was Abrams, whose gently persuasive manner and cast-iron religious conviction had turned him into the group’s unofficial leader, who made it official.

“People, I really think we should call it a day,” he said. “We’ve overwhelmed ourselves with ideas, problems, questions and philosophies. What we should all do now is go home, or back to the dormitories anyway, relax and digest what’s gone on here today. Or better yet, we should take in the sites. We are in Rome, after all: one of the oldest, most beautiful cities on our planet. Above all else, folks, we can’t let our questions, doubts and insecurities about the Ship cloud our judgment, or our faith. We Believe.” He capitalized that last word, by pausing, letting them absorb the strength of the statement, then continued: “Perhaps what we Believe in is wrong. It’s a point we all have to concede; we’ve had the argument about whose beliefs are right and wrong among ourselves for millennia. But that which we believe in, God, the Almighty Creator, will always be a part of who we are. Even if the Buddhists are right and the only God is the God within; we Believe, we have Faith. That Faith can and must be allowed to sustain us.”

They were silent, all pondering his words. Finally, the day’s conference broke up for good and everyone began leaving.

“That was impressive Rabbi,” Santino said as the two men passed on their way out of the conference hall.

“It’s just common sense,” Abrams demurred. “Which all too often has no relevance to religion.”

Santino chuckled.

“I have to agree with you there,” he said and then a little more bitterly added. “That’s certainly been my experience.”

“How so, Elder?”

“Please,” Santino said, as they walked down the hallway and down to the street, “don’t call me that. I’m not a Shaman. I was once, but that was a long time ago, as far as I’m concerned.” Abrams nodded.

“That answers my question, then,” the Rabbi said.

They continued making their way in silence. They reached the street, mingling with tourists and pilgrims touring the sites and shrines of the Capital of Christianity.

“There’s actually a good place to get coffee not far from here,” Abrams said conversationally, “unless you have a personal objection to coffee.”

The last humorous barb brought another chuckle from Santino.

“I have no objections to coffee,” Santino said. “Coffee sounds just about right.”

“Good!” Abrams said, cheerfully. “I want you to tell me a little more about the Ship.”

Colonel Margaret Bloom only said one thing to the pilot who took her from Houston to Fort Arapaho:

“Take the scenic route.”

And so they did. As they first made the approach to the Site, the pilot took them around the Ship in a figure-8 pattern which covered the span of the Ship. She had him do it twice. She’d never seen anything like it. The bowl of the Ship was a small mountain rising from the dish. There was no telling what the Ship looked like from underneath. Its immense size rivalled those of many cities she’d known. Certainly the height of the thing dwarfed any artificially made object she’d ever seen. That it had flown was unbelievable. That it had come here from space was undeniable. The blue-glowing canyons and gold and black crests and valleys spread out below and around her, the Pyramid at the summit of the Ship catching the sun, reflecting it back across its surface. Were the Ship more highly polished, she thought, it would be blinding for kilometres in every direction. She almost felt she could hear the Shipsong through the bulkheads of the plane and wished once more to have seen it from space after the Unearthing. From this low an altitude she couldn’t see the forest for the trees. Bloom wanted to see the Ship in its entirety. And even more so than that, she wanted to be *inside* the Ship; in the belly of the beast. As the plane began final approach to the airfield Bloom looked out at the Ship one last time and admitted to herself that she simply wanted the Ship. Mark had died to unlock its secrets. She would do everything in her power to make

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sure his death wasn't in vain. She would make sure that the work he'd started would continue and that she would be part of that work. The Ship was a treasure trove that belonged to Humanity. Honour enough to be one of the first to glance upon its finery, to see the Ship unspoiled. To possess, even if only in memory, the merest fraction of it, to be forever part of the Ship's history, lore and tale...that would be a gift from God. The plane touched down with a jolt, snapping her from her covetous idlings.

"Welcome to Fort Arapaho, Colonel," the pilot said.

"Thanks," she said, absently.

She was here. She had arrived.

Sonia Aiziz got up from her desk, bending backwards to stretch. She'd been there all morning, poring over images of the Codex, as she had done all the previous day and the day before and the day before. She'd launched into the project the minute they'd returned from Echohawk's funeral. She was fuelled by a new desire: to continue her mentor's work, to unlock the Ship. But the Codex, the key to the Ship was turning out to be its strongest barrier yet. Across the room at his own workstation, Michael Andrews was also poring over images from the Codex. A scale reproduction of the tablet of runes and numeric icons and other symbols was plastered to the table between them. Their relationship had improved collaboration on the project of deciphering the alien scriptures, rather than weaken it. They were professional, their desires' fulfillment reserved for off-hours, their passions channeled into the project during on-hours. They had made progress but achieved no breakthroughs. Aiziz was beginning to fear that they might never decipher what was here before them, evidently deliberately left, evidently meant to be understood. Worse was her fear that Mankind might never decipher the Codex; that the secrets of the Ship would be locked away another sixty million years, those mysteries outliving their species and perhaps any other intelligence that might ever arise on the world in the future. Such a tragedy she could not bear to fathom. But the possibility was one she had to admit to.

"You're having more coffee?" Andrews asked her, not looking up from his console, spectacles perched on the end of his nose.

"Yes," she said. "Don't worry. I'm watching my intake."

"Caffeine addiction happens fast," he cautioned. "Don't forget: Until a few years ago it was strictly regulated under the same laws that restricted and nearly banned tobacco products."

“I was a teenager at the time and the ban was only in the West,” she said, “and Israel, of course. But the Arab world had no such compunctions against coffee. Nor tobacco.”

“Allah be praised,” he replied. “It would have made my tenure at the New University of Baghdad completely intolerable.”

“I didn’t know you taught in Baghdad.”

“Only for a year; the last year of prohibition.”

“Ah,” she said with a smile, deliberately pouring herself another cup. “They run you out of there as well?”

Andrews smiled wryly. He’d lost the Lucasian Chair at Cambridge under circumstances not entirely dissimilar from those that had required him to leave Baghdad.

“In a manner of speaking,” he admitted.

Further musings on the subject were cut short, by the door chimes sounding.

“As long as I’m up,” Aiziz said with the slightest barb in her voice.

Technically he was closer to the door, though he made no move to answer it. Andrews’ mouth turned up at the corners by a fraction but he remained focused on the screen of his console. Aiziz toggled the switch for the door screen and their caller’s image appeared. She let her in.

“Hello Doctor Cole,” She said.

“Hello Sonia. Michael,” Cole said, stepping inside. “I just stopped in to let you know that Colonel Bloom’s arrived. She’ll be involved with the military thing for an hour or so, logging in I suppose. Once she’s done there, however, she’ll be sitting down with the Ship Survey Expedition.”

“What time?” Andrews queried.

“About fifteen hundred,” Cole replied. “I also wanted to ask both of you why you haven’t made your appointments with me regarding Professor Echohawk’s death?”

“Doctor Cole, I grew up in Palestine during the war with Israel,” Aiziz said. “I’ve seen death many times, lost loved ones, friends and family both. I’m long past the point of being traumatized by violent death. To me a death is a death; each one is tragic, but no longer traumatic.”

“Nevertheless, the Ship Summit requires you both to sit down for evaluation after the Professor’s death.”

“*Thank* you, Doctor,” Andrews said. “We will make time for the evaluation soon enough.”

“But—.”

“We’ll see you at the meeting,” Aiziz interjected. “We’ll discuss it then. We really have to get back to work on the Codex, now.”

“Good afternoon everyone,” Bloom said. “It’s good to see you all under better circumstances.”

She looked around the table. Peter and Sonia were the closest familiar faces here. Sonia had changed quite a bit since her time as Mark’s grad student. The other members of the Ship Survey Expedition sitting around her she could barely remember from the funeral. She took a breath and continued, switching on her workpad.

“I have already been brought up to speed insofar as your most recent briefing to the World Ship Summit, so let’s start with an update. Doctor Kodo?”

“I’ve run samples on the valve that seals the lift tube,” Kodo said, referring to his own workpad. “It’s biological, all right. But I’ve never seen cell structure like it before. I’m still trying to identify all the cellular components.”

“Are you sure it’s a cell and not nanotech?” Bloom asked.

“It might prove to be,” Kodo said, “but everything would seem to point to cellular biology. You’re welcome to have a look.”

“Let me know when’s good for you,” Bloom said. “On to the inscription. What have we got, so far?”

“We’ve identified an anomalous set of characters in among the numeric glyphs.” Andrews said, “The quarter-to-three quarter runes reversed, with the negative space inverted.”

“It is possible that these new symbols are indicative that the Builders used a base-ten, or decimal number system,” Aiziz added. “We’re still doing the sequencing. We’ll know for certain later on.”

“We have also identified symbols which we believe are calculation values,” Andrews said. “Once we know what numeric system we’re working with, we’ll know exactly what each symbol means. It looks like there are enough to run the whole gamut: addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, sine, cosine, exponent, equals, does not equal, less than, greater than...several more.”

“And on the linguistic side?”

“I’ve positively identified forty-seven base runic symbols and twenty-five others that seem to belong to subsets of each of the base symbols,” Aiziz said. “Others, I can’t yet classify. Still no clue yet as to what the symbols mean but

there are glyph and rune combinations that would seem indicate that the mathematics will create some form of corollary.”

“How much of a corollary?” Bloom asked. “We might be able to understand concrete concepts, but what about the abstracts? Communication of ideas relies on abstract concepts. Can we learn their conversational language armed only with the knowledge of their scientific language?”

“In this instance mathematics is the key,” Aiziz said. “The concrete concepts they will explain to us will include things like measurement, temperature, the periodic table and other constants that can be likewise expressed numerically. These constants will open the way to teach us their abstracts.”

“How so?”

“Let us assume we have working concepts for their periodic table and mathematic sets,” Aiziz said, leaning forward. “Combinations of their temperature sets and the periodic table could yield concepts like liquid, solid and vapour.”

“How long will it take to decipher the message on the Codex?” Bloom asked.

“That...we do not know,” Andrews replied. “We’re analyzing the alien glyphs, trying to establish beyond any doubt what numeric system the aliens who built the Ship had favoured. The problem is with the sequencing. Base ten works well for certain sets of numerics on the Codex, but not with others.”

He keyed up a diagram that appeared on the main wall of their boardroom.

“Using base ten,” Andrews explained, “we’ve identified the mathematical sets on the Codex represented by a handful of runes that appeared only in conjunction with the numbers. Simple equations on the Codex became evident once this was accomplished. But there are several false equations in the mix; equations that make no sense in base ten mathematics. Some of those false equations become true if we switch to a base five mathematic set, but others still remain false. Then there’s the textual half of the Codex; long lines of runic text accompanied by a handful of numeric glyphs. The glyphs are invariably arranged into mathematical equations, but those equations aren’t similar to either congruent or incongruent equations on the numeric half. There seems to be no pattern to placement of the equations, either. There are considerably more true statements than false, but there are far too many false statements for them to be ignored altogether.” Andrews paused making sure what he had said was understood by all.

“We’ve identified what we believe was the alien’s representation for the periodic table of elements, but we won’t be able to confirm that until we know for certain that base ten is the numerical system we’re dealing with.”

“We’re at an impasse until we’ve catalogued and classified every symbol on the Codex,” Aiziz concluded, “and then we’ll have to determine how each symbol works in context with other symbols. We don’t know if the runes represent whole words, concepts or phonetic values. The numeric runes will determine much, but there will be much more that we will have to determine on our own.”

“You had less to work with when you and Mark deciphered the Quipu Sonia,” Bloom said. “Right now you have a primer and the eager resources of the world’s linguists, scholars and mathematicians at your disposal. Keep in mind, though: Out of all of them you’re the one sitting here.”

Bloom consulted her workpad a moment and continued with the meeting.

“On the engineering side,” she said, “I’ve studied Doctor Scott’s notes but until I go down to the Ship, there’s nothing I can yet bring to the table. Tomorrow, when we make our return excursion to the Ship I might be able to lend a little more insight. Doctor Cole, you’ll be reporting to me privately regarding crew health, later on today.”

“I still haven’t received your own evaluations from the Pentagon, Colonel,” Cole said. “I may ask to run my own health and psych profiles on you.”

“It won’t come to that,” Bloom said dryly. “Peter: You’re running operations. Any problems I should be aware of? Anything we need that we’re not getting?”

“Nothing like that,” he said. “The biggest problem I’ve had has been sorting the information sent from the different scientific analysis groups working for us. Our secure message spar receives something like a thousand linxes an hour. I don’t have enough people on-site to go through them all.”

“What would you need to control the volume of traffic?” Bloom asked.

Peter hesitated. He needed James; James was the hacker, not him.

“Right now, I only have thirty operators, working in two eight hour shifts and using the standard heavy-traffic downlink processors built into their consoles,” Peter said. “I need Twenty-five operators working *per* shift around the clock. And a Dexo CR-490 or equivalent context-recognition processor connected directly to the message spar’s baseline. Without that half my people have to work filtering all the crap from the hard research, which’ll mean we’ll be hampered on what we gain from external research.

We've changed the spar ident three times already, so that won't keep the trolls, cranks and amateurs from hitting us."

"I'll put in the request to the World Council," Bloom said.

She consulted her handheld console again.

"On to the trip down tomorrow, the Ship Summit wants us to...oh, this is good. Until we've deciphered the Codex, they want us to explore the *surface* of the Ship and find an alternate point of entry."

"That's a little like looking for a needle in a haystack," Kodo remarked.

"Not necessarily Doctor Kodo," Andrews said. "Given the scale of the Ship and the number of interior levels we observed on the inside of the outer hull it is safe to assume that there are several different points of entry, most probably including docking bays for support vehicles. The real problem would be identifying them and getting them open."

"Astute," Bloom said. "I wasn't aware you had any engineering background, Doctor Andrews."

"I don't," he said. "The Ship is the size of a city. With inner levels along the outer hull multiple points of entry become possible without risk to the personnel and inhabitants in the inner hull itself. If you want I could come up with a rough estimate of how many access points we can expect to find per square kilometre of the Ship's surface," he paused and then added, "for all the good it'll do us."

"What do you mean?" Bloom asked.

"If the Builders had wanted us to have such easy access to the Ship they wouldn't have bothered sealing the First Chamber now, would they?" Andrews replied. "I'll wager you that any hatches accessible from the outside have been sealed and the rest can only be opened from the inside."

"And we can barely get readings on the Ship as it is," Peter said. "The thing's impervious to laser cutting...there really *is* only one way in."

"I want a look inside the Ship," Bloom said. "And I wouldn't mind getting a feel for its exterior geography, either. Tomorrow morning, we'll go down and have a look around. In the afternoon we'll take a walk across its surface." Everyone nodded, more than one face betraying smug mirth at Bloom's disregard for the Ship Summit's directives in favour of taking the fantastic trip down to the First Chamber, again.

"Unless there's any other business," Bloom said, "we'll adjourn. Peter, put together the gear for tomorrow's descent. Doctor Cole, we'll meet in my office in a half-hour."

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In this most Holy Dream, the Angel stood before Him near the entrance to the Pyramid. Gabriel Ashe beheld its presence, as the Ship sang its siren song, aglow in the garish blue light of the fires of Hell. The Angel was a pillar of gold fire, aglow from within and without, amorphous but for its eyes. Unlike mortal humans, the Angels had three eyes, so that they could look upon the Lord without earning destruction. The Angel's eyes were dark spheres of black violet, turned such for having looked upon the Lord. It approached him, a strange fore-image of itself preceding it. As the Angel drew nearer, its indistinct shape took the vaguest of mortal forms, the suggestion of legs and arms, blurred in movement below an asynchronous head.

"Remember this," the Angel said in a voice like raw electricity, "for I speak the Word of your Father, the Lord."

The Angel then set off for the Pyramid, leaving Ashe to follow. He could not but notice that the Angel had had no need to turn around, before moving down toward the Pyramid; it simply changed its point of view.

"I follow in the footsteps of the Angel of the Lord," Ashe said, "and I shall fear no evil."

They stood before the gaping black maw that was the opening into the Pyramid.

"You must pass through the gates and descend into the heart of the Golden Temple," the Angel said, "for this is the Word of the Lord whom I serve. You will be baptized within and shown the way to spread the Word of the Lord to all mankind."

"I will join My Father?"

"You will join Your Father."

"Then show me how."

And then the Angel moved forward and showed him.

It was cold before sunrise. She knew that as a fact of life about deserts and had experienced it herself many times in Australia, Africa and Brazil. Somehow she'd expected it to be warmer near the Ship. It meant that her usual running clothes of a tee shirt and shorts had to be traded in for sweat pants and a long-sleeve. Bloom had been nonetheless thrilled to discover Fort Arapaho boasted a run track along the edge of Ship's Canyon, including a bridge that covered a natural curve in the rock. The bridge was all guard rails and grillwork; you could see right through it and down to the Ship, kilometres below. Bloom loved the echo of her feet hitting the bridge. The Shipsong seemed to wrap itself around the sound of her footfalls, the clanging

percussion of sneaker on steel timing the rhythm of the strange, crystalline ululations. She couldn't help but pause in her run, walking over to the guardrail on the bridge to stare out at the Ship, feeling a thrill of vertigo as she stood staring out at the gargantuan alien artifact. The horizon to the east was brightening mightily, the first glints of light beginning to be reflected from the Ship's surface. The Shipsong echoed through the valley it had created to occupy. Even as the sun began rising, the Ship was still mainly aglow with the blue fire of its power source. Bloom marvelled over it for several long moments, before realizing she had to turn around and start back or she'd be late for breakfast.

They made their way down the ramp to the base of the Pyramid. The great door stood open as they had left it following their first descent into the Ship. No one from the Expedition had been here since Echohawk and Scott had been killed. The Ship Survey Expedition stood silent before the entrance to the Ship a long moment; a respectful, ponderous pause. The Shipsong cycled through its strange alien notes and sounds, echoing throughout Ship's Canyon and resonating powerfully around the members of the Expedition. Finally Bloom stepped forward and crossed the arch into the Pyramid. She was strangely let down by the scene inside: the flat black walls of the interior, the raised dais upon which the lift car would rest when it rose from the bowels of the Ship. It seemed almost ordinary. A faint trickle of dust and dirt had scurried into the Pyramid, drifting through the open door and into the far corners, curling around the side of the dais that faced the door. As the members of the Expedition came in behind her, a wind turned the detritus into spinning dust devils. The wind came from the lift tube, whose sealing valve opened in anticipation of the approaching lift car. Bloom had gone to see Kodo that morning and she had agreed with him: the valve was indeed biological and not nanotech. The Ship was indeed partially organic.

"Headsets on, people," Bloom said, as the wind's rushing augmented.

The lift could be heard coming towards them, displacing the air between it and the Pyramid as it ascended. The expedition members switched on their headsets, cameras recording. The lift car surged through the valve, coming to an abrupt and startling halt.

"That's unbelievable," Bloom said, taking tentative steps towards the gigantic lift car.

It reminded her of a titanic Faberge egg. She reached out to touch its surface. The crystal car's eggshell walls split open and the door into the lift

appeared. Bloom stepped back as this occurred, drawn to the mimetic effect of the crystal walls. She turned to face the door as they waited for the car to seal and descend. Bloom watched as the door slid back into place and fused seamlessly shut.

“Any ideas on how the car knows all are aboard and ready to go?” she asked, her voice hushed.

“It appears to be automated,” Andrews supplied. “Although whether it’s triggered by the open door into the Pyramid, or the presence of people within, is still a mystery. My guess is sensors either in the walls or floor count the number of people who enter the chamber and then the car.”

“One mystery of many,” Bloom said.

The car was swallowed into the darkness of the first leg of their journey. Soon they were dropping past the rings of blue light that marked passage through the tunnel and then came the climactic descent into the Ship’s vast interior.

“My dear God,” Bloom gasped.

The members of the Ship Survey Expedition were all faced outwards, peering at the wonders around them. The huge spires of the airframe bridged the gap between inner and outer hulls. Deck after massive deck, whole cities unto themselves encircled the upper half of the outer hull, some extending well into the airframes themselves. They wrapped around the interior of the Ship in a gigantic ring, joined to the outer hull and to whatever lay below their line of site by tubes of flowing blue energy and the skeletal fingers of the airframe. Bloom craned her head up to take in more of the Ship’s interior as they dropped away from it. The curvature of the Ship was dizzying from the inside and Bloom felt like an ant staring up at the vaulted ceiling of a cathedral. As massive as the Ship was, it was also a thing of beauty. The gold and black of its interior was a majestic triumph of engineering, of art, of the ability to create. She was looking at the fulfilled promises of a thousand legends: El Dorado, Atlantis, the City of God, Shangri-La... had the hearts of the prophets and storytellers who spoke of those places been somehow brought here, to this place in their dreams? As the car brought them to the end of their journey and down into the First Chamber of the inner hull, Bloom felt robbed, cheated of the wonders she had seen. She was unsurprised by the dampness on her face. Kodo, Aiziz and Peter, she saw, had also been overwhelmed by their emotions during their congress to the inner hull.

Bloom's hand traced itself around the brilliant blue band of encased energy that bisected the walls of the round chamber. The walls of the golden room had the same mosaic appearance as the floor of the lift. As did the ceiling save for where the white light shone through. Only the floor, a smoothly polished yet flat and reflectionless black, differed. The Codex dominated the room from its central position. The large, black stone fairly commanded attention. Andrews and Aiziz looked from the Codex to their workpads, to the keypad by the sealed door.

"If the numbers are base ten, then this is definitely a periodic table," Kodo said, studying the stone with the pair. "The layout is perfect and from what I remember of atomic construction, the runes associated with this pattern would seem for the most part to match them."

"For the most part," Andrews stressed, "but even from what I remember of the sciences I took in school I know there are far too many elements listed. What is the currently accepted prediction? No more than twelve additional elements are possible?"

"Something like that," Kodo conceded, "but up until a few years ago there were only a hundred and twenty-six elements on the table. There are a hundred and thirty-one now."

"There would appear to be over two hundred symbols on this table," Andrews said. "What do you make of that?"

"I don't know what to make of it," Kodo said. "Of the twelve predicted elements left to our periodic table, none of them are likely to be stable matter. How much do you want to bet most of the new elements here will be stable? I bet they will be. But, hell...I'm still trying to figure out the extra chromosome pairs and strange components in the cells I lifted off the lift tube valve."

"Extra components seem to be something the Builders enjoyed," Andrews said bitterly.

Aiziz gasped and looked at Andrews and Kodo.

"That's the key," she said. "The extra components. I'm sure of it."

"How do you mean?"

"The equations that are evidently false. I don't think they are," Aiziz said. "I think they're meant to call attention to themselves, to show us something else."

"Like what?" Andrews asked.

Aiziz stepped back from the Codex, her eyes roving until she could take it all in, at a glance. She ran her eyes across the surface of the black stone with

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grim determination. Andrews and Kodo watched her. Soon, Bloom was turning to regard the younger woman, as was Peter. At once Aiziz's eyes froze and widened in dawning realization.

“Sonia?” Bloom and Andrews asked, as one.

“I think...I...yes. Yes, I believe so.”

She used her stylus to scribble fiercely across her workpad, pausing only long enough to study the Codex before continuing with another burst of scrawling. She did this for several minutes and then moved for the keypad on the far left of the Codex. She keyed in a series of glyphs and runes and then pressed the stand-alone rune that appeared comparable to an “execute” key. There was a thud and then a hiss. The door from the first chamber rolled down into the floor and a short corridor beyond began to light up.

10

FIRST CONTACTS

James Johnson stared gravely at the door before him. They'd already scraped the gold-lined black lettering from the door. The words

Prof. Mark Echohawk

had once graced the frosted glass panel in the doorframe of the office in UCLA's Costen Institute. Now the glass was bare. James put the key in the door, turning the lock. Yesterday he'd sorted through the Prof's papers, checking the curriculum and assigning the work to the teachers who'd taken over Echohawk's classes. James had sent Echohawk's journals on to the World Aboriginal Anthropological Society as per Echohawk's last will and testament. Today James would be cataloguing the pieces in Echohawk's private collection, including photos, video chips and countless artifacts ranged along shelves in Echohawk's office suite. Some pieces were to be distributed to colleagues, friends, family; the rest of it to be boxed up and sent on to museums. James didn't want to be here. He'd slept poorly the night before and the circumstances surrounding his first few waking moments today left him in a dark mood, indeed.

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He'd woken up gasping for breath, his belly a tight, cold knot of terror. It took a moment for James' breathing to come under control, several moments more for his heart to slow down. There was enough light coming in from outside for him to identify his surroundings: Laura's living room. There was not enough light for his terror to be extinguished. Another nightmare. The Prof's death played out again. This time he was the Prof, getting shot, feeling the pain...getting shot again, falling over and knowing that these were the last few seconds he would be alive. James rolled out of bed, got into an undershirt and sweat pants and shuffled into the kitchen. He paused when he heard a low moan coming from down the hallway. He could hear bedsprings creaking rhythmically. Allison and Laura had gone out that night. He'd remained behind, declining the invitation to come with. They'd come home long after he'd gone to bed. One of them apparently hadn't come home alone. As another, louder, swooning sound of pleasure escaped down the hallway, James felt both aroused and so very alone. But above all, the terror; the irrefutable knowledge that he would one day die, that he would grow old, degenerate and finally expire. From the time he had been a child James had had doubts about whether or not he had a soul, though the five-year-old boy he'd been would never have been able to articulate it that way.

"Childhood's over when you know you're going to die," James said.

It was a quote from an old, old movie. A movie about death and resurrection, as he remembered. Resurrection was a concept James wasn't sure he believed in any longer. Death was an all too present inevitability. A door in the kitchen led out onto a balcony. He went outside to breathe in the night air. He was so afraid of dying. Watching the Prof's death had triggered that fear, released the genie from a bottle he thought he'd sealed a long time ago. He stayed out on the balcony, overlooking a small green space, taking in the night air and the stars for quite some time. It helped bring down the panic, but it did nothing for the fear. After a little while, he heard the door to the fridge open and caught light from its lone sentinel of a bulb. Inside the kitchen, Allison was taking a long, thirsty pull from a bottle of orange juice. James was unaware. She felt the breeze against her bare legs below her nightshirt. The door onto the balcony was open and James stood outside, watching the sky.

"James?"

He turned around and watched as Allison came outside.

"Hey," he said. "Sorry. Did I wake you?"

"No," she said. "James, are you all right?"

He couldn't help noticing the smell of sex on her. It was potent; her scent spicy and musk at once. It made him feel again as alone as aroused. It also made him feel intrusive. She had better things to do right now. He wasn't one of them.

"Yeah," he said. "Bad dreams."

"About Laura's dad?"

She took another step forward, the light from the still-open fridge enough to silhouette her beneath the filmy fabric of her night shirt. He tried not to notice the way the cool air hardened her nipples.

"Yeah," he said with a sigh.

"James," she said, reaching to hug him.

He let her, more from the need for comfort than anything else. But while Allison was in his arms he became uncomfortably aware of how warm she was under the nightshirt and that it was damp from perspiration. Her shoulder felt disconcertingly *there* under his palm, her breasts too present in their warm weight against his chest, her hip pressed a little too close to his for the interminably short hug and then she broke contact to regard him.

"James, you have to try and take it easy," she said. "We're going out to do stuff tomorrow, you and me, to take your mind off of things. Okay?"

"Okay," he said.

As terrified as he was of his own mortality, at that moment James had a completely different set of things to take off of his mind.

"Get some rest, James. Okay?" she said, with an encouraging smile.

She kissed his cheek and padded back to bed, kicking the fridge door shut as she walked past. James turned back to the green space but regarded it from behind closed eyes. And Allison was all he could see.

"Get a grip, James," he muttered. "The last thing you need right now is the hots for your ex-girlfriend's roommate."

And now as he catalogued antiquities it was thoughts of death and of Allison's warm body pressed against his that were captured in James' mind; fear and longing, neither feeling bringing comfort. He turned on the radio on the Prof's desk, hoping music would keep him from hearing the sound of Allison's voice in a lover's rapture. He'd not been paying much attention to the radio until he heard the announcement that the Ship Survey Expedition had just gained access to the Ship's interior.

The Encyclical Council was meeting with Santino's group, the subject of the meeting of course focused on the Creation Myth. Santino, Rabbi Abrams, Mufti Ressam and Brahman Radu sat to one side of an ancient conference table and Cardinal Santangelo and three bishops sat at the other end.

"There's honestly not much we can tell you at this point," Rabbi Abrams told them. "We are evidently not the only intelligent life in the universe and most probably not one of God's first creations."

Abrams had become Santino's council's de-facto leader, a wise and guiding voice among their ranks.

"That is precisely our problem, Rabbi," the Cardinal said. "How significant do we become in our Creator's eyes if we are one of many? What is our place in Creation?"

"Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God?" Mufti Ressam replied, quoting from the Gospel of Luke. "If we have one thing we can agree on it is that God's love is universal. There are millions, *billions*, perhaps, of different forms of life on planet Earth. God loves all His creations."

Cardinal Santangelo shook his head.

"What concerns us Mufti is that in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus also tells us, 'But even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not therefore: ye are of more value than many sparrows.' We have all been told time and again that we are God's Chosen People. If the Human Race is simply one among many, if we are not the Chosen People, then who are we?"

"I would like to remind you if I may, Cardinal," Radu said, "that we Buddhists do not believe that we are God's Chosen People. We do not believe in any manifest destiny for Humanity in the greater universe. Perhaps it is time you started to look at this from our point of view. We have always maintained that we are but one of many wonders in the universe."

"That may work fine for the Eastern traditions, Brahman Radu," the Cardinal said, "but how would it upset the teachings and history Semitic and Gentile traditions?"

"Love thy neighbour as you would love thyself?" Radu countered. "It sounds like a universal truth to me."

Before the Cardinal could reply one of the Bishops accompanying him received a linc on his headset.

"I'm sorry, Cardinal," he said, "but I've just received a message from the Council. The Ship Survey Expedition has unlocked the inner hull of the Ship."

Allison was curled into her favourite chair, her console in her lap. A steaming mug of coffee sat in a cup stand to the right of the chair. She was switching between channels, looking for something worth viewing. She flagged a nature documentary on insects as a possible and continued searching. An image caught her eye as she slipped past it. She returned to that channel. It was a picture of the Ship as seen from the Zuni Mountain Range. The image changed as the familiar face of an INN anchor appeared. Behind him was a picture of Colonel Bloom.

“Hey Laura, your mom’s on INN again!” Allison called.

She picked up her headset and linked into the console, studying the image on the screen. Allison keyed the INN story up and began viewing. In her room, Laura was linking her own console to INN. The anchor began speaking right at the start of the newscast.

“Good afternoon and welcome to the Interactive News Network. Colonel Margaret Bloom, leader of the Ship Survey Expedition announced this morning that the Ship Survey Expedition succeeded in gaining access to the Ship from the First Chamber. Access was made possible thanks to the discovery made by Professor Sonia Aiziz, about the nature of the Codex found in the First Chamber.”

Each keyword said by the anchor generated an icon at the bottom of the console screen. Icons linking to Bloom’s biographical data, to an information page on the SSE and images from the descent into the Ship and the exploration of the First Chamber appeared along the bottom of the screen. Other icons for the Codex, on Aiziz and on her report to the Ship Summit closed out the list. Allison continued with the headline newscast.

“The sealed door in the First Chamber opened down a small corridor and into another, larger chamber beyond,” the anchor said; Allison linked to the icon that read “SECOND CHAMBER AND BEYOND”.

They all stared down the open passage. The next chamber was aglow, inviting them in. Aiziz, closest to the now-open door had the clearest view. From her vantage she could see that the door into the next chamber was inscribed with another of the runes of Shiplanguage. As for the hall between the two chambers it was a plain enough passage by the Ship’s standards: golden walls, bisected by a brilliant blue band of energy, the golden ceiling transparently backlit by orbs of soft light.

“How did you do that, Sonia?” Bloom asked. “Holy shit.”

“The Codex isn’t a language primer,” Aiziz said. “Not in the true sense. It

is a list of their alphabet, their numeric system and yes, even their periodic table. But among the many equations and basic statements, were what appeared to be false statements and false equations. That was not the case. The equations and statements were all coordinate sets; rows and columns. The false numbers that confused us were the key. Each supposedly false number was actually the atomic weight of one of the elements on the periodic table. The false runic values similarly located specific runes in the textual grid. It was just a matter of determining which number represented rows and which one represented columns.”

“Congratulations Sonia,” Bloom said. “If that doesn’t earn you the Nobel Prize, nothing will.”

Sonia smiled and accepted the praise of her fellow Expedition members with good humour. But there was still bad news.

“The problem is we are still no closer to deciphering the Ship’s language,” she said. “All we have is a list of several hundred runes, of which we only know the meaning of a handful. We still have no sense of their grammatical structure, or conjugation.”

“We’re getting there,” Bloom said.

“I don’t know about the rest of you,” Kodo said, “but I’m ready to get going on into the rest of the Ship.”

“Hold on,” Bloom said. “There are some things we have to cover first. Peter: How’s our link to the surface?”

Peter checked his portable console.

“We’re doing good,” he said. “But I’d like to set up relay points down here. We’re getting deeper into the Ship and its hull is starting to mess with the signal. According to the lag time between the beacon navigator and the beacon we’re a good five kilometres down. Topside’s another time zone from here.”

“How long will it take to set up another relay transmitter down here?” Bloom asked.

“Counting round trip topside I could have it done in half an hour, maybe forty-five minutes.”

“That being the case I think we should go back up ourselves and make our reports to the World Ship Summit before we continue,” Bloom replied. She toggled her linx and spoke: “Doctor Cole? I’ll need you to have some of your EMTs set up a small ambulatory center down here in the First Chamber.” She paused as Cole made her reply and then Bloom said: “We’re going into the Ship, Doctor, and I’ll want First Responders down here on scene. All right. I’ll see you shortly.”

She cut the link and gestured for everyone to follow her to the elevator. They did so, reluctantly.

“The Ship’s waited sixty-five million years for us,” she said. “Believe me: it’s going to still be here when we get back.”

“Good afternoon, Major,” Bloom said as Benedict sat down at the table she had taken in the Officers’ Mess.

Like most of the buildings on the base that served no direct military, administrative or research objectives, the Officers’ Mess looked out over the Ship. Bloom had chosen a table near a window.

“Good afternoon, Colonel,” Benedict said before digging in to his lunch.

It was a little past noon and shortly after returning to the surface Bloom had scheduled this lunch meeting with her second in command, who was also serving as security officer.

“Good coffee here,” Bloom said, sipping from her mug.

“Not as good as we had skyside,” Benedict said. “Concord 3 had the best damn coffee I’ve gotten in a commissary.”

“The disadvantage being we had to drink it from a plastic sip-pouch.”

Benedict grinned.

“It’s good to be back under you, Colonel.”

It was Bloom’s turn to grin.

“If I had a dollar for every time a man said *that* to me...”

They laughed and ate in silence a few moments.

“How would you say the SSE is adjusting to the security measures?” Bloom asked.

“Bitchy,” Benedict replied. “It’s furloughs into town that are going to be really problematic. Washington wants to send in the Secret Service if they need escorts. Geneva looks inclined to agree.”

“What have we been able to tie to Ashe?”

“Sweet fuck all,” was Benedict’s bitter reply between mouthfuls of lunch. “Goddamn, this macaroni salad’s like *rubber*! Shit. No, Ashe is resourceful. The gun used in the assassination was completely clean. Never used before in connection with anything. Registry information hasn’t been able to turn up anyone connected to the Untied Trinity Observants in the Village who owns that kind of gun. We’re spreading our search to the national database, but so far nothing. Plus because fourteen member nations of the World Council have recognized the Observants as a legitimate religion, the World Ship Summit’s upheld their right to be in the Village, despite the obvious

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connection between them and the slayings.”

“Obvious but improvable,” Bloom said. “Ashe *is* going down. I’m going to see to it. I owe that fuck. I want to know everything that goes on inside that lunatics asylum he calls a church. I want full reports from you and the civilian authority. I’m not going to be happy until they haul that bastard off to the shithouse to rot.”

“We do have some leads from informants inside.”

“Nothing from his inner circle,” Bloom countered. “And that means nothing that INN and INTERPOL haven’t already told us.”

“No. But we’re trying there, too. We know that Ashe is planning something; we just don’t know what, yet. He seems to be divesting power to his inner circle. They may be forming terrorist cells.”

“I’m supposed to be taking the SSE back into the Ship in a few minutes. We opened the way out of the First Chamber and twenty minutes later the whole fucking world knew about it. And tomorrow we’re scheduled to start crawling around the outside of the thing, looking for a shortcut inside.”

“You want extra security?”

“I want a *full* security net on the SSE,” Bloom replied. “Tactical response, emergency response and evac standing by. I want guards posted at the entrances into the Ship and in the First Chamber, as well as an escort with each SSE team. I want attack helicopters on the perimeter and snipers guarding every access to the base, the Expedition and the Ship.”

“You expecting to be attacked?”

“I don’t know *what* to expect. And the lives of the people on the Ship Survey Expedition are my primary concern. So I’m going to cover all the possible plays.” Benedict nodded.

“I’ll have a full security detail ready before you leave for the Pyramid,” he said.

“Good,” Bloom said, rising, her lunch done. “I’ll see you before we leave then, Major.”

He rose as she left, taking her tray with her to the trash.

“Oh and Major?” This came as he was about to sit back down to the rest of his lunch.

“Colonel?”

“When I get back from today’s expedition I’m going to want to sit down and discuss Ashe. So you and Police Chief Raven are best advised to keep the early evening free.”

Doctor Cole’s medical staff had finished setting up a fully equipped emergency trauma unit by lunchtime. By 1:00 P.M. the Ship Survey

Expedition had returned. The Codex that dominated the center of the vast room now served to delineate the trauma clinic from the rest of the First Chamber. Bloom gave the new infirmary a cursory inspection as Doctor Cole and her staff stood by.

“Very nice,” Bloom said. “I just hope we don’t need any of you to do more than treat a skinned knee.”

“I feel much the same way,” Cole said, hoisting on a moderate-sized backpack. “I’ll be accompanying you as you make your way into the Ship. The Expedition is to have trained responders with them at all times and I can think of none better than the SSE’s chief medical officer.”

“Glory hound,” Andrews chided her, jokingly.

They made their way over to the open doorway, all eyes staring expectantly down the corridor beyond. Finally Bloom turned to Aiziz.

“You figured it out, Sonia. This is your show.”

She gestured for the young linguist to cross the threshold.

“I feel as though I should say something,” she said. “Make some eloquent speech for the permanent record of these events. Nothing comes to mind though and I hate public speaking.”

She stepped across the threshold and into the corridor beyond. Here the floor was a polished blue, the same colour as the bands of energy flowing to the right and the left of the hall, though non-luminous. Aiziz, followed closely by Andrews, Bloom and the rest of the Ship Survey Expedition made their way down the short, wide hallway towards the door on the far end. A black rune was engraved in the gold surface of the door. The rune was made up of a series of interlocked rings and curved lines. In the upper left corner of the rune a lone ring sat. Its opposite number sat in the lower right corner of the room. Between the two, three interlocked rings of different sizes, one inside another, burst out towards two lines, curved away from the rings. The mirror opposite of this image completed the sojourn to the lower right ring; two upwards curving lines interlocked with the lines above and stood guard over three more interlocked rings and the lone ring in the lower right.

“Is that one of the runes you found?” Bloom asked Aiziz.

“Yes,” the linguist replied. “But not one I was able to properly classify.”

“Curious and curiouser,” Bloom mused.

The door dropped down through the floor as they reached it.

“They must have an awful lot of space between decks, wouldn’t you think, Colonel Bloom?” Andrews asked.

“They’d have to,” Bloom said as they stepped towards the dark opening.

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“Unless the doors are made of some sort of mimetic material.”

“An interesting thought,” Andrews said. “One that leads to several different possibilities.”

Bloom ducked her head in through the door. The chamber beyond was dark. There was little possibility that there was anything threatening inside. Unless, a tiny voice in the back of her mind whispered, that these chambers and corridors were all part of an elaborate test full of tricks and traps. She suddenly felt—

“—Very much like rats in a maze.”

Aiziz and Andrews turned to regard her.

“It’s an apt analogy, I think,” Aiziz replied. “Though not entirely called for at the moment.”

She swallowed hard and then crossed into the chamber.

James arrived home late that afternoon, burdened with several bags of groceries. Allison and Laura were in the living room directly across from the kitchen.

“Hey guys,” James said as he got inside. “What’s new?”

“My mom’s on INN again,” Laura said.

“What’s happened?” James asked, heading to the kitchen.

“They discovered some sort of archive in the Ship,” Allison supplied.

James peered through the doorway in the kitchen into the living room. The monitor screen on the wall was linked to INN and Bloom’s image onscreen was frozen. Behind her was a picture from inside the Ship. Without a frame of reference, James couldn’t tell what the picture was supposed to be. Not that he had much interest. Since he’d left the SSE, James had avoided news of the Ship wherever possible.

“Coming to watch?” Laura asked.

“No that’s okay,” James replied, ducking back into the kitchen. “I’ll catch the stream later.”

Laura and Allison shared a look. They knew he wouldn’t. Laura understood why; or at least part of why. She was still having bad moments since her dad died. They were diminishing, but even she was still prone to them. But James seemed to shut down a little whenever the subject of the Ship or something related to it came up. James made a point of keeping to the kitchen while Laura and Allison went over the INN stream about Laura’s mom.

“You want me to go talk to him?” Allison asked Laura in a low voice.

“I wish he’d come talk to *me*,” Laura said. “He and I have been friends for a long time. He’s *supposed* to be able to do that. So why won’t he?”

“I don’t know,” Allison replied. “It’s not like he tells me much, either. I’ve tried to get him to talk to me about this, too. He only says so much and no more.”

“Men are fucked,” Laura said and turned back to the wall console, upon whose screen the image of her mother was still frozen in place.

Laura toggled a button on her earpiece.

“Resume,” she said, bringing Bloom’s image back to life.

James heard none of their exchange from the kitchen. And even if he had he still wouldn’t have been able to find the words or the voice to use them. How could he explain how thoughts of his own mortality plagued him every hour of every day? How when he was out at the university, working in the Archives, he was aware of each passing minute and could feel the day’s end when work was done as another day he’d never live? He felt the same when he slept too late: that he’d squandered precious time. Not even yet thirty, James could feel the weight of his years and measure it against the years that he might have left. So many things he’d never done, his youth almost over. The last ten years had gone in the blink of an eye. One day he’d been a high-school graduate and the next he was working his way through the final months of his doctoral studies while helping to excavate the Ship. Allison came into the kitchen and sat down beside him. She waited, watching him long moments as he browsed the Grid from his portable console. Finally she took his console from him and set it aside.

“How much longer do you think you can keep this shit bottled up, James?” she asked.

He looked at her a long, difficult moment. Their encounter on the balcony had happened much earlier that morning, but it was still achingly fresh in James’ mind. He found it hard to look at Allison, remembering the sounds he’d heard her making for most of the morning and the scent of sex that had been on her skin. He wanted to talk about what was going on in his head. He wanted to talk about it with Allison. He just wasn’t sure he wanted to talk to her about for the right reasons.

“Let’s not get into this now, please,” he said, at length.

“If not now, then when, James?” she asked. He sighed heavily.

“Tonight,” he said. “Okay? We’ll go out and we’ll go grab a coffee somewhere. I just... I just want a chance to put my thoughts together a little, first.”

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“I’m going to hold you to this,” Allison warned. “Tonight.”
“All right,” he conceded.

For millions of years, the Ship had waited for indigenous sentient life to discover and then to unearth it. A patient entity, the Ship had not minded the long, solitary vigil. It had been engineered to traverse extragalactic space with its crew safely in hibernation. The Ship was used to solitude and idleness. However, when it had at last been discovered there was a certain excitement to the sudden activity. When the subjects had completed the first test and descended into the Ship, it immediately began studying them, the technology they carried and their means of communication, which proved to be largely aural with some physical gesticulation. They had a grasp of written language as well, for it wasn’t long before they had solved the second, more complicated context-recognition test. Therefore judged ready for first contact, the Ship opened the first of two doors leading further into its secretive interior. Soon, the subjects would learn how to enter into direct communication with the Ship and then a final determination of their intelligence would begin...

The chamber they stepped into was brilliantly lit from its vaulted ceiling, the gold walls lined with what appeared to be consoles or workstations. The spacious room was built around a large central dais, which suddenly unfolded as the members of the Ship Survey Expedition entered. A large black column rose from its center and a panel covered in Shiplanguage runes and numeric icons blossomed below it.

“HYSANIHUZA POGU VU WY,” came a thunderous voice from all around them. Aiziz realized that the voice had the same crystalline timbre and tone as Shipsong. The black column in the center of the dais suddenly blossomed in gold runes and icons. Their ordered placement could only mean one thing.

“Dear God, we’ve found the language lab,” Aiziz said, in hushed tones.

Every screen surrounding the central column lit up with different runes and icons in different configurations.

“My God, it’s genius!” Andrews exclaimed, rushing over to one of the panels. “These are geometric equations and diagrams. And on this screen...this looks like trigonometry.”

“I think I’ve found the periodic table, over here!” Kodo announced, standing by another panel. “I count two hundred and twenty-seven elements,

but it's definitely the periodic table; looks like we have basic molecular layouts on the screens opposite."

"Test and simple images here," Aiziz said. "It appears to be just basic shapes and word associations, but it could mean anything."

"Doctor Kodo, over here please," Doctor Cole called.

As the biologist came over, Cole pointed to the screen in front of her. "Doctor, would you say that this is a cell diagram?"

"Definitely, Doctor Cole," Kodo replied. "It looks like it has all the same strange components as the cells I extracted from the lift tube, but it's definitely a cell."

And so it went throughout the room. The SSE spent the rest of the afternoon recording and collecting data from the thirty-one terminals surrounding the central dais. They discovered information relating to chemistry, physics, mathematics, biology, astronomy. Other panels weren't immediately identifiable, but Aiziz and Andrews seemed more than satisfied with what they had gleaned.

"We have more than enough to begin deciphering Shiplanguage," Aiziz said. "We obviously won't be able to discuss elaborately abstract concepts with the Ship yet, but we will be able to do that eventually; once we've established direct communication with the Ship."

"The doors are now sealed..."

The Minister tuned out slightly as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff gave the now-familiar opening oration to the meeting of the Committee Chairs. The Minister glanced over the eight other faces on his console screen as the Chairman's image dominated the center of his screen.

"Our operatives within the Ship Survey Expedition report a stunning breakthrough," the Chairman said. "They are at this hour being debriefed by the World Ship Summit. As of now, only they know what we know: A language lab was found in the Second Chamber and the SSE has begun learning how to communicate with the Ship."

"Once communication has been established, we should expect the SSE to be able to breach the South Door from the First Chamber," the Curator said, "which will probably mean they'll have full access to the Ship."

"Unless," the British Defence Minister said, her image now sharing the main screen with the Curator's, "the south Door opens into another test. *If* they even manage to enter into communication with the Ship, at all."

"Why wouldn't they be?" asked the Solicitor General.

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“The Committee did a study on this a number of years back,” the British Defence Minister said. “First, communication with an intelligent alien life form depends on at least some similar evolutionary characteristics. We assume that sight, hearing, taste and smell will be senses universal to intelligent life. They most probably are not. The sense of touch is most probably the only sense that we would have in common with alien beings. And even then, their perceptions might differ from our own.”

“What other possible senses could there be?” the Minister for Natural Resources asked.

The British Defence Minister shrugged.

“Virtually anything,” she said. “Telepathy, chemical communication; they might perceive only the infrared or ultraviolet ends of the electromagnetic spectrum instead of what we call visible light. They might be able to sense gravity, or even changes in local spacetime. We simply have no way of knowing.”

“Isn’t it safe to assume they have visual abilities, given the runes that we found?” the White House Chief of Staff asked, “and considering the liquid crystal imaging technology we recovered from the Bug?”

“That the aliens have or had visual acuity is likely,” the British Minister conceded, “but not necessarily very similar to our own. A multispectral scan of the imaging system aboard the Groom Lake Bug revealed that the system was broadcasting images on several wavelengths invisible to the human eye.”

“In any event,” the Chairman interjected, bringing the debate back to topic, “we must plan for the contingency that they will gain access to the rest of the Ship.”

“Indeed,” MI-6 said. “Before the World Council gets inside we must have operatives within acquiring technology for us.”

“Why?” the Minister asked, for the first time challenging MI-6. “To what end? The World Ship Summit and the Oversight Commission will be handling the catalogue and assessment of any technologies found within.”

“Precisely why we have to get there first,” MI-6 replied testily, unused to being questioned. “The Committee’s goal is to acquire alien technologies to the advantage of our respective governments, Minister. If the World Council is to decide who gets what from the Ship and what technology is to be restricted or utterly banned, there will be no advantage.”

“To that end,” the Chairman said, “I propose we prepare of team of operatives to infiltrate the Ship if and when access is acquired.”

“Will Colonel Bloom be in a position to grant us access?” the Chief of Staff asked.

“She’s in no position to refuse,” the Chairman growled.

“I agree and second the motion,” MI-6 said.

From his offices in London, the head of MI-6 crouched in closer to his console’s camera plate. The image of his face on the Minister’s console grew perceptively. It was almost as if MI-6 were addressing him. In fact, the Minister suspected he was.

“All in favour?” MI-6 asked a fraction of a second before the Chairman could.

The Minister took a moment to consider his position. He’d voiced his objections. Did he truly have enough reason to dissent here, to go against both MI-6 and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff?

“Aye,” the Minister said when his turn came.

They were just outside of LA in a deserted park that Allison liked to frequent, sitting on the hood of her car and smoking a home-rolled joint. She blew the ash off the end of the cherry with a short puff and passed the joint to James. She held her breath as he took his hits, exhaling only as he passed it back to her. Before she took a hit, she spoke:

“Okay, James,” she said. “Seriously, I don’t know you that well. But even I can tell you’re not normally as tense and brooding as you’ve been since you moved in.”

She took a hit, held it a second and exhaled. She continued speaking.

“I know that it’s not just about Laura’s dad, because even she’s picking up the pieces better than you are. So the way I see it, the shooting triggered something else that’s burning your chip.”

She took a proper toke from the joint and passed it back. He took a long haul off of it, as though it were a cigarette. He coughed it out a second later and flicked the ash off the end of the joint. Allison took it as James began talking.

“Well, it’s like you said,” he began, “I don’t know you very well and this is shit I’ve never really talked to anyone about before.”

He took the spliff back and took his own hits.

“What’s the problem, James?” she asked, her tone serious and somewhat annoyed. “Laura’s worried; I don’t know you well but I like you and I’m worried. What the hell is up, James?”

“I—,” he began, grasping for words. “The Prof—.”

He shook his head. She took the joint. It was nearly done. She threw it down the gravel roadway leading into the hillside rest stop. He looked at her.

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She waited patiently for him to speak.

“Do you believe in anything?” he asked her.

“What?”

“Do you believe in God? Or in life after death? Or reincarnation? Any of that?” Allison was taken aback by the question. The drugs were kicking in and it wasn’t entirely great trying to focus on such issues when she’d just been trying to get James to open up.

“Well, yeah,” she said, “I...well, I’m a Marian Pagan.”

“A what?”

“You’re going to have to give me a second, James,” she replied, reaching into her purse. “I need a butt and could you get me a can of Coke from the car? My throat’s paste.”

“Sure,” he said, dropping off the hood of the car and moving to the door.

“James? What has any of this got to do with you?”

“Just tell me what you believe,” he said. “Okay?”

Allison rolled her eyes. There was nothing worse having a conversation with somebody who was stoned and trying to make a point. He came back with her Coke and his Ginger Ale.

“So what is a...Marian Pagan?”

“I follow the Goddess worship tradition that says Maid Marian, from the Robin Hood legends, was the High Priestess of the Goddess’s cult. It’s not the same thing as Christian Marianistic Paganism, which is about making the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene into Goddess figures, but the two get confused all the time,” she told him as she finished lighting her cigarette. He took one, lit it.

“Wait. Paganism...isn’t that like witchcraft and all that?”

“No,” she replied. “Although most Pagan beliefs incorporate Magick into their ceremonies, Paganism is not strictly witchcraft. Marianism does use spellcraft and some Earth Magick, but we don’t classify ourselves as witches. We pray, we get together, we study our religion and we try our best to come to know the Goddess.”

“Okay, so then who was Robin Hood?”

“The High Priest of Hearn the Hunter, a Forest God represented by a stag,” she replied. “He was consort to the Earth Goddess and his horned image was bastardized by the early Church into that of the Devil and what the Hell does any of this have to do with your problems, James?”

“I was raised Catholic,” he said. “I was raised to believe that Jesus died for our sins and came back to life so that we could live forever in communion

with God. The thing is, since the Ship was found...well, I've been having some doubts. And then...when the Prof...died...I was raised to believe...I kept expecting...to *feel* something; to have some *sensation*, some knowledge that his soul had passed on. The bitch of it...the bitch of it is that I didn't feel a fucking thing when he died. Not a fucking thing. I don't know what I'm supposed to think."

He was choking out the words at the end and when he stopped speaking he took a long, angry drag from his cigarette. The wind blew the smoke into his face and burned the tears he was trying not to shed from his eyes. He snuffed a leak back into his sinuses and took another haul off the cigarette.

"Fuck," he rasped.

Allison put an arm around his shoulders.

"James," she said. "Gods, James, I didn't know."

"It's not exactly something that comes up, is it?"

"James..."

She rubbed his back in what she hoped was a supportive manner.

"I was raised to believe that God sent His only Son to Earth to die for our sins," James said. "I was raised to believe that God made us. He loved us so much he died for us. Well if God sent the Messiah to us here on Earth, what did he do for all the other species of life that must inhabit the galaxy? For all we know there isn't a single animal alive on this planet that didn't evolve from something the Ship brought here! Where does God fit in to all that? Everybody always says that Constantine and the early Church bastardized history and Jesus' teachings for their own end and now they're saying that the Ship helps prove what a fraud the whole of Christianity is. Everything I've been taught to believe's just been incredibly fucked up by the Ship. You're supposed to know, to feel something when someone dies right in front of you. You're supposed to witness something. Feel something, think something...I don't fucking know. But that's what I don't understand. What happened to the Prof, after he died? What happens to us when we die?"

Allison held him then, simply drawing him into her arms. He went gladly and for a long time she just hugged him tightly against her.

"James, this is really heavy shit you're trying to deal with," she said after a long silence. "I know, because I've been there. I don't know if you'll find the same answers I did or if you'll find any answer at all. But James, you've got to learn to talk things out sometimes. Laura and I are your friends. That's what we're here for."

"I don't think you guys can help me with this," he said, pulling away from her.

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He shook a cigarette out of the pack and lit it, taking a long drag.

“It’s a rough road to go down alone, James.” She turned him so he was facing her. “I don’t want to see you get lost along the way.”

“I...thanks,” he said.

She kissed him lightly.

“You’re welcome.”

It had been a long and tiresome night and it didn’t feel to Bloom that it was ever going to end. Aiziz and Andrews had been at the language lab until Bloom and Doctor Cole both ordered them up. Then there were the debriefings. Aiziz explaining to the SSE that the language program had shown her the key to understanding the Shiplanguage and how it was now in the process of teaching her and Andrews how to speak it. Then Kodo had shown them the original tissue samples he’d taken from the Ship’s organic components. The upper layer of cells in each sample had gone through a process that had hardened them. The cells underneath still seemed to be normal; at least as normal as he could determine, relative to the Ship. Kodo was looking into the process, including a metallurgical analysis of the hardened cells, but he had nothing yet. The general debriefing was followed by supper, in this case pizza and beer. After supper came the debriefing to the World Ship Summit. Then Doctor Cole delivered her report on the SSE to Bloom. Kodo and Peter were bearing up well, but smoking far too many joints in their off-hours. Aiziz and Andrews might be developing an obsession with the Ship. Some of the peripheral members of the SSE, studying the Ship from the points of view of geological history, radio spectrometry, scans and other such esoterica were showing signs of strain. Two were cases of APCSD, a term long-ago coined by whatever government department had originally thought up the idea of an extraterrestrial first contact: the acronym stood for Alien Post Contact Shock Disorder. The three other cases of strain were from people unable to handle the workload. In all five cases Cole recommended sending them packing. Bloom concurred and highlighted Cole’s recommendation to the World Ship Summit that the APCSD cases were given immediate and mandatory therapeutic treatment. After all was said and done Bloom sat in her quarters eating cold pizza. Once her appetite had been sated, Bloom declared the day done. She showered and made for bed. She had just fallen asleep when the first explosion woke her.

A universal truth of all intelligent life is that their first contact with an alien civilization is invariably cathartic. It is also universally true that all post-contact civilizations go through a period of panic. The distinction is that some civilizations survive this panic and some do not.

11

CRISIS

“The Lord Your God calls upon you to soldier for the cause of the salvation of His Son,” Gabriel Ashe said in His hypnotic monotone.

Before Him were the Chosen. Those marked by His closest disciples as being ready to fight, to die for Christ’s Son. The sun was high in the sky outside Ashe’s Church; the SSE had just breached the Second Chamber as had been foretold to Him in His visions. Ashe knew that this was the sign He had been waiting for. He had known since waking from the Dreams, the night before.

He had risen from His slumber and knew that the moment the Angel had bade Him prepare for was at hand. The knowledge had filled Him as surely as His lungs filled with air when He breathed. The time of His Ascension had come at last. Ashe inhaled deeply to calm Himself. It was then that the stench of rot hit Him and He became aware of His surroundings. The charnel smell of the Sacrifices He had taken for the sake of the Angel before His last vision quest; before He was shown the path to walk. Ashe moved to the door of the suite, past the torn and broken bodies. The man had been from the military, the woman from INTERPOL. He had broken them from the start, feeding them drugs to heighten their terror and enhance their pain. They soon confessed their sins under His carefully cruel ministrations. Even after they

confessed their crimes, He took much pleasure in their long brutalization and violation before He finally killed them, disembowelling the man with His bare hands and choking the woman with the still-dying soldier's entrails. Then the rush of the Act had taken Him and He partook of their flesh, before sundering their bodies as the Angel commanded. Ashe unlocked the door of His suite and stepped through. His Apostles, as always, were there.

"The time of completion of our great work is at hand," He told them. "Dispose of the sacrifices in the proscribed manner and prepare My bath and fast-breaking meal. Soon I will enter the Temple of My Rebirth and I want to be ready."

"The salvation of the Son can only come from the victory of the Son of the Son of God," Ashe told His Chosen, His Knights of Christ. "For I am the Promise Kept, I am the Word made Flesh, I am the Spirit of God that will unite the Father and Son unto Me. You have been chosen from the flock to be My Knights, to soldier for Me, for My Father and My Father's Father. You must remember death, for you may all die so that God might live. You are my Christian soldiers, Knights of Christ, of Christ's Son. Time flies from us and the time to act, to fight...and to die...is at hand."

They began singing "Onward, Christian Soldier"; a hundred men and women, their voices raised in unison. They wore white robes, a red sash hanging down from their collars. Ashe stood over the altar, where a hundred doses of Communion had been prepared. As one, Ashe's Knights of Christ rose and began forming a single queue, kneeling and moving toward the altar. This time Ashe had designed the drug differently. It would at first give them hours of ecstatic hallucinations and leave them highly sensualized. Then hours later, the drug's second stage would kick in, driving them into an adrenalized madness and psychotic rage barely controlled by their conditioned rapture toward Him and the Church of the United Trinity. They would move out into the World Ship Preserve, attacking the Village, Fort Arapaho and even the town of Laguna. And around the world Ashe's Apostles were preparing his Knights of Christ to do the same. For tonight would be the Great Harvest. And tonight Gabriel Ashe would make the Ship His.

"Tempus fugit," each of His supplicants said, before receiving Communion; *Time flies*.

"Memento Mori," Ashe replied to each, as He gave them Communion; *Remember death*.

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At last all had taken Communion; all were falling under the drug's spell. As the drug began taking hold, His followers began partaking of each other's flesh; grouping off, men and women, women and women, men and men...today, they would enjoy their last hours of earthly pleasure. Tonight, they would die in His name. And Ash, his own arousal rising, would partake of their flesh as well as they celebrated the triumphant coming of the Kingdom of the Lord.

Bloom was out of her quarters and running, her gun drawn as sirens began wailing. She was halfway across the compound, moving towards the operations center when a Ranger pulled up beside her. The back door opened.

"Colonel!" Major Benedict shouted. "Get in!"

Bloom hopped inside, pulling the door shut behind her.

"Report!" she barked. "What the hell is going on?"

"All Hell's breaking loose," Benedict replied. "The airfield's been hit; two explosions blasted the main hangar and the fuel dump. We're getting reports of explosions in the Village; so far, all in residential areas!"

"Shit! Who the fuck is doing this?"

"We don't know. It looks like lone individuals with explosives strapped to their chests. We're rallying now. Emergency response has been dispatched to the Village to help and all available personnel have been deployed around the base to ensure no one else is out there. It's an organized attack, but we don't know who's behind it yet."

They pulled up in front of the main building. Bloom was out of the Ranger, Benedict with her as she charged inside.

"Get the SSE to the designated secured areas," she said, "and get something, *anything* into the air; call in aerial recon from whatever's nearby if we don't have it and don't just send emergency response into the Village, dispatch troops!"

She tore into the command center, where a war theatre had already been set up. A map of the World Ship Preserve was already displayed on a tabletop screen. The Village and Fort Arapaho were centered, red circles on the map showed blast zones.

"How the fuck did this happen?" Bloom demanded. "How did they get past our perimeter?"

A communications officer was racing by. Bloom grabbed him at the shoulder.

"I need an immediate three-way link to the World Council Security

Commission, the World Ship Summit and the DIA,” she told him, slipping a linx into her ear at the same time. “Put it through to me here, right away, with a sub-window on this screen.”

She stabbed the tabletop screen with her finger.

“Contact Civil Protection and find out what’s needed to secure the Village,” Benedict said to another officer. “Find out from Laguna how long before they can assist.” General Harrod and the Liaison to the World Ship Summit appeared on Bloom’s console. She apprised them of the situation.

“Have the Protectorate deploy the Peacekeepers to cut off access to the World Ship Reserve,” the Liaison said.

“My Security Chief’s taking care of that as we speak,” Bloom replied.

Across the room, Benedict had jacked a video boom onto his headset and was linxed in to Police Chief Sharon Raven in Laguna and he was speaking with his civilian counterpart while information scrolled directly across his vision.

“We have civilians at the gates,” another aide called. “They want in!”

“Get them inside and head them down into the shelters,” Bloom barked, turning back to Benedict, “Exo; what’s happening with the Peacekeepers?”

“The Protectorate’s Peacekeepers are being deployed,” he reported, “and we now have a preliminary casualty list.” His tone at this was now grimmer.

“What are the numbers?” Bloom asked.

“At the airfield, five dead...seventeen injured, twenty more unaccounted for. There’s an estimated count of over three hundred dead in the Village.”

“Put everyone not on defence onto the rescue,” Bloom said.

She was about to turn back to the tabletop where an alarm sound signalled another set of explosions when the command center itself was hit. The explosion rocked the building, throwing everyone from their feet and plunging them into a thunderous darkness.

Laura and Allison had finally coaxed James out of the apartment. He went grudgingly, but admitted to himself that seeing Allison in clubwear was well worth it.

“This is our favourite club,” Allison told James when they arrived at Freebase, a Sens club that catered to the tox crowd with heavy beat dance music and flashy surrealistic lighting and décor.

Freebase served alcohol, hallucinogens, narcotics and other recreational drugs at the bar. As Allison, Laura and James bought and consumed half-doses of E from a scantily-clad waitress, he found himself recalling why he’d

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once enjoyed the club scene so much. As the fast-acting Ecstasy began taking hold they made their way out onto the dance floor. It wasn't long before the three of them were stoned, sweaty and sensuously moving against one another, the music seeming to control them. James tried to concentrate his dancing on Allison, wanting so much to touch and be touched by her, but concentration was difficult. Whenever Laura, or for that matter anyone else brushed up against him, he found himself pulled into that experience. Several times James found himself engaged in dances with strangers, being drawn back into Allison and Laura's circle. Often he simply remembered he was here with them and turned around to marvel at the sight of the two of them dancing together, pressed and grinding together like lovers. Then they would pull him back and they would dance together some more.

Finally they retired from the dance floor to one of the upper levels of the club, Laura and Allison pulling James away from where he had been standing next to a bus-sized subwoofer relishing in the way the violent vibrations from the giant speaker seemed to be displacing him in space and time. The three of them collapsed in a sinuous heap, drinking concentrated fruit juice over crushed ice, brought over by a nearly-nude waiter whose only covering was boots, a silver thong and a money belt.

"God, I love the service in this joint!" Allison said, approvingly.

James lit a cigarette from his pack, his head throbbing and the sweaty heat of Allison and Laura electric against his chest. The Sens music was unbelievably loud; jarring psychedelic sounds with almost no clear pattern to the noise. Rhythm was dead; raw sound was the new music aesthetic. Suddenly the crowds started screaming and cheering and it took James a long moment, still buzzing and still recovering from more than an hour's non-stop dancing, to realize why. The music had changed, the noise shifting subtly around a new sound: the crystalline wailing of Shipsong. The spinner had manipulated the alien tempo and notes somehow, warping Shipsong's natural rhythms and octaves, layering it all back on itself. Somehow the Shipsong was still whole in the mix and made every sound in the club part of its symphony. While Laura and Allison seemed enraptured by the sound it was upsetting to James. It seemed to be encroaching on him, suffocating him.

"Shit," he said, pushing himself up and away from Allison and Laura. "I have to get out of here. I need some air."

He rushed past Allison and Laura who, stunned by his sudden egress, needed a moment before they were clear-headed enough to follow him. James

pushed his way down to the main level and out towards the front entrance. Forcing through the multitude and fighting to get out only made James' level of panic rise. He felt like he was suffocating; the air he was breathing in too hot, too humid. A crowd was already in the lobby, waiting to get inside the club itself. Stoned, freaking out because of what the Shipsong was dredging up within him, bordering on a drug-heightened panic attack, James ran into someone in line. He looked into the crazed face of a young woman, who unbelievably, was singing "Onward, Christian Soldier": the hymn Francis George Franck had screamed out after killing the Prof and just before taking his own life. It was more than James could take; he stormed into the street. It was cold and raining out and James began breathing deeply of the chilly air, trying to calm himself.

"James!"

James looked back. He had started across the street. Allison and Laura were closing on him.

"James, what's wrong?" Laura asked. "What's going on?"

"I...freaked out," he said. "I had to get out of the club and—." The entire front of the club blossomed into orange fire.

A hot blast of air threw James, Laura and Allison the rest of the way across the street. They were deafened instantly by a concussion they barely heard and then fell violently to earth. They were pelted with debris. James whited out, stunned into a daze for a few moments. When he came to, forcing himself into a sitting position, what he saw stupefied him. The club had been in the middle of the block. It and the buildings to either side of it had been levelled, turned into flaming rubble. The street was littered with debris. Every car on the street had had its windows shattered. People staggered from other buildings, wounded, bloody; mangled bodies littered the sidewalk. James only became aware of the deafening ringing in his ears as it subsided. He could hear people screaming, sirens approaching and unbelievably, more explosions, near and in the distance.

"James!"

He turned his head. Allison. She was dirty, cut...kneeling over Laura. He made his way over to them. Laura was struggling to breathe. Some jagged metal shard had cut through her and she was covered in blood, rasping breath in gurgling lungfuls.

"Oh, God..." James moaned.

He dug into a pocket for his linx. It had been shattered. Ambulances and fire trucks were pulling in, to either side of the street.

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“Go!” he bellowed desperately at Allison. “Go get help!”

Allison ran; no, limped, he noticed, as she had been cut in the leg. Allison was screaming towards the nearest ambulance. In the eternal moments it took for the paramedics to rush over, James couldn't help but think of how horribly familiar this all was; cradling Laura's head in his lap as she lay dying, choking on her own blood just as her father had, the same scared, shocked expression in her eyes, just as he had seen in her father's.

The lights flickered back to life and then flashed out again. Emergency lights flared as the sprinkler system began to deluge. Ghostly beams of glaring light from the emergency lights in the corners cast an eerie incandescence over the dead, black consoles and systems control panels in the situation room. Bloom picked herself up as did the rest of her crew. Benedict listened intently to his linx for a moment.

“They hit the south side of the building,” he said. “The structure's been very badly damaged; it could come down at any time.”

“Give the order to evacuate,” Bloom said. “Everyone at arms-ready. We'll fall back to the emergency shelters.” Bloom made sure her voice was heard by all. “Grab some portable consoles on the way out; we'll set up our command center there. Post guards at *all* shelter entrances. Anyone who fails password confirmation is to be shot on sight.”

There was nothing left to be said. Only the hiss of the water spraying down from the fire extinguishers and the wet footsteps of the evacuees was heard. Gunshots, sirens and the cold desert air greeted them as they made their way outside. Their wet clothes immediately began steaming as they made their way to the nearest shelter entrance. A soldier came running up, saluting quickly as he paced Colonel Bloom.

“We've engaged the enemy across the compound, ma'am!” he reported, as they reached the doors of the shelter.

A sandbagged machine gun nest had already been set up at its entrance.

“Who's the enemy?” Bloom demanded. “Do we have an ident, yet?”

“Enemy or enemies unknown!” the soldier replied as he and Bloom began ushering people inside. “Civilian clothes, but their hardware and tactics say very well trained!”

“We're receiving reports of similar attacks around the country,” Benedict said, pressing his linx into his ear. “And sporadic reports of other attacks around the world.”

The Minister had been escorted—under guard—to the Defence Ministry headquarters on Laurier Avenue. He was brought straight to a situation room in one of many sub-basements. A string of terrorist attacks had begun across the country at 1:13 A.M., Pacific Time. The attacks coincided with similar attacks in the United States, Mexico and across Europe and Asia. The Canadian attacks had taken place in the Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto, Montreal and Quebec City regions. Oddly enough Ottawa, the nation's Capital, had not been attacked. Invariably military, residential and commercial districts had been attacked by powerful bombs and weapons fire. The national death toll was catastrophic; already into the thousands. The Minister was immediately linked into a conference with the World Council Security Commission and his Defence colleagues from around the world, including two of his confederates from the Committee.

“The most violent attacks seem centered in and around the World Ship Preserve,” the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff remarked. The World Council Security Commissioner referred to his notes.

“It would appear that the attacks can be directly attributed to one group: The Church of the United Trinity. A primary analysis shows that in almost all the areas under attack there is a significant United Trinity Observant ministry present.”

“Yes,” the British Defence Minister said. “Italian police managed to intercept one of the attackers before she could get to her principle target, the Vatican. She claimed to be working for the Son of the Son of God; that's been Gabriel Ashe's self-ascribed moniker for years.”

“It certainly fits with the attacks on Professors Echohawk and Scott,” the Chairman observed, “and that means we must move against the United Trinity Observants immediately.”

“The World Council Security Commission has already called for an emergency session to do just that,” the Security Commissioner said.

“Good!” the Chairman said. “And when the World Council's passed that resolution, the United States will have taken care of Gabriel Ashe, ourselves.”

“Mister Chairman, I don't think you would be well advised to take unilateral action against Ashe,” the Security Commissioner said, uncomfortably.

“Gabriel Ashe has organized and orchestrated attacks against American Citizens, while on American soil,” the Chairman growled, “which means dealing with him is an internal matter outside of the World Council's

jurisdiction. The World Council can handle the United Trinity Observants. Gabriel Ashe is ours.”

“I don’t think it would be wise to make Gabriel Ashe into a martyr for every cult, militia and anti-government group out there, Mister Chairman,” the Minister cautioned.

“I am inclined to agree with my Canadian counterpart on this one, Chairman,” the British Minister of Defence added.

“And the United States is not about to sit back and discuss this in a *committee*,” the Chairman retorted.

The message was clear. The US was going it alone on this one; without the World Council, or the Committee.

From the time the attacks began to their violent conclusion with the deaths of most of Gabriel Ashe’s so-called Knights of Christ, five hours would elapse. Those who had not been killed had gone to ground in the Churches of the United Trinity. Police and military forces around the world surrounded these structures; now determined to have been heavily fortified. As the sun rose into the sky over the Village in the World Ship Preserve, Colonel Margaret Bloom herself stood at the barricade, Major Benedict at her side. Ostensibly they were standing guard, waiting for an arrest warrant to be issued by the Justice Department. However Bloom’s hope was for action, resistance, an attack that would justify making sure no one inside the Church came out breathing. They had a ten-meter perimeter around the stand-alone structure that had become Gabriel Ashe’s base of operations, with security guards posted in all the sewers and conduits going in and out of the Church and every other building within a kilometre. The Protectorate’s Peacekeepers were patrolling heavily as well in case Ashe and his followers had other means of escape. Bloom took another hard look at the structure of the Church. In many ways it was typical, with white stucco walls and a low, sloped roof. Rounded corners and adobe-type windows added a certain distinction to the building, but it could well have been an Irish Catholic parish in some bedroom-town suburb as opposed to the fortified bunker of a maniac who believed himself to be Jesus’ only begotten son. Bloom only hoped that Justice allowed her to go in with them. Otherwise, she and her soldiers would be on parade while Justice went in with FBI and ATF special units. Bloom had to remind herself that she wasn’t a foot soldier; she was a pilot. The closest she had come to ground combat had been when her plane had been shot down behind enemy lines during the Australian conflict. But she still

wanted to storm that damn compound. She hoped something, anything happened that would justify that neither Ashe nor any of his supporters made it out alive.

“What’s keeping Justice?” she muttered irritably. “I want action!”

She turned to Benedict, who was nodding his head as he listened to his linx. Benedict turned to her, his face grave.

“Was that Justice?” Bloom asked.

“No, ma’am,” he said. “You’d better switch to Channel 8A0N3W5. It’s about your daughter.”

When they reached the hospital, the trauma center was already overflowing. Emergency cases from the attacks were all over; James remembered seeing images like these on the Grid during the last serious war overseas; hundreds of wounded people flooding hospitals in what had become an urban war zone. Laura’s injuries were grave enough for her to be taken immediately into surgery. James and Allison had miraculously escaped with only minor injuries and were left to sit and wait. They waited two and a half hours to be triaged and another six hours to be seen by doctors. And still they waited, worried, wanting for news on Laura’s condition.

Allison bided her time by trying to contact the World Ship Summit, to let Laura’s mom know what had happened. There was no way to get through; all Grid linx lines into the World Ship Summit were prioritized and shut down to public access. When Allison returned to the waiting room, she realized why: The display console in the waiting room had been switched to INN, which was broadcasting coverage of the worldwide attacks. Allison was dumbstruck. And all James could do was ask over and over again under his breath the same two questions:

“How? Why?”

It was late morning when, finally, one of the surgeons who had been working on Laura came down.

“Your friend is out of surgery,” he said. “There was damage to her spine and right lung. We were able to repair her spinal injuries, though we still don’t know the extent of the neurological damage she might have suffered. Her right lung was shredded and had to be removed. We’re cloning a new one for her, but that process can take several weeks.”

“We—can we see her?” James asked.

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The doctor shook his head.

“She’s heavily sedated right now; unconscious and on a respirator to help her breathe. The best thing you can do is go home and get some rest. We have your linx codes. We’ll call if there’s any change.”

And so Allison and James made their silent way home. Allison wearily slipped her key into the lock and opened the door. She tried again to send a linx to the World Ship Summit. She got through and began trying to connect to a live operator who would be able to relay either her or her message to Colonel Bloom. As she struggled with this, James went to shower. Allison was just finishing the linx when James had finished his shower. He went into the living room and dressed in a clean t-shirt and shorts while Allison, wiping tears of frustration/rage/exhaustion from her eyes headed down the hall for her own much-needed shower. James opened up the sofa bed and lay down. He stared at the ceiling, trying not to think. The sun was already high in the sky and the living room was bright. James still felt that he might be able to sleep, if only to shut out everything he’d just been through. The violence he’d witnessed tonight; five hundred people alone dead inside Freebase, twelve thousand dead across the city; it was so much worse, so much more horrifying than anything else he’d ever witnessed, including the assassinations of Professors Scott and Echohawk. The two events were undeniably linked. James had survived both, but both had shattered his faith; in God, in Humanity. James had watched Mark Echohawk die, struggling for breath, drowning in his own blood. Tonight, he had watched Laura Echohawk very nearly suffer the same fate.

The shower stopped. James listened to the new gap in the silence of the apartment until he heard Allison’s footsteps padding down the hall, back towards the living room. She stood in the doorway, wrapped in her ratty bathrobe.

“James?” she asked hesitantly. “James...after all that’s happened...I—I really don’t want to be alone, right now.”

Allison led James back to her bedroom. James’ heart was hammering out an anticipatory tattoo; he wanted to be with Allison for a flood of reasons: He had a crush on her; the memory of the smell of sex on her skin from the other night on the balcony still haunted him; he didn’t want to be alone tonight any more than she did; after everything he’d been through in the last few days/

weeks James wanted to feel *alive*, again. Allison paused in the doorway, turning around to kiss James. She broke contact quickly and stared at him a moment. For a panicked instant, James thought she might have changed her mind, but she kept looking and he found himself growing hotter, staring into her contemplative, lustful jade green eyes. The moment took her and Allison pulled James into a tight embrace, sliding her hands under his shirt, feeling his back warm and muscular beneath her hands. James kissed her, relishing the taste of her mouth. He undid the belt of her robe, sliding his own hands around her back. They drew together and Allison found James hard already beneath his shorts as she pressed into him. She pulled him out of his shirt. Once free of it, James threw open her robe and scratched his nails roughly across the contour of her breasts. Allison gasped at the sharp sensation and then moaned as he squeezed. She shrugged free of her robe and drew him to her again for a deeper, longer kiss. She could feel the heat building between her thighs as his strong arms pulled her against him. His scent and the residue of soap on his skin permeated the air around her, an overwhelmingly clean, strong, man's smell. She scratched her nails down his back and under the waistband of his shorts, dug her hands into his buttocks, pulling him harder against her. James felt his cock press against her prickly pubic hair as she hitched her left leg over his right. He gasped with the sensation; part of him was in awe that he would be with Allison. He wanted her so much...he wanted to make her come, to make her want him the way he wanted her. James gasped again as Allison slid a hand down across his scrotum and gripped his cock, tightly.

"God..." he rasped.

James pushed Allison backwards into her room, dark from the heavy curtains over the window. He closed the door behind him, slamming it shut. They found their way to Allison's bed, climbing atop the covers. Allison leaned to light some candles on the shelf over her bed. James admired her backside shimmering in the candlelight, her red hair like silken fire spilling down against her pale skin. Allison turned around and smiled at catching him looking. She leaned back to watch him watch her. James blushed, embarrassed, not quite knowing why. Allison reached for him, pulling him onto the bed with her. They kissed for a long while, their hands caressing and exploring, bodies grinding into each other with wet determination. The only sounds in the candlelit room were their whispered sighs and gasps and the louder noise of the bed sheets rustling beneath them. Need slowly overtook them. James moved in Allison's hand, Allison pressing his calloused fingers

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harder against her sex. Finally, her need surpassed his. She pushed him down, wanting his kisses elsewhere. He turned around, giving her access to him. She clenched her legs around his head as he tasted her for the first time; she held him like that, relishing the contact before taking him in her hand and into her mouth. Their moans and cries grew louder, more desperate, as passion took hold. Allison came first, quickly, intensely and she rolled away from James while the strongest waves of sensation elapsed and before he could come. Sated but not satiated and James still very much in need of release, Allison straddled him, pressing her hands hard into his shoulders as she let him inside. She kissed him, tasting herself in his mouth as they made love, desperation and need still not lost to either of them. Soon her thrusting lost its slow deliberateness, gaining force and urgency. She took one of his hands away from her breasts and moved it down where she needed it more. Soon they were both thrusting, both crying out both aching in the throes of passion.

James dozed off while Allison had gone to wash up. Her return startled him awake, gasping, his heart thundering in his chest.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he lied, pushing back the death-dream’s terror by sheer force of will. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

Allison caressed his chest, playing in the hair that grew there, tickling his nipples.

“No regrets?” she asked.

“No,” James replied. “You?”

She smiled and bent to kiss him.

“None,” she answered. Allison retrieved a pack of cigarettes and an ashtray from the shelf over her bed. They each lit one, smoking in silence.

“I checked the linx,” she said. “No word on Laura.”

“I guess that’s a good thing.”

“I guess.”

She stared at him, seeing the faraway look in his eyes, visible in the candlelight and dawning daylight from outside.

“James...*are* you okay? Really?”

“I don’t know,” he said after a moment’s reflection. “I want to...I mean, this sounds stupid and selfish given what’s happened to Laura, tonight...but all this death...I keep thinking of my own. I need to know what’s out there. I can’t accept not knowing. I...I need something to believe in.”

“We’ll find it, James. I promise.”

As the United Trinity Observants' Knights of Christ began their attacks, another attack was about to take place. Argentinean military dictator Roberto Diaz was orchestrating an invasion force that was taking over South America. Among his arsenal of weapons was a laboratory-enhanced version of the deadly Kreutz virus. The strain was so dangerous that when American intelligence heard about it they immediately began taking steps to make sure the virus could never be deployed.

Diaz was at his retreat in the hilly countryside far beyond Buenos Aires. The compound was alight and alive in the night, a party going on in the large walled garden. Behind thick stone walls topped with battlements and heavily armed guards, the partygoers were sheltered from the ravages of the war that was tearing across South America; a war started by the fanatical madman who was in fact host of the evening's festivities. Captains of industry, military leaders, heads of state sympathetic to the Argentine Ambition, as the war was termed. All of General Diaz's allies were in attendance, while only a few hundred kilometres away bloody battles were being waged by Diaz's troops. An aide approached Diaz and spoke to him briefly. Diaz nodded, replying. The aide departed and Diaz continued to work the crowd. The general had no way of knowing that his guards in the foothills had been taken out and that even now he was centered in the site of a high-powered sniper rifle. Colonel Isaac Jude watched Diaz impassively through the night-scope of his rifle. He had a clear shot.

"King in check," he said quietly, calmly into his headset. "Stand by for endgame. All pieces' status."

"Rooks One and Two standing by. Package secure."

They had a sample of the Kreutz virus.

"Rook Three standing by," came the next reply. "The castle is in check."

The bioweapons production lab that had grown the Kreutz virus was wired, ready for complete incineration.

"Rooks Four, Five and Six in position. Egress golden."

"Rooks Seven and Nine in position. Pawns at West covered."

"Rooks Eight and Ten in position. Pawns at East covered."

"Rooks Eleven and Twelve reporting. Rendezvous is clear."

Jude tightened his finger ever so slightly on the trigger of his rifle. One squeeze and Diaz would be dead. Argentine rebels were already waiting to claim the victory and storm the grounds of the retreat and presidential headquarters. Dissenters in the military ranks would be mutinying as soon as

word spread. With the head gone, the body of the monster that was Diaz's barbaric organization would collapse. The United States would be able to lead the Allied World Armies through the South American blockade and mop up the rest of this mess. Jude's finger tightened a little more. A twitch of his finger and this operation would be complete.

"Checkmate," he announced.

"Stand by, Knight," Control's voice came through his earpiece, startling him.

Jude relaxed all tension on the trigger. He took a moment to re-focus his aim and keep Diaz in his sights.

"The King is in check! Endgame ready to run!"

"Stand by, Knight," Control reiterated. "We are receiving new orders."

"In the middle of an operation? We've had operatives in the field for *months*, planning this!"

"Stand by..." Control called back. "Authentication's coming through. Continue with endgame and fall back to the rendezvous. When Match One is complete, another team will take the board for Match Two."

The second phase of their operation was the most crucial. Jude and his troops were supposed to ensure the rebels scored victories against Diaz's army that the rebels had no real chance in hell of winning. Another team moving in at this juncture would be dangerous; the rebels were already wary of Jude, who had worked in Argentina a total of five days in the last eight months. A new team would be completely mistrusted.

"Profile's not nearly complete!" Jude protested. "Why the fuck are we being redeployed?"

"I relay the orders, Knight," Control replied. "I don't analyze them."

Jude was silent, waiting a few more moments as he got the money shot he wanted; the back of Diaz's head.

"King in check," he hissed.

Jude squeezed the trigger.

"Checkmate."

The back of Diaz's head blew apart and a few seconds later the roar of a powerful explosion was heard. Jude had already dismantled his rifle and was rushing through the darkness to the rendezvous, when the first sirens wailed.

Bloom sat in her office cradling her head in her hand. The voice message from Allison had said it all. Bloom listened to it over and over again before fully absorbing it. She had left Major Benedict at the barricades, returning to

the base in an attempt to raise the hospital where her daughter was. Their Grid spars were shut, overworked by the calls flooding in from people like her, trying to find out about wounded loved ones. She'd requested emergency leave. General Harrod had denied it due to the ongoing crisis. Bloom had left Major Benedict at the barricades to wait for the Department of Justice. She was expecting to hear from him any moment, now.

Major Benedict watched the armoured transports roll up. Immediately, he knew something was wrong. The FBI and ATF didn't use Rangers, which were wide, high and boxy truck-like vehicles. They used smaller transports that could easily be disguised as civilian cargo haulers. The Rangers were, in fact, almost exclusively used by the military. Benedict stood at the head of the barricade with Police Chief Sharon Raven, who had been coordinating on behalf of the Protectorate's Peacekeepers.

"What the hell is this?" she asked.

"No idea," Benedict replied.

The lead Ranger halted and a passenger immediately debarked, heading over to Benedict. A colonel's rank was pinned to the man's uniform. Benedict saluted sharply.

"Major James Benedict?" the colonel asked, returning the salute.

"Yes Colonel."

"Isaac Jude," Colonel Jude said. "Major, you and your men are relieved." Jude turned to the police chief, "You and yours as well, ma'am. This is now a strictly military operation and it has been put under my exclusive command."

"Do I or do I not have command of this operation, General?" Bloom demanded angrily of the image on her screen. "Would you mind clarifying that for me?"

"Don't think the new promotion gives you more clout with me, *Colonel* Bloom," Harrod growled. "You watch how you address me."

"I think you can explain to me why my Chief of Security's been removed from the conflict," she replied, "General, *sir*."

"The conflict is no longer within the bounds of his jurisdiction, *Colonel*. Nor is it within the bounds of yours."

"What?"

"You are in command of Fort Arapaho and the project for which Fort Arapaho was commissioned: The Ship Survey Expedition. In collusion with

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the Southwestern Protectorate and the Laguna District, the Department of the Army is in charge of security on the World Ship Preserve. The Village and Gabriel Ashe are outside your jurisdiction.”

“How can you log us out after what we were hit with here?”

“You and your personnel are not part of this operation, Colonel. Accept it and move on.”

He terminated the link then, leaving her staring at a blank screen. She turned to look at Benedict.

“Who the fuck is this son of a bitch, anyway?”

“Colonel Jude,” Benedict replied, sitting on the other side of Bloom’s desk. “He’s a Special Forces type, strictly black ops. I’ve actually dealt with him in the past, Colonel; before I was assigned to Concord 3.”

“You don’t say,” Bloom growled. “Please, Major. Tell me all about it.”

“I’m afraid that information is still classified, Colonel.”

“Really?” Bloom said, giving him scrutinous regard. “One day we’re going to have to sit down and talk about all the things we’re not supposed to sit down and talk about.”

“One day, Colonel.”

They sat for a long moment, in silence. Finally, Bloom spoke:

“They’re going to delete Ashe, aren’t they? And we’re not cleared to know about it. They don’t want me involved because of my position in the Ship Survey Expedition.”

“That would be my assessment,” Benedict replied.

Bloom considered this a long moment. Considered Ashe and what one of his followers had done to Mark; what they had done to Laura. Considered the nightmare being faced by hundreds of people around the world as Ashe’s followers ran rampant wherever they could. Bloom took a long, hard moment and considered the black ops that was going down here and the reasons behind it.

“Good,” she said at last, “I hope they turn the bastard into stew. How are rescue operations coming?”

“They’re on schedule,” Benedict replied, as they made their way from the nearly silent command center, “but the people we’re pulling from the wreckage are in bad shape. We’ve pulled about two hundred and fifty people from the wreckage and we’re still digging the rest out. There’s still nearly five hundred trapped in the rubble. It looks like we have to expect a forty to fifty percent fatality rate among the casualties.”

“God dammit,” Bloom hissed. “We could have stopped this right after

Mark died, if they'd have thrown this bastard out! What the fuck's the death toll going to climb to, now?"

"Colonel, it was out of our hands."

"And it's been taken out of our hands, again." Bloom retorted bitterly, as they left the Administration and Command building.

They could see the barracks building from here; a twelve-floor tower, though it was barely recognizable as such anymore. The front half of the building was gone, the first five floors having been destroyed by the suicide bomb blast, the top half having caved in upon itself.

"What the hell did that bastard have strapped to his back?" Bloom asked.

"Our best guess is that the bomber had a backpack full of C-17 or a similar compound," Benedict replied. "We'll know more, I suppose, once the investigation is underway."

Benedict paused, the headset in his ear chiming.

"Colonel, we've just gotten word." He said, "They're storming the Church of the United Trinity Observants."

INQUESTS AND INQUISITIONS

The Ship had been instructed to establish communication with whatever intelligence found it by teaching them its common language. The Ship, however, had had millennia to consider the possibility that the beings who found it might not be able to grasp the complexities and subtleties of the language. Designed to be able to evolve beyond its initial programming, the Ship decided it might become necessary to learn the common language of whatever beings found it. After all, time and again history had proven the difficulty of communication between alien beings. The Ship spent centuries revising the tutorial for its common language and devising the means to learn its discoverers' common language.

And so when the Ship unearthed itself it began monitoring as much of this world's communications as it could. It catalogued hundreds of different languages and dialects; spoken, written and gesticulated. The beings of this world used the radio spectrum to send audio, visual and data streams and the Ship was able to exploit this as it tried to learn the language used most often on this world. The Ship had not anticipated the insight it would glean into this world's cultures. Like many primitive species, this world's many divergent (and often opposing) cultures were seeped in violence. The Ship catalogued great lists of both simulated and actual violence in the recorded visual media. The Ship was able to discern what was real and what wasn't only through

careful study. In fictitious violence it was usually the same beings who suffered or inflicted suffering on others, throughout various recordings. The Ship witnessed one being die no less than seventy times in seventy different recordings. And in many cases that proved their evident fictional nature, creatures and technology that couldn't possibly have existed were the ones inflicting and ultimately having violence inflicted upon them.

But the level of real violence, from their recreations to their public events to their interpersonal encounters disturbed the Ship. How had such a primitive, violent species attained such a level of technological advancement without self-destructing? There had recently been a sudden period of violent chaos: a series of murderous attacks by affiliated groups of beings against their parent civilizations as a whole. The representations the Ship gleaned from current events broadcasts seemed to indicate that this had been linked to the discovery of the Ship. This was not unusual among primitive cultures encountering an alien race for the first time. However the level of violence that had occurred during the attacks wasn't encouraging.

The Ship continued to study their languages, in hopes of better determining why these creatures were prone to such violence. In the meantime, it would continue to teach these beings to communicate with it, through the common language. And it would continue to watch and to wait. The Ship had much to decide about the beings who had discovered it and none of it easy.

TRANSCRIPT

INTERACTIVE NEWS NETWORK NEWSCAST

PLAIN TEXT FORMAT

**PATH: INN<>BROADCAST>>HEADLINES>>NIGHT
OF BLOOD>>UPDATE><**

ANCHOR

**GOOD MORNING AND WELCOME TO THE INTERACTIVE
NEWS NETWORK. AROUND THE WORLD AT THIS HOUR
POLICE AND MILITARY FORCES ARE STILL FIGHTING
PITCHED BATTLES AGAINST THE HEAVILY ARMED
FOLLOWERS OF THE CHURCH OF THE UNITED TRINITY**

THE UNEARTHING

OBSERVANTS AFTER WHAT IS BEING CALLED THE NIGHT OF BLOOD. THE CALL TO ARMS FOR THIS CULT SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN ISSUED BY THEIR LEADER, GABRIEL ASHE. ALTHOUGH THE OBSERVANTS HAVE ISSUED NO STATEMENT CONCERNING THIS VIOLENCE, INTELLIGENCE ABOUT THE CULT WOULD SUGGEST THAT IT IS PART OF A PLAN TO STOP WHAT THEY SEE AS THE IDOLATROUS WORSHIP OF THE SHIP AROUND THE WORLD. THE SOURCE OF THE VIOLENCE INDEED CAME FROM THE WORLD SHIP PRESERVE, WHERE A SERIES OF LATE-NIGHT BOMBINGS BY FOLLOWERS OF GABRIEL ASHE SET THE STAGE FOR THE VIOLENCE THAT HAS HIT SO MANY WORLD CAPITALS THIS MORNING.

PATH: INN<>HEADLINES>>REPORT FROM THE WORLD SHIP PRESERVE>>UPDATE><

WALTER QUINCY ROBERTSON

I AM STANDING HERE THIS MORNING, BROADCASTING ON THE BORDER BETWEEN THE LAGUNA DISTRICT OF THE SOUTHWESTERN PROTECTORATE, NEW MEXICO AND THE WORLD SHIP PRESERVE. SINCE 1:15 A.M. LOCAL TIME THIS AND EVERY OTHER HIGHWAY ROAD AND TRAIL INTO THE PRESERVE HAS BEEN UNDER BLOCKADE BY BOTH US ARMY AND PROTECTORATE PEACEKEEPERS. FROM WHAT WE HAVE WITNESSED OVERNIGHT WE KNOW THAT A SMALL WAR IS BEING WAGED WITHIN THE PRESERVE. THERE HAVE BEEN NUMEROUS EXPLOSIONS, GUNFIRE...WE HAVE BEEN TOLD NOTHING, BUT GIVEN SIMILAR INCIDENTS OF MAYHEM AROUND THE WORLD OVER THE LAST NINE HOURS WE KNOW THAT THE CAUSE OF THIS MADNESS IS GABRIEL ASHE AND THE UNITED TRINITY OBSERVANTS.

“And by morning, the Son of the Lamb will become the Scapegoat,” he muttered, freezing the image on the portable console.

Those who had stolen the souls of people of this world, those who sought to use the Ship for their ends were now calling Him a criminal. But He knew He would be remembered forever as the Saviour. But they had to try and make the world hate Him. Otherwise Prophecy would not come true. The House of God on Earth itself would reject Him. The Catholic Church, which so blasphemously spoke of itself as that same House of God, had already fulfilled that part of the divinations. Now, the House of Man would oblige Him by fulfilling the next part. His Ascension was imminent. For all was proceeding exactly as the Angel foretold. He looked out at the Ship and revelled in the sound of its seductive song. There was only a short distance to go before He was standing on its golden surface: the slow climb down to the Ship, itself. The Angel had shown Him in the Dream how the canyon wall had collapsed where the Salado Falls had until recently flowed. Now with the Rio Salado diverted the Falls had become a rock climber's challenge. But the Angel had shown Him how to get down. And so down towards the Ship, the Chariot of God, He would go, all the while knowing His enemy was above, hunting Him, coming for Him as he had from the beginning of these last events, before His Ascension.

“Rook One, do we have intel?”

Jude never faced away from the building across the way. A double barricade of mobile shield walling stood between him and the macadam road dividing them from the Church of the United Trinity. Rook One worked behind him, while Rooks Three and Four did a final weapons check. Control and Rooks Two and Five were skyside in the helicopter. Rook One linked the data to the headset Jude wore. The information was transmitted directly onto his eye from the micro scanner boom. He read the information using a series of eye movements and blinks to scroll through. Hardware twenty years from being low-tech enough to go public was at his command. Jude swivelled the viewer boom up and turned to Rook Three.

“Let me have the McAllister .30 calibre.”

“We going to pick them off one by one, Knight?” Rook Four asked, jokingly.

“Stow that, soldier,” Jude chided. “No. Just giving them a sign that their End Times have come.”

As they spoke, Rook Three retrieved the specified rifle from its case, snapped its components together and produced the ammunition magazine for Jude. The colonel took the gun and leaned over the side of a low section of

plating. A flip of a switch on the bulky scope and he had a brilliant blue and yellow CG image of the interior of the Church of the United Trinity Observants.

“Knight to Control,” he said into his mike. “Target in check, using TMI scanning. Link to scope view line and confirm target acquisition.”

Jude had selected a target at the far end of the church itself, a stoned mad faithful member of Ashe’s congregation, who seemed to be gently caressing an assault rifle cradled like a newborn in his lap. The shot was set up perfectly so that the front of the person’s head would blow off, sending bone, blood and grey matter flying right at Ashe’s altar and hopefully right into his face. With this gun and this scope, Jude was confident he could make the shot. Jude wanted to send them a message. He wanted them to know they were being hunted. He wanted Ashe to know. He wanted Ashe to die last. He contemplated this, while waiting for the helicopter to position itself in such a way that its own Thermal/Magnetic Imager could lock on to the church and link to his scope.

“Target acquisition confirmed, Knight,” Control said.

“Target in check,” Jude said, leaning into the gun, staring into the scope.

He watched his oblivious target, knowing what his prey did not, that they would be dead, in seconds. Jude felt no remorse, no sympathy for his target. They would die caught with their guard down, believing they were somewhere safe, somewhere secure. Jude squeezed the trigger of the sniper rifle, ever so slowly, ever so gently. There was a hollow sound as the gun fired and in the next instant, Ashe’s apostle’s head was blown off.

“Checkmate,” Jude said, dryly, a grimly satisfied smile on his cold features.

He opened His eyes with a start as something hot and wet sprayed Him. Ashe heard His disciples scream in alarm and watched as one of His flock fell, their head vaporized. Ashe stood up, trying to understand where the shot had come from. His Apostles moved to make a human shield around Him. Such was their love of Him that where His Father’s Apostles had betrayed and denied Him, His Apostles were ready to die in His Name. A moment later the back wall of His Church rattled with gunshots and His followers in the back rows convulsed as they were sprayed with bullets. As the doors into His Church were blown inwards by His enemies’ weapons, Ashe was ushered by His loving Apostles back into the Sacristy and the Sanctuary they hoped was beyond.

Ashe's followers were stoned sitting ducks for Jude and his troops. He and his men wore full body armour and they moved in quickly and ruthlessly on their targets. Rooks Three and Four were the vanguard, equipped with short-barrelled "house-cleaner" automatic rifles, hosing down the opposition inside. Rook One was covering them from behind, taking out anyone they hadn't cleaned up with his assault rifle. Jude took up the rear, rifle at the ready. He was after only one target. His men could handle the rest, but Gabriel Ashe was his. As his guard fanned out into the church Jude shut out the screams for help and surrender coming from the panicked followers of this doomed cult. Some tried to organize themselves enough to return fire, but had no chance to respond. None of it mattered. Jude had spotted his prey heading out into the back of the church.

"Target sighted, Control. Moving to the rear of the building. Get me intel."

"We're moving around for scan of the structure now, Knight," came Control's reply. Jude climbed up past the altar towards the doors towards the back of the building as all sounds of gunfire ceased. There were a few moans, weak and frightened, but they would soon each be silenced by single gunshots. Jude listened to his footsteps echo on the dais of the altar.

"Area secure!" Rook Three declared.

Rooks One and Four circulated, firing into the heads of the wounded survivors. Jude approached the open doorway into the sacristy.

"Knight, you have one to the right of the door, on the other side of that wall," Control called.

Jude said nothing, simply tracked his rifle to the right of the doorway. He fired twice and watched as a corpse fell across the threshold in front of him.

"Removed," Jude said.

"You're clear into the next room, Knight."

"Roger that."

Jude moved through, finding a deserted antechamber. A large locked steel cabinet dominated the back wall of the room and stood guard to the left of an open doorway, leading down a hall.

"What do I have here, Control?" Jude asked into his mike.

"That passage leads to the office area," Control said. "The only other exit leads to Ashe's private suite. The hall and offices are clear but thermals show six people in the suite. No movement on the perimeter. He's still in the building."

"All pieces' status?" Jude called.

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“Rook Four, guarding flank,” Rook One replied. “Rooks One and Three en route to the residence building. Do the orders stand?”

“Confirmed, Rook One,” Jude said. “Take out armed resistance only. All other targets are live capture.”

“Roger that,” Rook One came back.

Jude continued into the back of the church, towards Ashe’s residence.

Colonel Bloom waited irritably outside the airfield’s terminal as the incoming jump plane finished its drop from orbit, coming in on a near-vertical landing a few dozen meters from her position. The plane’s engines cycled down and the hatch in its side opened a ramp unfolding. There was still smoke rising from the crater that was once the base’s fuel depot. Bloom could still hear gunfire reports from the Village; the Night of Blood had barely ended and already the World Ship Summit had sent a major domo into its midst. Bloom watched as a tall, heavysset man debarked from the plane. He spotted Bloom and strode over.

“Good morning, Colonel Bloom,” he said, extending his hand. “My name is Robert Adams and I’m from the World Council Special Oversight Commission.”

“We’ve been expecting you, Mister Adams,” Bloom said, not taking his hand. Instead she turned about and began walking for the terminal. “To be honest, I’m surprised you’re here so soon. Gabriel Ashe still hasn’t been...apprehended and no arrests have been made.”

Adams smiled pleasantly. *Relax*, the smile said. *I’m a nice guy. I’m friendly. I’m not here on an Oversight witch-hunt.*

“Well,” Adams said, “we’re all anxious for your work with the Ship Survey Expedition to continue.”

“Work?” Bloom repeated, turning to face Adams. “Right now, work is the least of my concerns. My daughter is in a coma, Mister Adams, in hospital in Los Angeles. She was *severely* injured in last night’s attacks. Meanwhile because of the ongoing emergency, I am required to remain here while you complete your investigation. I buried by ex-husband less than two weeks ago. I have no desire to bury my daughter as well. We still have people trapped in the rubble of what once was Fort Arapaho. Despite our best efforts and the resources available, we expect to pull out more dead bodies than live. Right now my work with the SSE, Mister Adams, is the farthest thing from my mind.”

“I...I’m sorry,” Adams stammered.

Bloom turned back around, quick marching, gesturing for Adams to follow.

Jude dropped two more of Ashe's fanatical followers as he crossed into the first floor of the residence. Both had been spotted by Control from his vantage aboard a helicopter full of sophisticated scanning equipment. One of the pair had actually managed to get a shot off at Jude before being killed. The shot went wide, but it was still startling.

"Jesus Christ!"

Jude pressed a hand reflexively against his earpiece at his subordinate's exclamation.

"What is it, Rook Three?"

"They're all dead!"

"Who?"

"The cultists," Rook Three came back. "They're all dead; every last fucking one of them!"

"How?"

"It looks like poison," Rook One replied over the commlink. "There are a few who seem to have been strangled, but they're all dead."

"Close the hunt then," Jude ordered. "Call in the locals and the paramedics to evacuate the bodies; tell them we have people in pursuit of Ashe and the last of his followers."

"Confirmed, Knight," Rook One said.

Jude continued through Ashe's suite, heading now up the stairs to the second level.

"Knight: one on the landing around the corner to your left," Control warned.

Jude froze. A few more steps and he'd be in range of his weapon before he could get a bead on this threatened ambush. He loaded a small grenade into his weapon's launcher and aimed for the landing above. He fired and tuck-rolled back down the stairs as the explosion concussed. Shrapnel and debris scattered across the stairs and the smell of smoke and torn flesh was strong in the air. Jude raced to the landing. The walls and carpet in the blast zone of his grenade were wrecked; charred and smouldering. His would-be attacker was now sprawled where she had been thrown by the blast: down the hallway leading to the upper rooms of the suite, still alive but dying, her weapon dropped in the blast, the right side of her body a torn and bloodied ruin. She looked at him hatefully as he put two shots in her head. Three left, one of them Ashe.

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“Knight, we have egress out the back!” Control called. “Three down the hall to the right.”

Jude charged in that direction, weapon to bear. He watched as the last of Ashe’s followers dropped out the window. Jude fired, uselessly. He reached the window and was shocked to see that they’d dropped down an aluminium chute underground. He dropped another grenade down the chute and took cover. The explosion belched a rush of air and smoke.

“Control, they had a rabbit hole! Do a ground sweep; I think they’re heading to the sewers.”

“Roger that, Knight,” Control replied.

Jude contemplated dropping down the chute and thought better of it. If he’d nailed anyone down there, they were dead. If not, there was no telling what the inside of that chute looked like. It could be blown to Christ from the grenade, or worse, it could be booby-trapped and waiting for him.

“Son of a bitch,” he swore and then issued the command for his troops to gather at the back of the building, to start the hunt for Ashe as he himself made his way down and out.

“Good morning, everyone,” Adams stood at the far end of the mess hall, the executive staff of Fort Arapaho’s various departments gathered around him. “I am Robert Adams and as you have all no doubt been made aware I am here from the World Council Oversight Commission to investigate the events that occurred here last night. Now, it is important for you all to know that my investigation here is completely separate from the World Ship Summit’s inquest. Their query concerns the Ship and whether or not in light of current events there should be continued exploration of the Ship.”

Adams paused, studying his audience. The warm reception he’d gotten from Colonel Bloom seemed to have spread to the rest of the troops.

“My investigation will center on how this facility was so easily breached, last night. Normally, I know this would be done by an American military review board; however given that this base is under the direct authority of the World Council I will be heading the inquiry. I will not be interviewing everyone, nor will I be interviewing all department heads. This isn’t a hunt for blame, ladies and gentlemen. This investigation is to determine what happened and why and what can be done about it.”

“Knight, we have them,” Control announced.

Jude turned to Rooks One, Three and Four. All of them wore the same

expression: that of a hunter who has found fresh tracks leading to their prey.

“Location?”

“Five kilometres southwest of you,” Control replied as Jude and his personnel made for their transport. “They seem to be heading for the South Gate.”

“They’re heading for the Ship,” Jude growled as Rook One sped the Ranger off towards the South Gate from the Village.

“They’re going the wrong way, Knight,” Control advised.

“Not if they’re making for the Rio Salado,” Jude countered. “Which is exactly where that son of a bitch is heading.”

“Take the Rio Salado riverbed to the drop-off and try and climb seven kilometres straight down?” Rook One asked. “Colonel, that would take the better part of the day.”

“I don’t think he cares,” Jude said, “but either way Ashe won’t reach the drop-off.”

They sped down the streets of the Village even now still mostly deserted after the madness of the previous night. Soon they could see the helicopter in the sky ahead, on the trail of Jude and his two remaining followers.

“We have them, Knight,” Control called. “Target in check.”

“Arm mag pulse and fire,” Jude said.

But then, over his headset, sounds of alarm and panic could be heard:

“Jesus Christ! Pull up! Pull up!”

“Fuck! Fuck!” and then an electronic wailing noise.

There was a burst of static, a thundering sound and then more sounds of electronic distress before Rook Two came on the link.

“Knight, we’ve been hit; we’ve been hit! They had some kind of artillery; we’re going down!”

“What is the target’s position?” Jude asked with alarm. “Are they attainable?”

But all he heard in reply was shouting and panic from the helicopter’s instrument panel. There was a violent noise and then a moment’s silence, where static was dominant.

“Rook Five to Knight,” came the signal a few moments later. “We’re down. Target en route for the riverbed. They’re your kill now, sir. It’s out of our hands.”

“Understood, Rook Five,” Jude said. “Knight out.”

Jude turned to Rook One, who nodded grimly. He pressed the accelerator to the floor and the Ranger shot from the confines of the Village into the open

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desert beyond. They were going after the son of a bitch and they had no intention of failing. Jude had no desire to ever return to this patch of desert and the failure it represented. Even a record of black ops and other sundry deleted could carry bad marks and his failure to suppress the Type Seven Alpha that had become known worldwide as the Ship was doubtlessly the worst on his record. Killing Gabriel Ashe would by no means expunge that blight, but it would go a long way towards soothing Jude's pride and redeeming him in the eyes of his superiors, those who controlled not only his missions but his expendability. Jude didn't want or need to be red-shirted on his next op.

They were nearing the riverbed. Ashe would be somewhere ahead of them; not yet in the dry gulch, but closer to it than Jude. Nevertheless, the advantage would be Jude's. When Ashe finally descended into the riverbed Jude would be there waiting. He only wished he had the advantage of airborne support, but that was no longer an option. They'd nail Ashe, that was certain. Jude had no interest in letting him get near to the Ship.

"Hello, Major Benedict. Have a seat, please," Adams said. He referred to the console on his desk; the small, thin screen held Benedict's debriefing following last night's events. None of the command staff, not Bloom, Benedict, Kiang in communications, or Sorenson in operations, none of them had slept since the night before the attacks. Now this investigation, coming atop frayed nerves and lost sleep was the last thing they needed.

"Do you want a copy of your debriefing before we begin?" Adams asked. Benedict shook his head.

"No, sir," he said, "I believe I'm familiar enough with last night's events." Adams nodded. He adjusted a minicam, so that it was centered on Benedict.

"Now...the attacks by the Church of the United Trinity Observants started at 1:11 A.M., Pacific Standard Time," Adams said. "The first explosions were recorded in the Village at around that time as well. A few moments later the main hangars, fuel depot and air traffic control tower here at Fort Arapaho were hit. Am I correct?"

"Yes sir."

"Which means the suicide bombers had to have entered the base several minutes prior to the attack," Adams said, switching to a different file on his console. "Major Benedict, Fort Arapaho's airfield is at the far end of the base, closest to the perimeter fence on the edge of Ship's Canyon. Between it and

the main entrance are training grounds, a motor pool, the hospital facility, barracks, the Officers' Club, the officers' and non-com mess halls, the base's water treatment facility and the administration and operations complex. And the land bridge between the Ship and Fort Arapaho, called the Ramp by locals, is patrolled with security sensor nets placed every ten meters along the land bridge. The fort's perimeter is guarded by two separate sets of fencing, each topped with razor wire. Both interior and exterior fence lines are embedded with breach alarm sensors so we know no one cut the fence. And again as on the Ramp there are sensor nets set up all the way along the fence perimeter. How exactly, then, did three terrorists get past base security? They certainly didn't walk through either of the two main gates."

"We believe they entered through the sewers," Benedict replied evenly.

"And having come through the sewers, smelling of filth, emerging into the middle of the base, how is it that they made it to the airfield unchallenged?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know? But you're the base's security officer in addition to being the second in command. How is it you don't know?"

"Are you kidding?" Benedict retorted. "Because my people are still reviewing last night's recordings, Mister Adams; the investigation's only a few hours old."

"So then if I asked you how a second wave of thirteen terrorists, eleven gunmen and another two suicide bombers, got through to hit the barracks and the operations center your answer would be the same?"

"No."

At this, Adams arched his eyebrows.

"No?"

"No," Benedict replied. "They hid themselves among the civilians we allowed onto the base and into the shelters."

"Why were civilians allowed onto this base?"

"Colonel Bloom ordered them let in. They were fleeing the attacks in the village. Are you suggesting we should have turned them back into the gunfire and bombings that ransacked the Village?"

"No. I'm suggesting Colonel Bloom erred when she allowed the civilians onto the base unchecked."

"There wasn't exactly time to check Smart Cards, Mister Adams."

"There they are," Rook One said.

"We have visual contact with the target, Control," Jude reported.

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“Moving in to engage the enemy now.”

The Ranger sped forward, closing the gap between the two vehicles. Ashe seemed to be riding in the back of the vehicle with his two followers driving and riding shotgun. The driver looked into his rearview and saw Jude’s Ranger approaching fast. The shotgun passenger turned to look. Ashe remained seated facing forward.

“No weapons visible,” Jude said. “Let’s take them out.”

Jude and Rooks Three and Four made ready their weapons, the latter two opening the rear canopy to stand up, with their rifles trained on the vehicle ahead. Jude leaned out his side window as the two vehicles drew to less than one car length of each other. Jude and Rooks Three and Four opened fire. The passengers in the open-top vehicle before them flailed under the assault, all three fatally shot within seconds. As the vehicle lost control, swerving left and right, Rook One backed the Ranger off a little more. When the vehicle turned wide enough Jude fired, taking out the front tires. The transport overturned and started into its death roll. Rook One brought the Ranger to a full stop and there Jude and his men waited until the target vehicle had come to rest. Both passengers and the driver had been thrown clear of the transport as it crashed. All three of them would most certainly have been killed during the rollover if their bodies hadn’t already been riddled with bullets. Jude stood surveying the scene as his troops checked the bodies. As each was overturned so that they could get a look at the faces of the last of their prey, the realization hit them.

“He’s not here.”

“What?” Jude demanded, striding angrily over to Rook Four.

“Colonel, Ashe isn’t here!”

Jude looked at the corpses. Two of them were obviously Ashe’s apostles, but the third had been gagged and his hands and feet had been taped together. The accident had torn the tape loose, but there was no doubt that the third body was that of a hostage.

“Son of a *bitch!*” Jude roared.

He turned, marching back to the Ranger.

“Control,” he called into his mike, “we lost the King. They used a fucking decoy! He was not in the transport. Repeat: King was not in the transport. Gabriel Ashe is loose.”

They rendezvoused back at the crash-landed helicopter. By then an ESU had been dispatched by Fort Arapaho and to the helicopter. None of Jude’s

personnel were injured, so the rescue team was ordered out.

“What do we do now?” Control asked. “The parameters of the mission have been completely scrapped.”

“We proceed with the mission’s final objective,” Jude said. “The extermination of Gabriel Ashe. He’s going to the Ship. To get him we have to get there too and we have to do so according to directives: Zero involvement of on-site military personnel.”

“That scenario’s no longer valid,” Control said. “The only way to get inside the Ship ahead of Ashe is via the Ramp. That means going through Fort Arapaho.”

“Then we don’t take the Ramp,” Jude said.

“There’s no way to get a vehicle down there without being noticed by the locals,” Rook One supplied. “I don’t know how you propose we get there.”

“Only one person’s going to go: me,” Jude replied, “and I’ll go from the far end of the Ship from Arapaho and the Ramp by paraglider.”

“Shit, Knight,” Rook One said. “The amount of time it’ll take us to circle round to the far side of the Ship and the time it’ll take you to climb up to the Pyramid, the target stands a good chance of getting there ahead of you.”

“So it won’t be an ambush,” Jude countered. “It’ll be a hunt and a short one. There’s only a handful of chambers and accesses open down there. He won’t have much place to hide.”

“We’ll be out of communications range once you’re inside,” Control advised. “That means no tactical support and no standby evac.”

“Then we’ll have to supply me with as much hardware as possible,” Jude said, “because I’m going after that bastard.”

“Hello Colonel Bloom,” Adams said as Bloom sat down.

While referring studiously to his console Adams attempted small talk.

“So...have you had any news about your daughter?”

Bloom found the question both invasive and offensive. In fact she had heard that Laura’s condition was stable although she was still being kept under sedation.

“Yes,” she said, curtly.

She offered no further details. Adams looked up, attempting, perhaps, to solicit further information from Bloom about her daughter. When none was forthcoming he returned his attention to the screen of his console.

“Colonel, where were you last night when the attacks began on Fort Arapaho?”

“I was asleep,” Bloom replied. “I had gone off duty a couple of hours before.”

“And what duties had you been attending to prior to that?”

Bloom shrugged at the question.

“Well I’d been in debriefing most of the evening with the World Ship Summit. After that I reviewed the daily reports from the Ship Survey Expedition department heads, went over the daily evaluations with Doctor Cole and then the bases’ divisional reports.”

“I see,” Adams said, “and tell me if you would, Colonel, what a normal day at the office is like for you.”

“My tour of duty starts each morning at oh-six hundred thirty hours,” Bloom replied. “I usually have a breakfast meeting with my Exo Major Benedict, who briefs me on currents ongoing on the base. Following breakfast, I take care of any pressing matters that are of concern to the staff and personnel assigned to Fort Arapaho. At oh-eight hundred, I sit down with the Ship Survey Expedition for the morning briefing and by oh-eight thirty or oh-nine hundred the latest, we are en-route to the Ship.”

“And how long do you stay at the Ship?”

“Depends on what’s going on. Since I took over as head of the Ship Survey Expedition we’ve only been down to the Ship twice. If Doctor Aiziz hadn’t discovered the glyph and rune sequence that opened the door into the language lab I doubt we’d have spent more than a couple of hours down there, at any given time.”

“But now?”

“At least ten hours at a time,” Bloom replied, “followed by two hours of debriefing with the World Ship Summit.”

“So after twelve hours with the Ship Survey Expedition you would then go back to work as the chief administrator of this facility until you went off duty for the night.”

“Pretty much. Unless there was a priority situation that required my attention as base commander; in that case my priorities would be up top, with Fort Arapaho.”

“And you don’t feel that your time with the Ship Survey Expedition is taking away from your duties as commanding officer of this base?”

“No, Mister Adams, I do not,” Bloom said. “By way of official duties during peacetime, the modern military commanding officer has very little to do. Sign a few high-level requisitions, attend staff meetings, parlay with Top Brass on current issues, receiving the occasional order and brief and making

sure that the ordinance assigned to and the troops stationed on base are well maintained. Most of these duties can be and usually are delegated to the command staff under the supervision of the company's executive officer."

"Colonel Bloom," Adams continued, "when a large number of civilians rushed to the gates of Fort Arapaho last night, apparently herded there from the Village, you gave the order to allow them into the base. And yet these people were not quarantined or in any way isolated."

"There wasn't time to isolate them," Bloom replied. "As soon as they were through the gates the shooters hiding in the crowd opened fire. Most of the first gunshot casualties were among the civilians we let in."

"So...lives could have been saved if you had not allowed those people in."

"There's no way to answer that. Most likely, one of the two bombers in the crowd would have detonated their packages."

"The barracks building and the main administration building wouldn't have been destroyed. One hundred and seventy-nine soldiers who died in or subsequent to those explosions would still be alive."

"And the twenty soldiers at the gates and the environs and three hundred and twenty-three civilians who were trying to get in would have been blown to kingdom come," Bloom countered. "If you want me to say I made a mistake when I let those people onto my base you won't get the words out of my mouth."

"Thank you, Colonel. I think we're done."

"Too goddamn right we are."

Gabriel Ashe limped as He made His way across the surface of the Ship towards the Pyramid, the entrance to the Chariot of His Ascension. He had fallen to the Ship's surface during the last few meters of His climb. It had been dark by then and He hadn't been able to see properly. He didn't know if His ankle was broken or simply sprained, but none of it would matter once He reached the entrance to the Ship. It would be a long enough walk but He was determined. The Shipsong was almost deafening at this level and He could see that the crevices that bisected the Ship were wider than He'd anticipated. It would be challenging territory even for one as Divine as Him. Most of the way to the Pyramid was uphill and most of that a fairly steep and difficult climb, especially when the only real illumination was the blue bands of energy that lined the floors of the crevasses on the Ship's surface. His ankle wasn't hurting as badly as it had following His fall. That was good. He had much territory to cover before He was safe. And if He was being pursued,

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which He knew He was, He had to cover that territory most quickly. He knew He was being hunted; He had seen His hunter that morning in the Church. Gabriel Ashe had no doubt that the man had been sent by His Father's enemies.

Ashe took a moment here at the top of His climb, to rest and to pray. He did so as He had always done since He had been a teen and first discovered His father waiting for him beyond the veil of His first acid trip. Ashe took the last dose of Holy Communion that He had; swallowing the pills dry, feeling the discomfort of having them stick and dissolve in His throat. Then He dropped to His knees and spread His arms out to either side of His body. The night air was chilling rapidly as the full moon began cresting the sky as Ashe had just crested the rise of the bowl of the Ship. Despite being drenched with sweat and wearing only a light shift and pants, Ashe did not feel the cold. His Communion was already strengthening Him against such mortal, physical concerns.

"Dear Father, I thank You for guiding Me safely here, to the gates of Your Father's Chariot," He prayed. "I thank You for the love of My Disciples, who became a Sacrifice Unto You so that I might live and reign with You and the Lord."

He was silent here, thinking about the followers who had sacrificed themselves in His name not just here in the Village but around the world; attacking the heathens who did not know His Father's Law and those who would bow down to the false God of the Ship instead of seeing it for what it truly was: a vehicle, *His* vehicle to the very Gates of Heaven. He thought of His last two Disciples; His two favoured Apostles who had laid down their lives at the last to protect Him from the Soldiers of His Father's Enemy. They died of their love of Him as His Father had died of His love for Mankind. But now, His purpose here was fulfilled. He had proven His worth, for He had been delivered here and was free of His enemies at long last. His favoured Apostles would rule with Him in the Kingdom of Heaven, where even now they waited to greet Him when He arrived. He rose to His feet and began the walk around to the far side of the Pyramid, to the entrance into the Chariot of God and His Destiny. Gabriel Ashe stepped through the entrance to the Ship, into the dark confines of the Pyramid. He paused before the dais and waited. All was exactly as it had been revealed to Him by the Angel of the Lord. The ring of the dais began glowing softly, lending light to the interior of the Pyramid. He watched as the floor of the elevated plain began to undulate and

iris open. All was as it had been promised. Soon the crystal egg rose from the gaping hole this too lit from floor and ceiling, which were both disks of gold more brilliant than He had seen in this vile, secular world. The crystal egg split and Ashe stepped aboard. He turned to face the doorway He had crossed from, leaving the Mortal world behind for the Heavenly. There in the doorway He saw the face of His Enemy. The soldier was bringing his weapon to bear as the crystal egg resealed itself. The soldier fired and a spider web of cracks appeared across the surface of the protective egg case. Then as the lift dropped down into the Ship itself Ashe watched with no small wonder as the cracks healed themselves until the egg was once more as unmarred and pristine as the Virgin who had begotten his Father.

Jude raced in after the departing lift but too late, the dais had resealed itself. He would have to wait and hope that there was no trick to the lift and no way to disengage it from within. His prey knew that he was being hunted. That lessened the disadvantage Ashe faced, but Jude was overwhelmingly armed, armoured and prepared for this little expedition whereas Ashe had entered the Ship with nothing more than the clothes on his back and the shoes on his feet. Jude was fed and rested and had a good supply of food and water. He seriously doubted Ashe had the same. This would be a cake-walk, a single-shot death; the hallways of the Ship would be the killing ground, the anticlimactic last act of a drama that had started so violently the night before.

“Well you know what they say, Reverend Ashe,” Jude muttered silently as the lift car began making its return ascent. “In like a lion, out like a lamb.”

Gabriel Ashe stood under the vaulted dome of the First Chamber, the door into the rest of the Ship at the far end of the room open invitingly. He looked at the slab of stone decorated with alien runes and glyphs. It could only be Angelic Script that He saw, for only the Angels of the Lord could possibly command this Chariot. He admired it, knowing that soon enough He would be able to read this text and speak the Angelic Tongues. This majestic chariot represented but one of the magnificent beauties of the Kingdom of Heaven. And that it had been here waiting for Him for so long could only mean that it was the least of the Kingdom’s wonders. Gabriel Ashe made His way down the corridor at the back of this vestibule knowing where He was to go just as the Angel had instructed. Behind Him the crystal egg ascended once more, but it was of no consequence to Ashe.

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As Jude descended in the lift to the inner hull of the Ship, even he who had helped capture or destroy so many alien artifacts throughout the other bitter campaigns he had waged, felt humbled by the majesty and grandeur of the Ship's interior. He looked out over the airframe, the bulkhead walls lining the inner hull, the city-sized constructs that ringed the inner hull and was awestruck. Such a display as this pulled even at his heart, long since locked away so that he could be the best soldier possible. It stirred yearnings for adventure that he hadn't felt since he was a boy. How could such a thing as this Ship even be built, he wondered, how could it stand up under its own weight, let alone fly? The time for his idle speculations and daydreams was over, for the lift car was now dropping into the inner hull and it was time for the hunt to continue. The lift opened up onto the deserted First Chamber. Control had taken the time to downlink the known specs of the interior of the Ship. Jude moved straight down the hall into the Second Chamber. It was a dead end; the as-yet undeciphered language lab left no hiding place and Jude was startled a moment when he realized that Ashe was not within. He turned around, racing back to the First Chamber. Ashe had nowhere to go. Jude chambered a round into his rifle, allowing the mechanism to make as much noise as possible so that the echo announced his presence to Ashe. Jude stepped back into the First Chamber and was astonished to see Ashe standing on the other side of the second doorway, the door rising shut. Jude fired, but all Ashe had to do was drop to the deck to avoid the shots. The door rose completely into its frame and the few shots that did get past the door flew harmlessly beyond Ashe. Jude approached the door. It remained shut. This wasn't possible. The SSE hadn't yet been able to open this door, so how in the Christ had Ashe? Jude turned, noticing the keypad to the left of the door. It was covered with runic script and numeric glyphs and though Jude had seen these very same characters on several artifacts he'd acquired in service to the Defence Intelligence Agency they made no sense to him. Nor could he understand just how Gabriel Ashe had been able to determine what sequence was needed, to open the now-sealed door before him.

Many mistake the end of chaos and the soothing of terror for the resolution of crisis. In fact, during a period of purgative change like that caused by the Ship's Unearthing, the end of chaos is merely the beginning of the crisis.

13

DESCENT

“The doors are now sealed,” the Minister said. “The Committee is now called to order. Let everything said within these walls stay within these walls.”

He looked at the console screen before him; at the faces of the Committee members before him, gathered for the Minister’s first meeting as chair. It was a meeting at which a lot of recovery and catch-up would be played. The Night of Blood, as the worldwide attacks by the United Trinity Observants was now being called had resulted in the World Ship Preserve being sealed to all but heavily guarded and scrutinized supply runs. Now there was little chance of the Committee sending in a team to pillage the Ship. However Colonel Jude’s disappearance inside the gargantuan vessel constituted the next best thing.

“There is pressing business on the agenda tonight,” the Minister continued after what he hoped was a pause long enough to be austere and short enough to not be pretentious; so much on the Committee depended on appearances. “According to the Chairman we have not had contact with our subsidiary operative since he entered the Ship in pursuit of Gabriel Ashe. We also have an increasingly rare item of equal import on the agenda: something that isn’t Ship-related. It is my understanding that our Liverpool facility has at long last succeeded in properly synthesizing the mimetic metal found so long ago at the Roswell crash site. Mister Chairman, I’ll invite you to address

us first, given how urgent it was to order Gabriel Ashe's execution. Madam Minister, you will have the floor following the Chairman." As the Minister finished speaking, the British Minister nodded her head. The Chairman cleared his throat and spoke:

"Approximately twenty-two hours ago Colonel Isaac Jude pursued Gabriel Ashe into the Ship under orders issued to him by the Committee through our blind contact General Roy Harrod," the Chairman began. "Since that time we have had no news from Jude. His troops are monitoring the situation but are under orders not to enter the Ship. There has been no sign of Gabriel Ashe since Jude followed him into the Ship."

"The situation is at the moment, fairly well contained," MI-6 added, "as the World Council has suspended the activities of the Ship Survey Expedition until hearings on the matter are concluded."

"We can expect that the SSE will continue operations shortly," the Curator said, his image and voice piped into the meeting via console.

"Not necessarily," the Solicitor countered. "One of the items the World Council and the World Ship Summit are scheduled to discuss is whether or not exploration of the Ship should be suspended altogether. There is a vocal and growing minority that blames the Ship for the madness we've witnessed in the last two days."

"One wonders if they aren't right in that assumption," the British Minister commented, "but the Ship is hardly something the world can forget or ignore. It's a Pandora's Box, opened now and not something that can simply be closed."

"I'd have compared it to a Lament Configuration, myself," MI-6 muttered, recalling a classic story he'd read in school.

"The question is what are we to do about Colonel Jude and Gabriel Ashe?" the Minister interjected. "There's been no official announcement made about Ashe. We have to tell the world something and we also have to deal with the reality of the situation."

"I move that we tell them Gabriel Ashe died fleeing the US Army in Salado Gulch," the Chief of Staff replied. "That there was a gunfight and Ashe was killed. We can doctor images of one of the actual victims of the desert attack to look like Ashe."

"But we don't know if Ashe is dead," the Minister objected.

"We don't know that he isn't," MI-6 said, "and it's far better than telling the world he may still be at large. If he resurfaces, we'll deal with him ourselves."

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“Then you are seconding the Chief’s motion, MI-6?” the Minister asked. The older gentleman nodded his head.

“Then the matter is put to a vote; all in favour?”

The motion passed unanimously. The Minister had never doubted that it would.

“And what of Colonel Jude’s status?” the Minister asked.

“Colonel Jude’s men will set up a hidden base overlooking the Ship,” the Chairman said, “and monitor the situation in case either he or Gabriel Ashe re-emerges.”

“The expense of hiding, equipping and manning a monitoring outpost in the field is rather high,” the Solicitor said. “How long would you intend on keeping them out there?”

“Until Jude is recovered,” the Chairman said, “or until it can safely be presumed that he and Ashe are dead.”

There was a moment’s silence as they pondered the Chairman’s statement.

“We’ll have to determine a proper number of days by the time the project is implemented,” MI-6 suggested.

“On to the next item of business,” the Minister continued. “Madame Minister?” On everyone’s consoles the image shifted to a minor montage of shots from the Roswell crash of 1947, images of the mimetic metal, its chemical signature and images of the lab work that led to its synthesis.

“What we are looking at is the first parcel of successfully Earth-engineered mimetic metal,” the British Minister began. “By the use of different electrical currents we can induce three states in the metal: plastic, inert and liquid. With the application of electrical current one, the metal becomes plastic in texture and can be shaped into whatever form we need. When electrical current two is applied for a set period of time, the metal will become inert and remain locked in its current shape. If damaged, reapplication of the plasticization current will revert the shaped metal to its undamaged shape. The metal can be completely reset and reshaped into a new configuration by turning it into a liquid, through the application of electrical current three.” As she spoke, images of the testing of the finished metal were shown on their consoles.

“Needless to say,” the British Minister said, “the practical applications of this metal are nearly limitless...”

New images appeared on their screens and the British Minister began discussing them. But the Even as they listened to the British Defence

Minister's presentation they were all still concerned with the Ship, with Gabriel Ashe and with the missing Colonel Jude.

Things had started falling apart twenty hours earlier, after the door sealed between him and Ashe. Jude stood there one long moment, dumbly stunned that Ashe had been able to work the door mechanism. Jude had no idea what any of the symbols meant and if he was to wrap this up quickly he had no time to learn. Among the equipment he carried was an aerosol bottle that held a chemical compound designed precisely for the purpose of defeating keypad locks. He sprayed the aerosol on the keypad. Instantly, five of the keys fluoresced with green smudges which were obviously fingerprints. The good news was that Jude now knew which keys Ashe had pushed. The bad news was he had no idea of the sequence. Each key had only been entered once; that was some help. It limited the number of possible entries somewhat. The keys tainted with Ashe's fingerprints were spread out across the keypad in such a way that Jude suspected there were deliberate rows and columns involved in the logical process. But did the alien text read from right to left, left to right, or did it read vertically? Jude wished he had at least some inkling of what the alien symbols meant. He knew the circles represented numbers and the runes either syllabic sets or whole concepts, but that gave him little by way of actual insight. Five keys, too many possibilities. Jude flipped open his mini console and held it in one hand, using the other to enter the numbers. Each failed sequence was written down on his console, each symbol represented by numbers one through five. And so it went until the door finally unlocked, allowing him to continue the hunt. Another short hall was beyond this second door, which rolled shut behind Jude as he crossed its threshold. Jude quickened his pace.

The burnished gold of the corridor curved outwards to a large vaulted ceiling. Jude found himself standing on a balcony overlooking another large, round chamber below. Twin spiral ramps snaked their way gently down the sides of the balcony to the deck below. In the center of the chamber beneath him Jude witnessed a towering sculpture, intricate in its beauty and hard to look at for all its alien geometry. Jude descended the ramp. The alien sculpture, sitting on a raised dais, dominated the center of the chamber. There were no visible exits and no sign of Gabriel Ashe. Ringing the chamber in a definite horseshoe was a deep, wide channel. The two ends of the large "U" bordered the ramps down from the upper level. Jude looked around. The channels were barred by irises not unlike the one that guarded the lift car tube

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in the Pyramid. The familiarity to the lift tube and the general atmosphere of the chamber made Jude suspect this was a transit station. And as he approached the platform, a transport car shot out of the far end of the channel racing around the back of the track to stop neatly in front of him his suspicions were confirmed. Jude dropped a small beacon transmitter next to the bizarre alien sculpture and switched on a locator band on his wrist. The beacon would hopefully be able to lead him back to the transitway. Jude was going forward, following Gabriel Ashe. He stepped into the gold-floored, transparent-walled transit car. The doors sealed shut seamlessly as they had in the lift tube. The crystalline transit car began moving, quickly picking up speed. There were no seats, but Jude felt no inertial shift as the car shot down the tunnel. He had no time to contemplate the physics of it; he was on the hunt. He was going to find Gabriel Ashe and he was going to kill him.

The last two days had been sheer hell for Colonel Bloom. While Colonel Jude had been laying siege to the Church of the United Trinity, Bloom had been trapped on base overseeing salvage and rescue operations while answering questions from that officious prick Adams. Adams left last night, but Bloom hadn't. She wanted to be by her daughter's side; Laura was expected to come out of sedation in the next couple of days. She would likely be sent home to convalesce until her lung replacement surgery was scheduled, pending the outcome of the cloning procedure. Bloom's place was with her daughter and she couldn't go. The Ship Survey Expedition was on indefinite hold and all Bloom could do was play base commander while waiting for everything to settle. It was all too frustrating for words.

Bloom was jogging down the track that ran partway around the Ship. This late in the year the sun was barely a glimmer on the horizon as she made her morning run. The Ship was luminous in the dark and the Shipsong still rang its chorus through the Preserve. Bloom stopped in mid-run just to listen. It sounded at once hypnotic, mournful, triumphant, divine, eerie, above all else inviting. It was omnipresent but never the type of sound that would fade into the background. How could it when it was an alien sound, one never made by anything indigenous to her world? And it was a sound that Bloom realized may be as close as she ever got to returning to the Ship. Bloom leaned against the chain link fence, staring down at the Ship. She couldn't help the tears in her eyes. The madness, the insanity that the world was still cleaning up after couldn't be blamed solely on the Ship. But although the violence may have

died down, the hysteria wasn't dead yet; far from it. It had now simply changed forums to the political arena. Now jowl-shaking, sanctimonious politicians were dictating stopgap and reactionary policies about the Ship, saying the whole damn thing should be re-buried, cordoned off, nuked, whatever, so long as mankind never went near it again. It was wrong. If the world turned its back on the Ship then Mark, the troops at her base, the innocents around the world...they would all have died for nothing. She could only hope that cooler heads would prevail and that—the sudden chime of her linx broke her chain of thought. She slipped her headset into her ear, toggling the “connect” button.

“Colonel Bloom here,” she said.

“Colonel,” came the response, “this is Doctor Kodo.”

“Hello Doctor,” Bloom replied. “What can I do for you?”

“Colonel, I just went into my lab to look over the tissue samples I'd taken from the lift iris and...are you accessed to a viewer right now?”

“Audio only,” Bloom replied. “I'm out for my run and I left the viewer boom in my quarters.”

There was a pause, apparently as Kodo digested this.

“How soon can you get over here?” he asked at last.

“Give me about twenty minutes,” she said. “Why?”

“You'll have to see it to believe it.”

When Bloom arrived, Kodo was showing Cole something on a microscope.

“Colonel Bloom,” Kodo said, “you'll want to have a look at this.”

Bloom looked into a petri dish that held a small, greyish sample sealed under its lid.

“This is a sample of the lift tube iris that Doctor Kodo took on our last trip into the Ship,” Cole supplied.

“What am I looking for?” Bloom asked.

“There's still cellular activity going on,” Kodo replied.

“Is that unusual?”

“Certain cells can survive quite some time without their parent organisms, as long as they're in some kind of nutrient-suspension fluid,” Cole explained. “These cells aren't in any nutrient-suspension fluid at all.”

“At the very least some of these cells should be dead or dying. None of them are,” Kodo said, changing the slides under the scope. “This is actually a cross-section taken from the tissue sample I acquired. The only change I've

observed is that the outermost cells in the tissue samples have developed a hardened membrane, essentially sealing in and protecting the rest of the cells in the sample.”

“And it’s been... what? Three days since you took these samples?” Bloom asked.

“Just about,” Kodo said, claiming another Petrie dish from his collection. He switched slides again.

“What do you notice about this sample?”

“It’s almost identical,” Bloom said, hoping she sounded authoritative, “but I honestly don’t know what I’m looking for.”

“This is the first sample from the lift tube iris I took,” Kodo said, “from the Ship Survey Expedition’s *first* trip down into the Ship. This tissue sample is still alive.”

“There’s been no tissue degradation,” Cole said. “Again, other than the hardened outer layer of cells there have been no real discernible changes. We’ve witnessed some cells dying, but they are almost always replaced by subsequent cell division.”

“How are the cells still alive?” Bloom asked.

“We don’t know,” Kodo admitted, “and what’s more, have a look at the cells themselves. Notice how uniform they are in appearance, size and shape? That’s almost unheard of in nature. Go up another couple of magnification levels and have a *good* look.”

Magnification levels were one of the few things about a biology microscope Bloom knew how to work. She switched up by two lenses.

“Holy shit,” she said.

Even she could see what was going on. Each of the cells had a near-perfect hexagon shape, interlocked uniformly throughout the sample.

“It’s a honeycomb structure,” she said.

Bloom knew the implication; from an engineering standpoint, the hexagon was the most efficient interlocking shape for both use of space and structural stability.

“There’s no doubt in my mind that these cells weren’t just grown as much as they were engineered,” Kodo said. “The only way to know for sure would be to do a biopsy of the iris and I don’t get the impression the Ship would like that, overmuch.”

“You’re talking like it’s alive.”

“At least partially it is,” Kodo answered.

“We’ve run some analysis on the cells,” Cole said. “The first thing we

discovered is that they are composed of eighty-seven chromosomes. Comparatively, Humans have only forty-six. At least, we *think* that they're chromosome structures; we haven't been able to isolate DNA from the cells yet and the chromosome-like objects are missing some component structures that we would expect to find."

"I don't understand. How could you not isolate DNA from the cells?" Bloom asked. "I thought all life was made from DNA."

"On this planet that may be true," Kodo replied. "But before now we've never encountered extraterrestrial life. We have no way of knowing for certain that DNA is the only combination of chemicals from which life can evolve. DNA is just a complex string of amino acids. But not all possible amino acids are used in DNA and even then some of those used in DNA serve no apparent function at all."

"We subjected those tissue samples to extremes of heat and cold, burnt some, dissected others," Cole supplied. "Except for those exposed to severe extremes, like super-frozen in liquid hydrogen or incinerated by propane flame, powerful acids or micro laser dissection, the cells survived unscathed. They do fine in water, in vacuum, in toxic situations...it's as though they're made to be multienvironmental."

"Then the only thing we can be absolutely sure of is that they were engineered," Bloom said, "because I can't imagine an organism like that occurring in nature."

"Well the evidence certainly seems to *suggest* that the organism was engineered," Cole commented.

"The society that can engineer this hearty an organism," Kodo said, "that *large* an organism," he added with a sweeping gesture meant to indicate the Ship, "makes Human gene therapists look like witch doctors."

There was that distinction, again. One that until not so long ago had been the domain of science fiction only: the distinction between Human and Alien. It was like a racial distinction, between White or Black, Chinese or Indian. Only it was clear that now there was a *real* distinction, like that between man and insect. And in Human versus Alien, Bloom had no doubt about which was the real insect.

James woke up in a blinding wave of terror, falling out of bed with a scream escaping his lips. His heart pounded in his chest, his eyes were wide with fear and the undisputable knowledge that he was going to die seared his mind.

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“James!” Allison said, sitting up in bed. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

It was the morning after their second night together. Allison knew about his panic attacks but she had never seen James in the grips of one. James flinched away from her as she reached out to touch his shoulder. He looked to her like a cornered animal; terrified and pathetic.

“I’m afraid...” he stammered. “I’m so afraid...”

Allison crouched down, sitting on the floor in front of James. She reached out a hand. James took it, grasping it the way a drowning man might. He was covered in a thin sheen of sweat and his breathing was shallow and fast.

“James...there’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“Yes there is,” he sobbed. “I’m so afraid of dying.”

Allison drew James into a tight embrace. The stink of fear-sweat on him was overwhelming.

“There’s no reason to be afraid of dying,” she said. “It’s an inevitability. All you’re doing is worrying over nothing.”

“I keep dreaming...I keep dreaming of the Prof’s death...of my death...I can’t stop thinking about it. And after what happened to Laura—.”

“But Laura’s going to be fine,” Allison protested.

“But she almost died the *exact* same way her father did,” James replied, “lying in my lap, drowning in her own blood. All I keep thinking about are the people I love dying. All I keep thinking about is *this*.”

“James, you need to relax. Calm down, please. It’s okay.”

James pushed himself free of Allison’s embrace, standing up.

“It’s not okay,” he said. “*I’m* not okay!”

He left Allison’s bedroom without dressing, rushing to the living room where they had left the pack of joints they’d bought the night before. He shook one out of the pack, lighting it and smoking quickly and deeply, like a cigarette. Allison followed him into the living room.

“You have to do something about this, James,” she said, leaning against him. “You have to see someone.”

“Yeah, I know,” James rasped, “I know.”

The Minister read over the report from one of the Committee’s advisors, sipping from a large mug of tea by his side. The Republican Minority in the US was working to organize a campaign to shut down the Ship, as were the Liberals in England, the Social Reformists in Russia and the ruling Socialist party in France. Other cells of protest were making their voices known across the world, most especially in the nations that had been struck by Gabriel

Ashe's cultists' suicidal rampage. The voices of reason didn't seem to be as loud, though they were certainly as many. The media smelled sensation and the bid to shut down the Ship Survey Expedition was that sensation. It was just another example of the media influencing public opinion with selective coverage of the facts: the sort of thing that had allowed Carver Rose II to be re-elected President of the United States and continue a campaign of aggression that became known as War Three. And with the current crisis over the Ship even INN wasn't immune to the sensation. Though it had some balancing news items on its grid spar, the stories in heavy rotation and the ones being linked to the most were the stories in favour of shutting down access to the Ship and turning the World Ship Preserve into an isolated spot on the planet's surface. Even within the Committee there was some debate about whether or not the SSE should be allowed to continue operations; the Committee and its subsidiaries would have fuller access to the Ship if it were closed off. They'd have clandestine access to it with impunity. As things were now the Committee had to rely on more difficult methods of discovery and usually whatever they learned was learned first by the World Ship Summit and the World's scientific communities. The Committee had some information that the World Council wasn't privy to but shutting down the Expedition would enable them to learn much, much more.

The Minister didn't agree, because he was fond of the idea that the World could directly benefit from discoveries made in the Ship. Fortunately, the opinion that the World Council should be influenced by the Committee to shut down the Ship Survey Expedition was a minority one, held by the Chairman Joint Chiefs, the Minister of Natural Resources and the British Defence Minister. Even MI-6 was opposed to the shutdown and oddly enough for many of the same reasons the Minister was. The question was whether or not the Committee had enough influence to stem the flow of public opinion as it was whispered into the ears of the members of the World Ship Summit and the World Council. Would the Committee have enough influence to convince these august bodies to keep the Ship open to the SSE? The Minister already knew that the World Ship Summit's decision to close the Site down while their investigators moved in was a largely theatrical one, designed to appease the agitated and the agitators who wanted the Preserve sealed. The investigators were little more than census-takers and surveyors, canvassing public opinion in and around the Site, getting witness testimony and the like so that they and their counterparts in all the hot zones created by

the Night of Blood could sit in committee and create a convoluted recommendations paper that the World Ship Summit would study and debate while no doubt secretly waiting for final public opinion to decide their true course of action. It was so much like Canadian politics that the Minister found it almost unbelievable. The only difference was that the World Ship Summit didn't have the lunatic fringe of the United Conservative Party sitting in opposition. The Minister only hoped that the Committee's influence with the World Ship Summit would be of value to the Ship Survey Expedition. Otherwise the SSE would fall away to be replaced by a Committee-sponsored equivalent with the likes of Colonel Jude in charge. And speaking of Jude nearly two full days had gone by without word from him or his troops, which meant the colonel and Gabriel Ashe were still missing and presumably still at large.

Jude stood at the front of the tramcar staring at the tunnel stretching out ahead. Every so often he passed through a ring of blue energy banding the tunnel walls. Beyond that Jude had no notion of the distance he was traveling or at what speed. The beacon he'd left behind at the transitway station had cut out the instant the tramcar had launched itself into the tram tunnel. With no sense of inertia within the car, Jude could only tell that he was moving because of the energy bands he shot through. He timed them initially at one every ten seconds. But now either the car was slowing or they were spreading further apart: he was now passing blue bands at twenty second intervals. An indistinct light was forming ahead and this was what had attracted Jude's attention to the front of the tram car. It seemed he was reaching some sort of destination. The transit tube the car was traveling in suddenly became transparent and Jude could now see: the tramcar shot out into a chamber easily half a klick high, with level after level of platform stacked from floor to ceiling suspended on a lattice of honeycombs through which dozens, if not hundreds of transit tubes crisscrossed. The tubes all met at the platforms; each platform opened onto another transit tube and in each tube sat a row of oval cars, waiting for passengers. Numerous lifts rose from the center of the platforms, giving access to every level. The scale of things staggered Jude's imagination. He knew one thing beyond a doubt: Ashe could be anywhere now. Jude had no hope of finding him. Jude stepped from his car onto the platform. The bank of lifts all stood open on this level, waiting. Jude dropped a beacon on the platform and approached the lifts. He took out the aerosol fingerprint detector and liberally sprayed the wall of the lift bank. Nothing showed up. Given the lead that Ashe had there was little chance of a thermal

residue on the floor from the insane cultist's footprints. Ashe could be anywhere. Jude turned around heading back for the lift car. He'd ride the circuit and return to the surface. There was nothing else he could—Jude froze in his tracks; his ears intent, his body almost completely still. He tried to listen over the thrumming noises of the Ship's interior, his ears fighting against the echo of seventy million years of stillness. Had he heard voices? He couldn't be sure. Jude was about to move on back towards the car when he heard it again. It seemed to be coming from above. A single word, the inflection questioning. Jude reached carefully into one of the cargo pockets of his uniform. There was an identifiable sound; something that didn't belong to the background noise. From his pocket Jude pulled a small sound tracker and keyed it into the headset he still wore. He pointed the device straight up and cocked an ear. It only took the machine a moment to filter out the regular background. Then, he heard it again: It was definitely a voice; only there were too many levels of platform between Jude and the speaker for anything to be coherent. It sounded almost as though the speaker was having a conversation with someone, but that was impossible. They were alone down here. Jude replaced the device in his pocket and brought his weapon to bear. Three steps later he was inside a lift car. The doorway sealed seamlessly behind him, creating another perfectly transparent wall. However this lift was different from the one that ruled the Pyramid somewhere above him: This one had a control plate to the right of the door. But pushing the wrong button would send him in the wrong direction and possibly alert Ashe to his presence.

"Fuck," Jude muttered.

The numeric glyphs were all pretty self-evident once he took a good look at them. The only thing to determine was whether the first number was the highest floor or the lowest. Jude looked up over the door where in a traditional Human elevator the floor number would appear. Nothing. Then he noticed one glyph on the console was glowing, backlit ever so faintly. That had to be this floor. He'd noticed as he came in that there seemed to be fewer floors beneath him than above. There were fewer glyphs to the right of the lit one than to the left. Therefore, it was a good guess that the top left glyph denoted the highest floor. Jude pushed it and began watching both the glyphs and the transparent wall of the lift. The car rose. So far, so good. Jude watched intently as floor after deserted floor of platforms dropped away beneath him. His beacon still sounded below him, which was good. No sign of the owner of the voice he'd heard although Jude had no doubt as to who he'd find. Finally the car rose up to another level and there he saw Gabriel Ashe. The madman had his back turned to the lifts, but as Jude rose into view, he turned

around to look straight into Jude's eyes.

"Shit!" Jude cursed, stabbing the button for the floor he'd just shot by.

The car kept climbing. Jude began punching at all the non-numeric buttons on the keypad. Finally he succeeded in stopping the car and returning it to the floor he'd spotted Ashe on. Once more, he was too late. Ashe was stepping into a transit car and speeding away. Jude dashed from the lift for the next tramcar in line waiting for use. He dropped another beacon to the deck just before climbing aboard. Moments later he was speeding off once more in pursuit of his prey.

The heads of the Ship Survey Expedition were gathered together in Colonel Bloom's office.

"The way things stand at the moment," Bloom told them, repeating what the liaison from the World Ship Summit had told her, "we're lucky that we can still continue with our activities here at base camp."

"So, we're stuck going over old data that's already being looked at by the best minds on the planet," Peter said. "We're the vanguard for the research into the Ship, Colonel. We're supposed to be down there exploring."

"We can't move any farther towards understanding the Ship's language until we go back to that language lab," Aiziz added. "We're at a standstill. We *have* to get back down there."

Bloom raised her hands and made a halting gesture.

"Look, I agree," Bloom said. "Christ knows that I want to be back there too. But the World Ship Summit wants to make sure the Ship doesn't cause another massacre. They're afraid of global-scale panic."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, the Ship didn't cause that massacre," Andrews sneered bitterly, "any more than it'll cause worldwide panic. It's been how many weeks since the Ship unearthed itself? In all that time, we've had no mass hysteria and the only violence that we have experienced was at the hands of a doomsday cult that most people agreed was dangerous to begin with! If the Ship hadn't set off Gabriel Ashe, then something else bloody well would have."

"There *is* panic, right now," Bloom said. "Fear that something worse might happen next time. People are frightened. The world is frightened."

"And where does that leave us?" Peter asked.

"Stuck waiting for someone else to decide things for us," Bloom answered.

The crisis centers set up in Los Angeles following the attacks by Gabriel Ashe's Knights of Christ were able to quickly place James with a therapist who would be able to help; a young woman by the name of Louise Brace. After taking a brief patient history from James, asking some basic questions designed to rule out certain psychological disorders, she began questioning him directly on what was troubling him.

"Had you ever witnessed someone's death before Professor Echohawk?" Dr Brace asked.

"No," James said. "Plenty of people in my life have died though; my grandparents; my uncle John; a friend of mine in college killed himself—well not suicide, but he killed himself driving drunk up on Mulholland."

"But you'd never witnessed death before."

"Not unless swatting flies counts, no. I've never seen a pet dog or cat put to sleep. I've never even been hunting or fishing."

Brace made notes on her console's writing pad before addressing James again.

"Tell me, with as much detail as possible, what was going through your mind, when Professor Echohawk was killed."

"You mean, how did it make me feel?"

"No," Brace said. "I'm fairly sure that unless you're dangerously psychotic, you felt like shit when Professor Echohawk was killed. What I want to know is what you were *thinking*."

James swallowed and thought back to the shooting. He recalled the events...the sounds...and there among those memories, his thoughts at the time had been very well recorded. He recounted them to Doctor Brace. When he was finished, James was tearful and shaking. Brace regarded him with clinical sympathy as James blew his nose and wiped his eyes. When he had composed himself, she asked:

"And the panic attacks always begin at night? While you're sleeping?"

"Yes, mainly. Sometimes during the day...I might start thinking about death...or growing old and it starts."

"Does the dream of Professor Echohawk's death always accompany the panic attacks when you wake up with them at night?"

"Not always," James replied. "Sometimes, I just...wake up scared; terrified."

"And you said you've been self-medicating with marijuana?"

"Yeah; half-gram joints, usually with a beer."

Brace checked her console again, writing down more information,

consulting the World Psychiatric Diagnostic Resource's extensive Grid spar. There were a number of possible clinical conditions that James Johnson might have, but Doctor Brace suspected his death-terror and panic attacks were basic; a little therapy, a little medication, a little time...she felt she could help him.

"Mister Johnson, I feel reasonably sure that I can help you," she said. "Although it may take some time. We'll start by alleviating your immediate symptoms. I'm not fond of you using marijuana as heavily as you have been. Cut it back to social smoking and don't smoke a joint within two hours of taking the medication I'm prescribing. No alcohol with the meds either and don't drive or operate heavy equipment while on these."

"What are you giving me?"

"A fast-acting sublingual tranquilizer, called Sereling. It's an older compound with a proven track record," Brace replied, filling out the 'scrip. "Take a whole pill under the tongue if you wake up with a panic attack. A half-dose should do if you feel your anxiety mounting while you're awake. They're non-habit forming and have few side effects. Your pharmacist will be able to give you specific information relating to your health profile."

"Is this it?" James asked, taking the prescription from her.

"No," Brace said. "We'll also be meeting for ninety minutes every two weeks to talk. As your also experiencing a crisis of faith, you might want to speak with your parish Priest. You said you were Catholic?"

"Yeah, but non-practicing."

"You might want to look at that, as well. If you're still comfortable within the bounds of organized worship."

"I don't know."

Brace smiled.

"Well there you are," she said. "Find out if Church still holds and interest for you. We'll talk about that when I see you again in two weeks."

She and James logged an appointment time and then it was time for him to leave.

The tramcar shot out from the darkened bulkheads of the inner hull into a long transparent passage which spanned the distance between inner hull and the gigantic edifices built into the superstructure of the outer hull of the Ship. Jude watched as the car approached a multi-tiered construct that crawled halfway up the side of the outer hull. The decks on the inner wall of the outer hull of the Ship ringed around its entire surface but were separated from each

other by the bulkheads. What lay beyond the bulkheads Jude discounted; he didn't know, he didn't care. All that mattered was that Ashe was in there and he would find him. Jude was focused on killing Ashe, more so than ever. But the grand scale of the building he was approaching was not lost on him as it stretched above him for kilometres and levelled off onto a large black and gold plateau several kilometres below. This Ship was a majestic thing, an ancient thing; Jude had to acknowledge that it was far greater and far more enduring than the battle he was fighting at the moment, or the cause he was fighting for or the nation whose flag he fought under. Ashe's assassination would matter little to the Ship. The Ship would be here longer than Ashe's assassination would even matter. It had already been here longer than recorded time. The tram passed through the bulkheads of this outer rim structure. Jude was approaching a station from which he would catch up to Ashe, now only a few minutes ahead of him.

"James?" the voice called.

He sighed once, dismissively and went back to sinking deeper into the blissful oblivion he'd created for himself. James had decided to see how the pills worked in conjunction with smoking a joint. The effect was heavenly.

"James, what's going on?"

James rolled open an eye, blinked and then dragged himself into a sitting position.

"I guess the tranqs hit me hard," he said noncommittally, stretching his feet out on the floor in front of him.

He'd been resting, zoned to shit, on the couch for a while.

"How many of those things did you take?" Allison asked, perturbed.

"Just one," he lied. "But I'd smoked a joint first."

He'd chased two pills with one joint and a double rum and Coke about two hours before. James still felt mainly out of it.

"You know you're not supposed to mix that shit; it can be dangerous!" she said, alarmed. Allison paused, looking deeply into his eyes. "James... is there a problem?"

"No," he said. "What? You mean with drugs? I just started taking them; how can there be?"

Her frown said she wasn't entirely convinced.

"Come on," he said, "I started taking the pills today. Is that enough time to get addicted?"

"No," she said, "but James, those pills are rough on you."

THE UNEARTHING

“It’s not like I’ll take them all the time,” he said. “I’m only supposed to take them when I have a panic attack. I just wanted to see how well they worked.”

That seemed to placate her. She smiled uncertainly and kissed him. Then she wrinkled her nose and drew back.

“You should take a shower. You smell like stale smoke and jays.” He smelled himself, curiously.

“Yeah I guess I do,” he said.

“Come on,” she said. “We have to get ready. They’re releasing Laura this afternoon and we have to pick her up.”

“Shit,” James said, “I forgot.”

“Come on. Go get ready.”

She pulled him off the couch and pushed him in the direction of the bathroom. A few minutes later he had steaming water running for his shower and he was regarding himself in the mirror. Looking back at him he saw the face of the only person he knew would be with him until he died. He wanted another pill but knew it wouldn’t happen just yet. Not with Allison hovering around him. Maybe after they got Laura home. He stepped into the shower. A couple of minutes later the bathroom door opened and closed and he watched as Allison undressed, watching him as she touched herself slowly, languidly before joining him under the spray.

“I wanted to welcome you home too,” she said, kissing him. “Going to see Doctor Brace must have been a hard thing to do.”

The only comfort the world of sobriety held for James was Allison’s body. A shame she couldn’t keep him from feeling his own mortality even as he touched her and was touched by her.

“*Now* you’re awake,” she said as she went down on her knees and on him.

“Yeah,” he rasped, but for reasons other than what she thought: the fear was a constant flutter in his stomach, all the more since the spray from the shower and the promise of impending sex had woken him fully from the drug stupor.

James came after only a few minutes under her ministrations. She got back up, kissing him and he tasted his saltiness in her mouth. James tried to focus on her and on what she was doing for him, to him. He tried to be more involved in the process of soaping her up, of running his hands over her, touching her, caressing her, but it was still the cold of the grave that he felt inside. He was very aware that his now-pounding heart would one day be finally silenced as he kissed her passionately, backing her against the wall to

enter her. Allison cried out and curled a leg around his waist, parting the way in for him. His eyes were closed in concentration and against the spray of the water. She opened her eyes to regard him as his movements started becoming fast, hard.

“James!” she exclaimed.

She hadn’t expected him to be a rough lover. It wasn’t unwelcome; rough could be fun. He grabbed her from behind, lifting her up.

“Yeah,” she whispered against him.

Even as loving her became the serious focus of his efforts, James was still very conscious that he was going to die one day; that he would cease to exist. He wanted to focus on Allison; on the feeling of her around him; how good she felt. He wanted to lose himself in the moment but couldn’t. His body was absorbed in the love play but his mind was trapped, thinking of death; of his death, of hers. He thrust into her harder, eliciting cries of pleasure from Allison. James was trying desperately to make the pleasure at his center stronger than the fear in his heart. Allison’s breath was coming short in her chest, now. God, if he only knew what he was doing to her...she looked at him, again. His eyes were tightly shut, his face flush...but there was something out of place on his features. She started to look harder at him, trying to see, but he moved a hand to her breast, brushing and then squeezing the nipple and thrust into her even harder. The sensation was too strong, too inviting. Her concentration broke, absorbed into what he was doing to her. As Allison wrapped her arms around his neck, crying out and hitching her other leg around his waist, James thought about what it would be like in those final few seconds of life as his existence slipped away, his awareness fading to an oblivion far more real, more permanent than the ones he experienced on a heavy dose of his medication. His body was responding to hers, thrusting more urgently, eliciting cries and moans from them both, but still he thought about his death, his end; the fear that he might outlive Allison if they stayed together, the terror that he might not. Allison opened her eyes. He was driving into her a little too hard now. It was starting to hurt along with her escalating pleasure. She stared at him. There was no mistaking it. Something was wrong. There was some horror in his face, some urgent terror and as he continued to fuck her harder, the look on his face became more intense. She was scared and despite the way her pleasure was climbing, peaking, what was going on was frightening her now.

“Slow down...” she gasped. “Slow down...”

Allison didn’t want to come yet. She wanted to stop him, slow the rhythm

so she could concentrate on James, on what was wrong. But he didn't slow. Instead, the hand at her breast slid further down, zeroing in and the pleasure overtook her. She screamed as she came, the pleasure and the pain of his rough motions overlapping and then she felt the hot wash of his orgasm following hers, his own cry sounding. As his body experienced the little death, James' mind was momentarily free of the shrouded thoughts of his real death. His knees buckled and Allison unwrapped her legs from his waist, pulling away from him to stand on her own unsteady feet. She leaned on his shoulders, her body quaking with the aftershocks of the powerful orgasm she'd just had. She stared at him, seriously regarding him.

"James," she said catching her breath, alarmed at her orgasm as much as at him and what just happened under the shower's hot spray, "James, where were you just now?" she asked in a voice as shaky as her footing. "What the fuck was going on? What the hell *was* that?"

She brushed his wet hair from his face, seeing something dark in his eyes beginning to fade.

"James?"

He looked at her face, looked at her eyes, seeing that she did care for him, that she was scared and had to look away. He was so wrapped up in himself; he should have been more aware that there was someone else involved. James started crying, then. Grief over his own death; guilt over his inconsideration towards Allison overwhelmed him. She drew his head to her shoulder, pressing against him, holding him.

"I'm sorry," he sobbed. "I'm so sorry."

"What was going on?" she asked. "What was it? James...it's okay."

And despite meaning it, what he said next still shocked her, still made feel her unclean, made it anything *but* okay:

"I was trying..." he sobbed. "I was trying to fuck death away."

When Jude arrived at the docking station, he'd actually seen Ashe cut through the open door at the far end and into the hallways beyond. As the door from his own tram car cracked and slid open Jude charged after him. The hallway beyond was much like any other hallway in the Ship: golden, blue-banned and lit by orbs that turned the black ceiling transparent, like obsidian. Though this hallway branched off in four different directions and had many closed doors lining the passage, it was, for the Ship, nondescript. No sign of Ashe, but this close behind the manic preacher that wouldn't matter. Jude slipped on his scope and activated the thermograph. The thermal

representation of the floor clearly showed footstep heat traces. Ashe's footsteps were barely visible, as Jude made his pursuit. The material of the floor seemed to be a good conductor. Jude followed as far as he could, but soon enough the footsteps faded altogether. He scouted through the corridors looking for Ashe, listening for footfalls, looking for some sign. There was no sign of his quarry and all the doors along the hallway were sealed. As Jude came to the far end of the corridor he found a bank of lifts. They opened readily, like most other mechanisms in the ancient Ship working perfectly. Jude was convinced that Ashe hadn't been able to make it this far. Jude rounded another corridor, choosing a new branch in hopes that it would lead him to Ashe. Then he realized that he'd not put down a transmitter since pursuing Ashe down the tram tunnel.

"Shit," he hissed, his voice echoing and lending more mystery to Ashe's disappearance.

The hallways all looked so much alike and the alien text apparently posted as directional signs were all illegible. He was lost. Jude's sense of direction was good but not so good that he could navigate by sense alone, down here. Jude refused to surrender to panic. He calmed himself and began making a slow, steady route through the level he was on, hoping that he would eventually reach the tram. He hadn't realized how large this level was, or how many different branching corridors the edifice had on this level. Sooner or later he was sure that he'd make a circuit of the level even if it was several kilometres large. He'd once marched a hundred clicks with no rations no water and no stims through dense jungle. The flat, air-conditioned corridors of the Ship were no match for that.

Jude paused during his hike to take a sip of water from his canteen. He'd been at this for a couple of hours now. He wasn't ready to dip into his rations yet, but the initial stages of hunger were setting in. Jude closed the canteen and stood up and the door at the far end of the corridor opened. He tensed, bringing his weapon up. Jude moved cautiously towards the door. There was movement inside, but the chamber beyond was too dark for him to see properly from the outside. Jude lowered his display boom over his left eye, switching it to the night vision scope. A Human figure moved to the back of the room. Jude crouched and charged into the room. Once inside the door sealed shut behind him and he found too late that this was a trap and Gabriel Ashe was ready and waiting for him. There was no mistaking the device strapped around Ashe's chest, or that it was already primed for detonation.

A NEW LIGHT

The sunny day and cool, crisp air belied the sullen and sombre mood inside the walls of Vatican City. Rome had been the scene of one of the United Trinity Observants' deadliest attacks. The Vatican Council on the Ship was not going well. The doubts James Johnson, in his existential crisis in Los Angeles had expressed to Allison McQuire were the same doubts Catholics around the world were expressing to their Clergymen and what some members of the Clergy themselves were expressing to their brethren. "Trust in God" could only take someone so far.

Many people had died during the attack in Rome by Gabriel Ashe's followers. Many of those killed had sought shelter within the walls of Rome's many churches only to die within the walls of failed sanctuary. Where was God in this madness? Why had this happened? Those and a thousand other questions plagued the man sitting in the ancient chair overlooking a private garden in the middle of the Vatican. Pope Simon Peter sat in silence within the guarded walls of his inner sanctum. The only other person in the room was his oldest friend in the Church, his closest advisor, a friend from the Pontiff's first days in the Seminary.

"I'm afraid I may have brought the Church to ruin," the Pope said, in the heavy silence of the room.

The events of the last few days had added new lines of worry and stress to the aging Black man's wizened features.

"No, that's ridiculous!" Vincenzo Cardinal Carielli protested. "We are in a period of crisis right now but it's hardly you that's to blame."

"Vatican IV has raised more questions and found more doubt than it has answered," the Pontiff said. "Had I not called for this council, things might be very different."

The Cardinal shook his head. His friend wanted to believe he had erred, that he had done wrong; the job of convincing him otherwise would be difficult.

"How many people looked to you, to the Church for guidance after the Ship unearthed itself?" Carielli asked. "Had you not called for a council to deal with the issue of the Ship the leadership of the Church would have seemed vacant."

"But we are no closer to answering the questions of our faithful than we were before the Ship was unearthed. If anything, more questions have arisen; especially now. There is a crisis of Faith brewing because of the Ship and what it represents! Some even question whether or not life evolved on this world independently or not."

"Of course it didn't arise independently on Earth," the Cardinal replied. "All life comes from God and that is how that question should be answered."

"That isn't what they want to know," the Pontiff replied, "and you know that as well as I do."

"Questions of science are not our domain. Questions of Faith are. Whether God grew us here or seeded the world through the Ship makes no difference to me," the Cardinal said, "nor should it make any difference to them."

"It makes a difference when you consider that God revealed His love for Mankind to us through His Son," the Pontiff countered. "How then did He reveal Himself and His love to these Aliens? That is what people are asking. That is what I cannot answer. Given the slaughter of innocents perpetrated by the United Trinity Observants people wonder if God truly intends the Ship to have a message for us."

"Of course it does," the Cardinal replied, "but there have always been those who would strive to make us deaf to the Word of the Lord and the Devil's pawns they are, all of them."

"I agree. But I have failed to teach the Faithful this. They will not understand when I tell them so."

THE UNEARTHING

“You committed no sin, my old friend.”

“But still I have failed.”

“To do what? To stop Gabriel Ashe?”

“No. To stop the crisis in the Faith,” Simon Peter replied, agitated. “What is our place in God’s plan if we are not His sole creation? How was God’s message delivered to the other worlds out there? Are Humans His true Chosen People or is all life, all intelligence numbered among His Chosen?”

“That we cannot know,” the Cardinal said. “How can we when we are not from those worlds? How can we when we cannot even hope to understand the fullness of God’s Mystery as it concerns Mankind?”

The Pontiff nodded.

“This council is getting us nowhere,” he said, rising. “We cannot understand the Lord’s message, if there is indeed one, while sitting here discussing the Ship in a committee. It is clear to me that I must go to Geneva and petition the World Council for access to the Ship.”

The storm was a threatening band of dark grey on the horizon to the northeast, when Bloom took her jog around the Ship. It was such a chilly morning that she hadn’t stripped off her warm-up suit before her run. From where she was it looked like the storm was half a continent away. The morning was otherwise promising to become another bright and sunny New Mexican day.

By late morning the wind had picked up and the storm was blowing in. The wind suddenly died around One PM and the clouds crested to a halt, darkening the sky to a dusky gloom. The storm broke while Bloom was having a late lunch with Major Benedict and the senior members of the Ship Survey Expedition. They were sitting by the bay window of the Officers’ Mess, overlooking the Ship.

“Look at that,” Doctor Kodo said, looking up from his cheeseburger platter.

The rain was coming down in sheets and the Ship could only be seen because of the blue glow pulsing from the many trenches that crisscrossed its hull.

“Yeah,” Peter remarked.

Above the bay windows, shutters allowing fresh air were open and the room began cooling perceptively. As one of the mess hall workers moved to shutter them closed, Bloom held him off.

“Easy there, Private,” she said. “The breeze is nice. Let’s enjoy the cool air, while we can.”

“Yes ma’am,” the private said, returning to other duties.

They sat watching the rain. Then, they watched a large flash of lightning strike the Pyramid. Seconds later the concussion of thunder made itself known. And then as the rain slackened a bit the lightning storm began. The largest metallic object in the area was the Ship and with all the energy it produced to power itself it was a natural attractor. The view of the Ship never seemed to get old, Bloom observed and when it started to seem commonplace, something else about it would surprise you. The thunderstorm overhead reflected a new beauty back at them: the lightning strikes doing nothing to the colossus other than showcase it in brilliantly brief flares of light which cast strange shadows across its even stranger surface. Aiziz and Andrews snuggled closer together as they watched. Peter stepped up to the window, as did Major Benedict. The spectacle was hypnotic and could even boast its own soundtrack: Even over the din of the wind and rain and thunder, the Shipsong could be heard, once more seeming to make the noise of the storm part of its own symphony without once ever changing its alien harmonics or its surreal rhythms. When the storm abated, the meeting resumed.

“Okay,” Bloom said, “show’s over. Let’s get this meeting back on track; time for departmental updates, such that they are.”

As she finished speaking, Bloom gestured to one of the mess clerks for a large pot of coffee. While they waited, Kodo spoke:

“Doctor Cole and I have gotten in touch with some people we know,” he said. “Microbiologists, biochemists and geneticists; we’ve sent them cell samples. When they get them, they’re going to start running different experiments. Among other things, we’re hoping to clone the cells.”

“To what end?” Bloom asked.

“We might have a better understanding of the cells themselves if we can watch them grow,” Cole replied as the coffee arrived.

The members of the SSE began preparing their coffees.

“Other than that, we’re taking a closer look at the extra chromosomes found in the samples,” Kodo said. “With most life on Earth we’d see between twenty and fifty chromosome pairs, depending on the type of life form. Humans have forty-six chromosomes. The cells from the Ship have eighty-seven; assuming that they are indeed even chromosomes.”

He glanced at Doctor Cole, who referred to her console.

“The chromosome-like structures we’ve observed are quite unusual,” Cole said, “given firstly that there are an odd number of base pairs. Secondly, they don’t quite behave the way we would expect chromosomes to behave in a normal cell. Finally, the structures are lacking the equivalent of telomeres; objects on the ends of chromosomes that gradually shorten as cells divide, regulating cell growth.”

“You left out the fact that eighty-seven is a prime number,” Andrews interjected.

“In chromosomes,” Cole continued, ignoring the mathematician, “The telomeres also serve the function of controlling the rate of cellular reproduction, to a certain extent. Without them, cells divide at uncontrolled rates. Cancer, for example, occurs partially because cells mutate in the body and develop without telomeres. Then there are other components, similar to structures in plant cells and yet serving no function we can identify. The mechanics of these cells are completely unlike anything we’ve seen here on Earth.”

She’d finished speaking and sipped at her coffee. Bloom turned to Aiziz and Andrews.

“We’re working with Peter right now,” Aiziz reported, “on determining what we’ll need to generate a high-speed translation software once we’ve mastered the basics of Shiplanguage.”

“How likely is that?”

“Very, actually,” Peter replied. “Once we have the basic structure of the language and know the context of the runic symbols, the rules, the modifiers et cetera, we can generate a ‘ware that’ll translate Shiplanguage into English, or any other Human language we program the machine with.”

“Although it seems likely we’ll have better luck if we translate into Japanese, or one of the Arab dialects,” Andrews said. “From what we were able to record in the language lab before they shut us down, Shiplanguage is very contextual. With the order of the symbols, their placement and the symbols next to them modifying one another in very specific ways. A language as simple and basic as English might not have the complexities necessary to properly interpret Shiplanguage.”

“We may have to filter Shiplanguage through another level of Human language before it can be translated into English,” Aiziz concluded, “but we should still be able, eventually, to come up with an interpreter.”

“For my own part,” Bloom told them, “I’ve been working with engineers through the Grid on a study of the Ship, based on what we’ve seen of it so far.

Basically, we know three things: It's big, it's old and it's the most well built thing we've ever seen." There were mirthful groans of irritation around the table.

"The basics behind the engineering of the Ship are sound," Bloom said. "From what I've seen there's nothing very new or radical as far as principles of engineering go. The real miracles must be in the materials and the technology. That's my basic job here: to locate and extract technology that the World Council thinks will be beneficial to Humanity. Until we actually get beyond the language lab and into the Ship itself, there isn't much as an engineer that I can do. That's why I've filed for a temporary leave of absence. My daughter's home from hospital and I'm going to spend the next few days by her side. I'll return once the World Ship Summit has announced its decision regarding the future of our expedition. Major Benedict will be taking care of you while I'm gone and will be able to reach me if necessary."

"And then what happened?" Doctor Brace asked. James swallowed hard.

"Allison thought it best that she go alone to get Laura home from the hospital," he said, "and I thought it best I try and reach you as quickly as possible."

"You're fortunate that I do two hours a day of Grid linx appointments," Brace said from the viewer boom over James' left eye. "So Allison's not back from the hospital with Laura, yet?"

"No...they should be back soon. I got a text message from Allison saying traffic was bad."

Brace nodded her head.

"You have your work cut out for you where Allison's concerned," she said. "That much is certain. I can't say that I'm pleased with you using the tranquilizers I prescribed to get high. It was stupid and dangerous. For someone who's afraid to die, Mister Johnson, you shouldn't take such a risk with your life. You have to start appreciating your life instead of simply being afraid to lose it. We all die, Mister Johnson. It's inevitable. You have to focus on other things. When you start thinking about death again, fight back. Think about what you have; what's worth living for. What you want to accomplish. What you want to do. Life is for living, Mister Johnson. You're conscious awareness of your mortality can be a blessing in disguise if you let it."

THE UNEARTHING

“Mark, have a look at this,” Cole beckoned from where she’d been working with cell samples.

It was late at night, Cole and Kodo having spent much of the day hunched over their desks, working diligently. Kodo sighed and stretched, coming over from his workstation to Cole’s. He moved with exhaustive lethargy. Cole moved aside, turning the eyepiece of her microscope toward him.

“Here,” she said, “have a look at this. I was trying to isolate the polymerized cells from the regular cells.” Under the microscope slide one of the darker, polymerized cells was stuck against a small cluster of living tissue.

“Notice anything?”

“Not really,” Kodo said.

Cole increased magnification until the cells seemed as big as saucers under the lens. She then positioned a microscopic spot light directly over the polymerized cell.

“How about now?” she asked. In the sample dish, a dot of blue energy had appeared in the polymerized cell and glowing veins of blue could be seen flowing to each of the cells in the tissue sample.

“My God,” Kodo said.

“This is occurring under normal light as well,” Cole explained, “but it’s much stronger when light is concentrated on the polymerized cells.”

“Then this is how the cells have been staying alive; the polymerized cells have become photovoltaic generators.”

“That’s right. And those cellular components that we couldn’t identify are part of that process. In the regular cells, they convert the power current generated by the voltaic cells into nutrients. In the polymerized cells, they run photosynthesis.”

“Simone, you’re a genius.”

“Well, yes, Mark, I am.”

“Good morning, Elder Santino.”

Santino sighed heavily. He could never understand why Catholic clergy always seemed to be such bloody morning people. It was half past six and he wanted for another hour’s sleep, at least. He toggled the comm switch on his console, turning the screen so it faced him.

“Morning, Brother Gage,” he said, to the cheery-faced young man on the roll-out screen before him, “but this early, it can never be good.”

“Actually, I’d think it is,” Gage replied.

“You would,” Santino sniped. “Why? What is it? Our committee isn’t supposed to sit...” He called up his schedule on a submenu. “Shit! Brother Simon, we’re not meeting until this afternoon!”

“I know. You have an unscheduled breakfast meeting.”

Why him? Santino bemoaned. He’d been having breakfast meetings off and on since he’d gotten here. First, the heads of the Aboriginal Delegation had wanted to speak to him and then it was the Hindu Delegation, the Muslims, everyone wanting to hear about the Ship, all of them asking for his perspective on it, as a Shaman. Try as he might he couldn’t get it through these people’s heads that he *wasn’t* a Shaman, he was a scholar.

“Who wants to see me, this time?” he growled. “The Pope?”

“Actually, yes,” Brother Gage said.

Santino sat up in bed, suddenly fully awake. The Pope had asked for an audience. With him.

“He knows I’m not a Shaman, right?”

“Yes.”

“Who told him?”

“I told the Bishop, who told the Cardinal... I can only imagine the Pontiff saw it on your updated biography on our Grid spar.”

“When’s breakfast?”

“His Holiness likes to have breakfast at seven thirty,” Gage replied. “You have about half an hour before someone comes to collect you.”

“Collect me? I’m housed a half-klick from the Vatican.”

“We have to brief you on protocol when meeting the Earthly head of the Roman Catholic Church.”

“Oh. Great.”

“I’ll see you in a half an hour.”

“Half an hour. Great,” Santino grunted. He terminated the linx and rolled out of bed. It was going to be a long, goddamn day.

Santino was escorted into the Pontiff’s inner sanctum and into the walled garden beyond. Besides the Pope, few people ever saw this place. Santino was shown to a table in the middle of the enclosed garden and seated before Pope Simon Peter. The aged Black man poured the former Chief of the Laguna Band a cup of strong coffee.

“Good morning sir,” the Pontiff said. “I request one thing of you before we begin: speak plainly with me, or not at all. Although the people around me mean well, they so often fail to inform me, as much as they flatter me.”

THE UNEARTHING

“All right,” Santino said, “I think I can do that.”

“Good,” the Pope replied, “then I can reasonably expect not to always hear what I want to hear from you. I imagine you’re wondering why you’ve been given an audience with me.”

“Yes your Eminence, the question had crossed my mind.”

A servant brought out a small buffet of breakfast foods. The Pope heaped scrambled eggs and bacon onto his plate, along with toast and sausage. As Santino filled his plate, the Pope glanced at him wryly.

“One of the greatest advantages of age and heading the third largest religion in the world,” he said, “is being able to eat what you please for breakfast.”

Santino smiled. They ate in silence for a few moments, each of them relishing their initial mouthfuls of breakfast. Finally, the Pope spoke:

“Plainly put, Elder Santino,” the Pontiff raised a hand to pre-emptively silence Santino as he saw the other man begin to object to the use of the title, “whether you are comfortable with the honorific or not it owns you as you do it, *Elder*. Plainly put, I have asked to see you because of all the people gathered in Roma as part of this fourth Vatican Council you alone have seen the Ship; you alone were there when it was unearthed.”

“I didn’t actually witness the Unearthing,” Santino said, “but I have seen the Ship; I’ve stood near it and heard the Shipsong.”

“I have read and seen records of testimony from quite a few people who have been near the Ship,” the Pontiff informed him, “mainly my fellow-Catholics who related these encounters to their clergy.”

“Then I don’t suspect there is much new information that I can give you.”

“Every report I have read, every record I have seen, has all been coloured from the Catholic point of view. Even when the accounts were of Catholics finding doubts in their faith having been to the Ship, everything is filtered. We tend to be biased by our faiths. That was one of the reasons I made Vatican IV multifaith. I even invited the Pagans, much to the horror of many Catholics,” the Pope chuckled. “I come from Haiti. I grew up with Voodoo and Catholicism living side by side. All religions, Elder Santino, *all* religions have something to say to us.”

“I wouldn’t even go so far as to say I’m very religious, Your Eminence,” Santino replied. “A scholar of Native American religion and folklore, yes; but not much of a believer.”

“Then you will see things from the perspective of your lack of faith,” the Pope said. “Either way, I need to know what you saw after the Ship was

Unearthed and how you saw it.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand why.”

“Because,” the Pontiff sighed, “it is my intention to go there and when I see the Ship for the first time with as little bias as possible.”

Santino chuckled, hiding it badly taking a bite from his toast.

“You’ll forgive me, but given who you are...”

The Pope smiled, understanding his mirth.

“Yes, yes. I am the head of the Catholic Church. Everything I do or say is coloured by my perspective as the Pope. Tell me Elder Santino: What defines your perspective? Your job? Your religion or lack thereof? The experiences you’ve had? The teachers who educated you? Your family, your friends?”

“Pretty much all of the above.”

“Then what makes you think I am any different? One does not stop being a man just because one becomes Pope. One still has one’s past, one’s life experience to draw upon. My world is very much coloured by my beliefs. I have dedicated my life to God, as revealed to me through Jesus Christ. I have had the good fortune and the blessing to become the Earthly head of His Church. But I am also a man of this world. I have degrees in psychology, anthropology, bio-agriculture, diplomacy...I know six languages...I was part of the Slam Culture as a young man...I served on a freighter during War Three and before becoming a Priest I was married and widowed. Is it so hard to believe, then, that when I see the Ship for the first time I want to see it without lenses of bias in front of my eyes?”

“No...I suppose not,” Santino replied.

The Pontiff smiled.

“It is important for me to see the Ship for what it is. Not what I want it to be,” he said. “That is why I need to know what you saw, when you first saw the Ship.”

James and Allison hardly spoke when she’d returned from the hospital with Allison. He spent that day on the couch and Allison spent it tending Laura. Then the following day Bloom arrived and was taking care of Laura as much as she could. Her daughter was in and out because of the painkillers, but Bloom was tending to her diligently, freeing up Allison and James to avoid each other. When everyone had retired for the night, James and Allison lay in bed together. Allison put on the blacklight and lit a joint. She smoked it for a while before James reached out a hand and she passed it to him. Allison blew out a long stream of smoke, regarding him in the faint gloom.

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“James, we have to talk.”

“Yeah, I know.”

She held her breath, a long moment. Those three words were becoming an all too regular part of his vocabulary. He took his tokens from the joint before passing it back to her.

“Yeah, I know,” he said again, “I’m just scared. Growing old...aging, dying...it’s all just too terrifying for me.”

“James, we all grow old. We all die.”

“I don’t *want* to,” he said, flatly, “and if I have to die I want to know that there’s something else out there, that I’m going to get to be part of.”

“We all do, James.”

“But I’m not sure that there is. I don’t think there’s really anything out there.”

“There has to be.”

“There does? Why?”

He turned to regard her, rolling over to look up into her face. She shook her head in response to his question and then asked him one of her own.

“Because, then what’s the point?”

“What if there is no point?”

Her smile faded, a distant look crossing her face. Her eyes seemed to shimmer under the blacklight. For a moment she seemed different; her face sad and at peace, lonesome...so utterly lonesome...yet happy. James was moved by the half-second hint of serenity he’d seen in her face.

“There is, James.”

“How do you know?”

Allison smiled, not quite understanding herself just why at that second she did know that there was.

“I just do,” she said. She bent to kiss him. “I just do. And you have to accept that even if there isn’t, there’s no point in spending your life afraid. James, I care about you a great deal. But I was so...*pissed* at what you did yesterday, things almost ended between us. You’ve got to get over this, James. You’re going to self-destruct if you don’t.”

“Elder Santino?” Santino squeezed his eyes tighter shut and groaned. Couldn’t anyone in this place sleep *in* a little? He squinted an eye open, looking at the clock. Not nearly seven. The call of his name and honorific came through the console’s speaker a second time. No mistaking *that* voice. He reached for the console by his bed, unrolling the screen and tabbing it on.

The face of his sleep-depriving tormentor appeared onscreen.

“Good morning, Brother Simon,” he groaned, blearily. “You Catholics really don’t believe in letting the wicked rest, do you?” Brother Simon chuckled.

“Actually, Elder Santino I’m calling because His Holiness has requested that you join him for breakfast again this morning.”

“I really wish we could meet for lunch, just once,” Santino quipped, “then I might actually be able to sleep until after eight in the morning.”

“His Holiness is going to be in Zurich, this afternoon,” the young Monk said, “appearing in person before the World Ship Summit.”

“In person?” Santino remarked. “Hell, when I testified before the World Ship Summit it was over the Grid.”

“His Holiness *is* head of the Roman Catholic Church,” Gage replied. “There are over two billion Catholics around the world, Elder Santino. A billion more Christians recognize the sanctity of the office he holds. That kind of influence opens doors.”

“And gets people out of bed at indecent hours too, I’ve noticed,” Santino said, finally resolved to being awake. He rolled out of bed.

“What time is breakfast, today?”

“Seven thirty.”

“So why wake me up now? Has protocol for eating with the Pope changed in the last two days?”

“No, but I thought you’d like time to get ready. You explained how suddenly we came calling for you last time.”

“That was because I like to *sleep* a little, while I can!”

“Oh, okay then,” Gage said, helpfully. “Now I’ll know better for next time. Good day, Elder Santino.”

The screen went blank.

“Next time I’m taking the battery out of this damn thing,” Santino said, tugging on the screen release so it rolled back into the rear of the console.

As Santino was shown into the Pontiff’s private garden again, he discovered a table not set for two, but for several people. Already some had assembled, seated around the table with the Pope. Santino recognized a couple of faces, notably Rabbi Abrams, Imam Ressam and Brahman Radu. Pope Simon Peter rose from his chair to greet Santino.

“There you are, Elder!” he said warmly, shaking Santino’s hand. “Welcome. Have you met the other guests?”

“Some of them, your Eminence,” Santino said as Rabbi Abrams came over to shake Santino’s hand. “I wasn’t expecting so many people to be joining us,” he told the Pontiff.

Simon Peter smiled.

“I feel more as though I am joining everyone else for breakfast,” he said. “No, you’ve all been called here together for a very important reason.”

“His Holiness has made a point of keeping mum on the subject,” Abrams told Santino. “He’s waiting for everyone to be assembled before we’re told what’s going on.”

“I can only assume it has something to do with the Ship,” Santino said.

The Pope smiled.

“Yes, it does,” Simon Peter replied, mirthfully, “in a very direct way.”

He patted both men on the shoulders and moved off to greet more new arrivals, namely the representatives of the Hindu and Pagan delegations.

“Only a couple of people here are actually the heads of their delegations,” Abrams observed. “What do you make of that?”

Santino arched an eyebrow.

“I really don’t know,” he said. “I can only guess that these people distinguished themselves in some way or another over the last couple of weeks and the Pope’s asked us here because of it.”

“Doesn’t it make you wonder what it is you’ve done to impress him?”

“Do you?”

“Frequently,” Abrams said. “Frankly, I thought I’d rather pissed off the head of *my* delegation with some of my statements, so I’m a little surprised at being here. Why do you think you’re here?”

“I’ve been to the Ship,” Santino said. “I was there when it was unearthed, as a matter of fact. His Holiness asked me for my testimony about it just the other day. I can only assume that’s what I’m doing here.”

He said this as he and Abrams sat down at the large table. The other delegates were doing likewise as the Pope strolled casually back towards the table, the head of the Muslim Delegation with him. Everyone stood as Simon Peter took his place at the head of the table. He reached out to either side of him, grasping Rabbi Abrams’ hand on his left and the head of the Pagan delegation on his right. Everyone else around the table likewise linked hands.

“I think it would be appropriate, if we took a moment to bow our heads and pray silently to the Lord in the ways that our cultures have taught us,” the Pope said.

They bowed their heads in prayer. Santino, not much of a faithful person,

did a slow count to sixty in his head and then looked around. Everyone else was still bowed in prayer. He looked around the table, spotting faces he'd come to recognize at the very least as belonging to a particular delegation over the last couple of weeks. Rabbi Abrams, of course from the Jewish Delegation; His Holiness, the Pope; the head of the Pagan Delegation had been introduced to Santino at some function or another. She was a pleasant if somewhat spacey woman; Imam Ressam was not only heading up his delegation, but was Khalif of the New Council of Islam; Brahman Radu was a friend from Santino's committee from the Vatican Council; the Dalai Llama was at his side. Parul Ghandi was, besides the Pope, probably the most easily recognizable person at the table: The head of the Hindu Delegation was also Prime Minister of India. Soon the others had finished praying and the Pope indicated that they should all sit down. Attendants came over and began setting dishes down on the table, creating a small buffet. Before anyone could help themselves, the Pontiff rose and took up Rabbi Abrams' plate.

"What are you having, Rabbi?" the Pontiff asked.

"Bacon, eggs and sausage," Abrams joked. "Actually, toast and honey, with a half of grapefruit, if you please."

Pope Simon Peter nodded his head and bent to the task of serving Abrams' breakfast. In similar fashion, he served everyone else around the table before finally fixing his own plate and sitting down. Small talk dominated much of breakfast, but as second cups of tea and coffee were served, people helping themselves to more food as they desired, the Pope rose again and addressed his guests:

"I've invited you all here this morning because I have an important request to make of all of you," the Pontiff began. "When I called for this conference, back when the Ship Unearthed itself, I did so mainly to stave off a worldwide religious crisis and to find the Ship's proper perspective within the contexts of our religions, particularly what it must mean for the Judeo-Christian teachings and especially the Roman Catholic Church. I feel that although we have made much progress towards better understanding one another's beliefs as well as our own, we have not made great inroads into understanding what the Ship means for us, or more precisely: what the Lord intends for us to learn from the Ship."

"Perhaps," the Dalai Llama suggested with a polite interjection, "the understanding and appreciation we are learning for one another's cultures and religious beliefs, is what we are intended to learn from Ship's Unearthing. I do not find it surprising that it would take such an event to bring

us all together. We Humans are a close-minded species and we hate in each other what we so often hate about ourselves. The Ship has taught us that we have more in common in our hopes, our fears and our values than any of us previously believed.”

The Pope nodded his head at the Buddhist’s sage words.

“That is indeed at the very least part of the message intended for us to find,” the Pontiff continued, “but I no longer see how it will be possible to reach any better understanding as long as we remain here in Rome. The World Council is currently debating whether or not to continue with the Ship Survey Expedition. If they decide not to steps are going to be taken to seal the Ship off from the rest of the World, permanently.”

This was all news that they had heard before. Almost every media outlet was carrying the debate. But the Pontiff was obviously going somewhere and everyone waited attentively, respectfully, while he took a sip of tea to moisten his throat. He let out a small, satisfied sigh as the tea warmed his stomach and then returned to the topic at hand:

“If the world loses access to the Ship,” he said, “we will lose a great deal. Not simply from technological advances, which even I must admit will be of great benefit to humanity if used wisely and judiciously, but we will also lose any possible spiritual benefit the Ship may have for us. That is why I will be traveling to Zurich this afternoon, to testify before the World Ship Summit. And that is why I would ask all of you to come with me so that together we may petition the World Summit to keep the Ship Survey Expedition going and to grant access to the Ship to delegates from the Fourth Vatican Council.”

James got up slowly, carefully from bed. He woke up with a gasping intake of breath, terror filling his insides like the cold sweat covering his skin. Allison was asleep beside him as he rolled from bed. He found a pair of jogging pants and a t-shirt in the dark and crept into the kitchen. He took two whole pills, slipping them under his tongue where they quickly dissolved. Soon he felt a rush of blissful relaxation flow into him. But still the fear was there, like a gibbering creature in the back of his mind. James fumbled in the dark for the pack of joints he knew had been left on the table. He pulled two from the nearly-full pack and made his way out onto the balcony. He lifted the grate in the balcony floor, accessing the fire escape. He climbed down into the park common shared by the apartment complex, strolling the grounds. There were other late-night denizens out at this hour. The type of people James had come to expect in an inner-city common at this time of night: the youth

counterculture, zoners and party freaks; a teen couple having furtive sex in a darkened doorway; low-end gang bangers on patrol for the CBA—the united mob that had grown out of the old Crips and Bloods and their affiliated West Coast crews.

James sat down on the back of a park bench and lit up. It helped James to be outside among people. A homeless old man with a long scar down the left side of his face watched James intently from where he lay propped against the side of a building. His gaze made James feel uncomfortable and so James got up, heading back home. He was staggering by the time he tossed away the joint, under chemical onslaught from the tranquilizers and the marijuana. He got turned around somehow and found himself by an outdoor shelter. He decided to sit down and rest a moment, his head dizzy and everything's perspective sharply screwed up. James could still sense the fear, albeit in a detached fashion. But it was still there, still whispering in his ear that time was not as long as he'd like; he would die, he would die. James sat there, twirling the other joint around in his fingers. He was experiencing mild hallucinations; electric colours in place of the shadows, everything around him in sharp detail, the night sky a grey-green with rolling clouds. He looked up and noticed someone in the shelter. A young man, maybe a couple of years James' junior, pulled a cylindrical ampoule from his pocket, breaking off one end and revealing a needle point. James recognized the object immediately: it was an injector for Oil; the last great designer drug. James watched as the young man brought the injector down hard against his leg. The needle automatically injected the drug. The young man's eyes rolled up in his head and he leaned back against the wall. Oil was almost fifty years old. Legend had it that when prohibition shut down big tobacco, a cigarette company scientist found a way to synthesize heroin and nicotine into a deadly, super-addictive compound he'd called Oil. Indeed the new drug was more addictive than either heroin or nicotine; it was one of a handful of dangerous drugs that was kept strictly criminalized. Possession of more than a few ampoules meant an automatic life sentence, no parole, in most of the Western world. James had done Oil once or twice. The high was amazing, rapturously orgasmic, one that had a calming, blissful effect even as it heightened your senses. In the space of a heartbeat, he considered the terror he'd wake up with in the middle of the night, the paralyzing fear that would overtake him at odd times during the day. The Oil might give him an out; a calmativ that would keep the worst of the fear at bay. He'd only have to use it until he finally got over this terror. He knew he would eventually. Just right now he needed

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something to get him through it. The decision made, he acted instantly. The Oil-head blinked his eyes languidly, still unsure of the predicament before him. James spoke:

“Do you know where I could score?”

World Ship Summit Special Investigative Subcommittee Report

WORLD SHIP SUMMIT SPECIAL INVESTIGATIVE SUBCOMMITTEE REPORT INTO THE EVENTS LEADING UP TO AND THE REPERCUSSIONS OF THE WORLDWIDE ATTACKS BY MEMBERS OF THE UNITED TRINITY OBSERVANTS

DOCUMENT ONE:
INVESTIGATION SUMMARY, PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

PREAMBLE

Following the attacks by the United Trinity Observants against twenty-nine cities across the globe this subcommittee was established in order to determine the following:

1. Whether the assassinations of Professors Everett Scott and Mark Echohawk and the subsequent attacks by the United Trinity Observants were triggered by the Ship's influence over Gabriel Ashe, or if the Ship's presence merely hastened the ultimate plan of a dangerous cult leader.

2. Whether the Ship's presence will ultimately prove beneficial or detrimental to humanity.
3. Whether exploration of the Ship should be allowed to continue, or should the means be found to permanently seal the Ship off from outside access?

For the purposes of these investigations this subcommittee sent researchers to each of the cities that were affected by the United Trinity Observants' attack and to each place where the cult had a base of operations. The subcommittee also dispatched investigators to the major scientific institutions who have devoted resources to the study of the Ship and technologies that may be found within. Several Grid spars were also established with the intention of polling the World population on their opinions of the matter. This subcommittee spoke to political and religious leaders, the militia and law enforcement officials, medical and psychological professionals and the citizenry at large over the course of their investigations. We have chosen not to obfuscate this final report with statistics or charts, nor will we here, present whole testimony of those interviewed. That information is logged into private record on the Grid at several locations; hard copies have been produced and can be viewed in length and at the leisure of the members of the World Ship Summit, the World Council and its member nations. A public rendering of these data and of this report will be made available at the World Ship Summit's discretion in support of whatever decision the World Ship Summit arrives at, based on the information herein.

THE INVESTIGATION

The investigation took place over the course of six weeks beginning two days after the attacks. The first part of the investigation was concerned with learning the background of the United Trinity Observants, the biography of Gabriel Ashe and collecting testimony of survivors and witnesses of the attacks as well as from the emergency crews who responded. This subcommittee has prepared detailed documentary briefings on everything discussed in this report. (See

document 2: Investigating the Church of the United Trinity.) The paragraphs below are a summary:

SECTION ONE THE UNITED TRINITY OBSERVANTS' ATTACKS

Cult experts have studied the United Trinity Observants closely over the course of its ten-year period of operation. Experts suggest that the cult may have been in operation on a smaller scale for as much as five years before beginning its public recruiting. Gabriel Ashe's insanity was as irrefutable as it was unpredictable. Years of systemic drug abuse contributed to his delusions and psychoses. Believing himself to be the son of Jesus Christ, Ashe founded a cult dedicated to his worship for the purpose of elevating him to the supposed third position in the Divine Trinity of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This was in keeping with an early Christian mystic tradition that stated that the Trinity would be made of God, God made Man and Man made God. Ashe believed strongly that the way to elevate himself to Godhood was through the use of powerful consciousness-altering drugs and the self-sacrificing devotion of his followers. Ashe believed himself to be the son of Jesus Christ and therefore destined to become the third presence in the Divine Trinity. Just how Ashe arrived at this twisted Messianic complex is not entirely known but the leading explanation seems to stem directly from his upbringing. Ashe was the only child of a former Carmelite nun expelled from her order for defying numerous Church teachings. His mother died when Ashe was ten and he was placed into a Catholic-run orphanage, where apparently his religious delusions were deepened and strengthened by events that took place there. Though completely insane, Ashe was also highly intelligent and went on to attend the Divinity School in Cornell. He was expelled, however and from at least two other schools of divinity. It is believed that this was when Gabriel Ashe began gathering those followers who would become his Apostles, the inner circle of his Church of the United Trinity Observants.

About five years into the public life of Gabriel Ashe's cult his message began taking on apocalyptic undertones. Following a series

of drug-induced “visions” in which Ashe claimed to have spoken with an Angelic envoy, Ashe began explaining that his ascension to the third person in the Divine Trinity was vital in order to prevent the forces of darkness, which he saw everywhere in the World, from destroying the Throne of Heaven. He began preparing his followers for a “great sacrifice” that would have to be performed in order to complete his ascension to divinity. Ashe believed that the end would come when dark clouds from Hell spread across the world to consume humanity. Ashe believed that only his ascension would prevent this, but said the signs of the time of his ascension would be revealed. However Ashe’s rhetoric seemed to remain stable; neither escalating nor decreasing in overall tone. The “Time of Ascension” seemed to stay forever in the future, at least until the Ship Unearthed itself.

At this time, it should be noted that the above statements were compiled entirely from the following three sources: INTERPOL’s Anti-Cult squad; two former members of the United Trinity Observants (one of whom left the cult six years ago) and people who knew Gabriel Ashe during his time at Divinity School. What follows came entirely from investigators and video recordings retrieved from some United Trinity Observants compounds around the world. Much of it would be seen as conjecture and theory by the World Court Rules of Evidence. What follows is to be seen as the most probable chain of events leading from the Ship’s Unearthing to the United Trinity Observants’ attacks on the Night of Blood:

The Ship’s unearthing and the subsequent media coverage and world attention that it generated must have seemed like just the sort of sign that Ashe was waiting for. He immediately mobilized his worldwide organization, weighing in with the opinion that the Ship was going to be used as “The tool of the Devil”. Ashe moved his Church headquarters to the so-called “Global Village” that sprang up almost immediately around the Ship. His public claims were to be doing this so that they could have a holy and redeeming presence there to fight against the unholy objectification of the Ship.

However once in the Village, Gabriel Ashe’s message became more and more hardline and the rhetoric used to condemn the Ship

and the Ship Survey Expedition more extreme. The end result of this escalation of rhetoric in Ashe's sermons was, of course, murder. The assassinations by Francis George Franck of Professors Everett Scott and Mark Echohawk were still under investigation at the time of the worldwide attacks. However it would now appear that Franck was one of a number of Ashe's disciples being trained for the apocalyptic attacks that followed those murders a little over two weeks later. Whether Francis George Franck's attack was that of a zealous follower overcome by his own enthusiasm to please Ashe or whether he was specifically sent out by Gabriel Ashe to kill Scott and Echohawk is now something we will never know. We do know that following the assassinations of Scott and Echohawk, Gabriel Ashe's sermons changed. The Ship was no longer the tool of the Devil or an unholy temple of false idolatry. It is still unclear what changed Ashe's mind about the Ship during the last week leading up to the attacks by his followers. In the end his final sermons claimed that the Ship was the "Chariot of God" sent to take Ashe and presumably his loyal followers, bodily to Heaven where Ashe expected to be united with God the Father and Christ the Son. The change in Ashe's attitude was sudden and inexplicable. He claimed, according to one recovered video recording, to have been given a new vision by the "Angel of the Lord" who communicated with him during his drug-induced trances. Whatever the case, his change in attitude should have alerted observers and security officials that something was amiss. Within days of the change in Ashe's sermons the Night of Blood attacks were carried out. Experts and former cultists interviewed disagree on the purpose of the attacks by the United Trinity Observants.

Cult experts feel Ashe's intention was both a purging of those outside his cult whom he believed were against him and to send his followers on to Heaven to mark the way for him. However former members of the United Trinity Observants feel that Ashe was using his members as a massive human sacrifice, having them kill the "heathen enemies of a United God" to show their devotion to their God-in-Man Gabriel Ashe and then surrendering their own lives to show how Ashe's disciples loved him more than Jesus' disciples, many of whom publicly are said to have denied Christ for weeks following his crucifixion. Whatever the reasoning behind the attack no one denies that the catalyst for Ashe was indeed the Ship's Unearthing.

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The question that therefore arises is whether or not Ashe would have eventually ordered the same or similar acts of violence had the Ship never been discovered. Five years ago when the teachings of the United Trinity Observants started becoming apocalyptic in nature, people feared another mass cult suicide would occur. As a precaution several levels of national and international law enforcement placed infiltrators inside the cult. No mass suicide ever occurred and the rhetoric from Gabriel Ashe remained apocalyptic. Ashe however never made any direct threats against people or public institutes and therefore managed to avoid prosecutorial measures. Ashe continued to speak of “the Sign from My Father that the Time has come” up until the Ship was unearthed. Because of Ashe’s fervent anti-Catholicism it was believed that Ashe was referring to the death of the current Pope, Simon Peter, as the sign he was waiting for. Some, notably the Vatican’s Swiss Guards, believed that Ashe meant to have the Pope assassinated. Given the size and co-ordination involved in the attacks by the United Trinity Observants it is safe to assume Ashe had been training his army for some time.

At the time of the Unearthing there were several investigations underway into the cult, pursuant to rumours that an attack was planned against the World Council. The Unearthing shifted everyone’s focus, apparently also those of the members of the United Trinity Observants. Before, Ashe was obsessed with the “Rebirth of Ungodly Rome” in the form of the World Council and “the Blasphemous Church of Peter” in the form of the Roman Catholic Church. Ashe’s energies were now focused almost entirely on the Ship. Here was the Sign had been looking for. The conclusion drawn by criminal investigators, cult experts and former members of the United Trinity Observants is that had the Ship not been discovered, eventually Gabriel Ashe would have had his followers perform some other heinous attack in the name of his Godhood.

SECTION TWO ON THE QUESTION OF THE SHIP’S IMPACT ON HUMANITY

No one can deny that the Ship was the contributing focal influence that led Gabriel Ashe to organize the attacks by the United Trinity

Observants around the world. Nor can anyone deny that the dramatic spikes in the rates of depression, recreational drug use, suicide, violent crime and other problematic sociological indicators are directly attributable to the Ship. (See *document 3: Statistical Registry of the Ship's Impact on Humanity*.) When the Ship unearthed itself it led to an immediate and almost disastrously violent conflict between the Emancipated Native Protectorates and the government of the United States. In their testimony before this subcommittee, the religious leaders who from the Vatican IV Council pointed to severe crises of faith in their religions stemming from the Ship's unearthing and subsequent events. These crises of faith are being experienced not just by the lay members of these religions but by members of their clergy, as well. (See *document 4: Transcripts from the Open Subcommittee Hearings*.) There are also countless reports of people who are afraid of the Ship and what it may potentially unleash upon humanity either directly or indirectly. The United Trinity Observants were not alone in their views of the Ship. Survivalists and militia groups around the world are holed up in their bunkers and fortresses, awaiting the doomsday that they believe the Ship heralds. (See *Document 4(A) INTERPOL report to the Subcommittee*.) It cannot be denied that people are living in fear and under a great deal of emotional stress because of the Ship. When it unearthed itself, the Ship changed everything we thought we knew about our place in the universe. We know now that ours is neither the oldest, nor the most advanced form of life that has graced the universe. No one's life will ever be quite the same again. It was the Canadian emissary to the World Council who said it best: "The Ship will prove to have the most consequential impact on human civilization since the discovery of fire".

But this is not to say that all the changes that have occurred are negative. The Ship can also be credited with an increase in attendance of religious ceremonies, despite the ongoing crises of faith experienced by the world's religions. The Ship has, through the resolution of the crisis between the US government and the League of Emancipated Native Protectorates, also proven the effectiveness of the World Council in settling disputes involving the United States, which has long contested the World Council's authority to "interfere" with American sovereignty. In many respects the world's governments have undergone a rapprochement with a notable increase in support

for the World Council. There has been an incredible boom in the world economy, most notably among the scientific, research, information and speculative technology industries. Employment figures for the industrialized world are running at close to an average of 96% for the first time in generations. Although not all the new jobs are in these fields it nevertheless means that nearly everyone has more personal wealth. Many people have put aside racial and religious prejudices, as more as more people come to realize we are one race. For as much fear and dread that the Ship has apparently generated, it has also given the world new opportunities and hope. (*See document 3: Statistical Registry of the Ship's Impact on Humanity.*) The Ship has irrevocably changed the world and the direction it will take.

There is no doubt that the technologies behind the Ship are far in advance of our own. That it was able to absorb or destroy hundreds of billions of tonnes of earth in order to expose itself is proof of this, as is the fact that after so many millions of years buried beneath the earth that the Ship is still at least partially functional. Any new knowledge that we glean from the Ship, whether it be in the form of new understanding of the physical makeup and laws of the universe or in the form of new technology will prove to be either beneficial or harmful to all of Humanity, depending not only on what is discovered, but who discovers it and how that information is used. It is incumbent, therefore, on world leadership to be responsible with the Ship and to be cautious and open-minded in all dealings with it, whether the World Council decides to continue working within the Ship, or not.

SECTION THREE CONCERNING THE STATUS OF THE SHIP SURVEY EXPEDITION AND THE FUTURE OF SHIP EXPLORATION

There are those who would shut down the Ship Survey Expedition and close off the World Ship Preserve. There are even those who would have us attempt to destroy the Ship, all in the name of protecting Humanity from it and from its influence on us. There are also those who feel the work of the Ship Survey Expedition should not only continue but expand in scope. Both sides of the debate make compelling arguments for their positions and although this

subcommittee has recommendations of its own regarding this matter, we feel it is necessary to present both sides of the argument with regards to the future of the Ship Survey Expedition and exploration of the Ship. The following arguments are summaries, based upon the testimony given during the Open Subcommittee hearings. (See *document 4: Transcripts from the Open Subcommittee Hearings.*)

THE ARGUMENT IN FAVOUR OF CONTINUING THE SHIP SURVEY EXPEDITION

The main proponents of continuing with the expedition are the leaders of the world's scientific, medical and academic communities. Their voices are given the additional weight of the commerce and information and speculative technology industries. The arguments in favour of continuing the Ship Survey Expedition are as varied as the people who responded, but a general consensus can be found in the following argument:

That the Ship's technology is far in advance of our own is self-evident. But what is also self-evident is the need that Humanity currently has for such advanced technologies. The greatest crises facing the world today are climate change, disease and overpopulation. Because of the malignant effects Western industry had on the planet prior to War Three and the devastation caused by that war, we are living through the worst period of climate change in recorded human history. Although in the fifty-odd years since the end of War Three much has been done to change our wasteful practices there are many who believe that we have no hope of recovering and that the environment will decay past the point where it can support life. The technologies found within the Ship might well be able to yield to us some means of undoing or surviving the damage past generations have done. The Ship obviously has an energy source of extreme power; One that could solve most of our current power-related crises. Thirty years after the implementation of the Sarajevo Accords banning the mass use of fossil fuels and the mass introduction of the modified Ballard fuel-cell technology we have found that the waste by-products of the fuel cells, water vapour and hydrogen, will lead to increased humidification of the planet and solutions are being sought. Perhaps

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the Ship holds the alternative we need. In space exploration alone, the possibilities for expansion are evident. The Ship obviously came from deep space. Some scientists are looking at colonizing the moon or Mars as a means to alleviate our population crisis. The Ship can offer us the means to make that possible. Many mine sites are being closed, not because of a depletion of resources, but because of the effects mining has had on the environment. The Ship could yield the technological abilities to mine the solid bodies of the solar system, or even the asteroid field out beyond Mars. We will be able to explore space like never before: viably and with immediate and beneficial results and send people quickly and safely throughout our solar system. There exists now, for the first time in Human history, the potential opportunity to not only seek out, but to communicate with and to interact with life from other worlds. But all these opportunities can only come about if we continue to explore the Ship.

Going beyond the practical applications of the superior technologies found within the Ship, there is much we can glean from it. Basic knowledge that we do not have on the origins of the universe, physics, chemistry, biology, all the sciences and perhaps more lay within the Ship. We already know that the builders of the Ship had a periodic table of two hundred and thirteen different elements. What those elements could possibly be, how they could possibly be, are beyond our current realm of knowledge. It would also seem evident that the Ship is composed, at least in part, by some of those elements. The Ship also represents the first opportunity we have had to study an alien culture and see how similar or dissimilar intelligence that evolved elsewhere in the universe is when compared to our own. Pope Simon Peter points out that whether or not the theology of the aliens behind the Ship is represented in some way is also of great importance. How they saw God, whether they believed in God at all, is something very significant. The Ship is a repository of knowledge, of answers to questions that we have long sought, that we dearly need.

THE ARGUMENT IN FAVOUR OF DISCONTINUING EXPLORATION OF THE SHIP

Those who spoke out against the continued exploration of the Ship come from as many different backgrounds as those who believe in the Ship Survey Expedition's mandate. However it seems to be sociologists, psychologists and politicians who dominate this debate. But again the strongest voices in this debate come from the general populace at large and not from their political and professional representation. An interesting distinction is just how similar the individual arguments against continued Ship exploration are when compared to one another. There would appear to be a greater consensus among those who speak out against the Ship than those who would defend it.

If anything, Humanity has proven itself incapable of handling the burden of knowledge and implications that the Ship represents. Since the Unearthing we have witnessed nothing but crisis after crisis. Mass hysteria over aliens among us, the near-riot in the Laguna District immediately following the Unearthing, the violent attacks by the United Trinity Observants are simply signs and symptoms of a greater problem: Humanity's inability to express the level of maturity necessary to cope with the presence of an ancient and vastly superior alien artifact, such as the Ship. Although there are no doubt many members of the general public who are able to deal with the Ship's presence and the obvious impact it has had on all our lives, the planetary population as a whole is not ready for this discovery. The sociological impact the Ship has had on our species is painfully evident: Suicides, drug use, psychological problems and crime rates have spiked far higher than normal. Crises of faith among the world religions are getting out of hand. Anti-government demonstrations have also increased in the world's capitals since the Ship unearthed itself. What we are left with is a world society in crisis.

When proponents of exploring and expropriating technology from the Ship speak, they speak about the great advancements we can expect, from the treasure trove of the Ship. The Ship seems to be more of a Pandora's Box than anything else. There are already voices

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among defence circles who think that the system used to unearth the Ship would make an effective weapon: being able to wipe out a thirty-two kilometre wide area with no collateral radiation or incendiary fallout is quite appealing to the world's military forces. What other weapons could be created from near-infinite power sources? Even if these weapons were left in the hands of the World Council only, or strictly regulated or even out-and-out banned, the fact that the technologies found within could be perverted to such use means that eventually some rogue state or terrorist cell would develop and use one such weapon. Then there arises the question of what is done with the technologies found within the Ship. With whom are they shared? Are they parceled out to certain states only? Given freely to all, or again held within the discretion of the World Council to hand out as they see fit? Whoever controls such technology will control the world. Politically speaking, we could well see the end of individual national sovereignty because of the Ship's technology. And the question that arises is: would there be one dominant superpower and if so, what checks and balances would be in place to prevent global-scale totalitarianism? War Three resulted from the United States' position as sole world superpower. A fourth world war, fought with weapons gleaned from the Ship could well be the ultimate war with the ultimate devastation: the extinction of Humanity. It is a war that no one can afford to fight, a war that no one can afford to have. Humanity is not ready to deal with all that the Ship represents. As there is no turning back from the Ship, now that it is unearthed we must do the next best thing: The Ship must be sealed off, until such time as we have the collective will and wisdom to deal with its secrets in a manner that will not devastate us.

SECTION FOUR FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The above two arguments were both deliberated over by this subcommittee after hearings ended. Public opinion on the matter was almost perfectly split on the subject of the Ship Survey Expedition. Public opinion changed from one survey to the next, making it impossible to determine the world's consensus opinion. A similar

problem was faced by this subcommittee, as we argued the issue. Document 5, *World Ship Summit Special Investigative Subcommittee Findings*, details our conclusions. In summary it is our conclusion the Ship Survey Expedition should continue. There are nonetheless certain recommendations that we feel the World Ship Summit would be wise to implement before the SSE is allowed to return to the Ship:

There is within the Ship an apparently interactive language facility. This would imply that either the Ship itself or a programmed function in the Ship is trying to establish communication. Beyond the learning of the Shiplanguage any and all communication with the Ship must be done solely under the World Council's direct supervision.

Access to the Ship (explored areas deemed safe only) should be granted to non-members of the Ship Survey Expedition who have an official and direct interest in the outcome of the Expedition. This would include world dignitaries, state and local leadership, the media and religious leaders, such as the delegates from Vatican IV. This will do much to reassure the public and to expand understanding and perspective of the Ship.

Any technologies discovered within the Ship must be thoroughly assessed for possible dangers before being released. Anything that does not pass assessment should be returned to the Ship and all records of its existence sealed, if not destroyed outright. The same applies to technologies that pass assessment but then prove to be potentially threatening.

A specific and binding charter must be drawn up and signed by all members of the World Council governing the Ship. The Ship and all technology within must remain the property of the World Council until such time as the knowledge or technology is released to the world at large.

Any technology extracted from the Ship will be highly advanced from our own. It is therefore necessary for this technology to be shared,

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equally and without restraint, among all member nations of the World Council. Efforts must be made to ensure that it does not fall into the hands of non-member states unless they agree to abide by World Council treaties and charters.

An effort must also be made to allay the fears of those who oppose the exploration of the Ship. Their representatives should in fact be brought into the process in order to ensure that their concerns are addressed. In their opposition they may have nonetheless valid issues and useful ideas that will be of benefit to us.

Above all else, everything that has to do with the Ship must be done publicly. This is the best way to ensure that no individual, corporate entity or state misuses anything found within the Ship.

The World Council Special Oversight Commission must continue to monitor not only the Ship Survey Expedition and the World Ship Summit but the World Council and its dealings with the Ship and discoveries made within the Ship. The Oversight Commission must be given real powers to ensure the responsible use of any technology retrieved from the Ship.

If these recommendations are put into place, then it is the opinion of this subcommittee that exploration of the Ship can continue safely and to the benefit of all humankind. Although we would further recommend suspending the Ship Survey Expedition's activities until a charter governing this situation can be drawn up and ratified, we feel confident that the Ship Survey Expedition, under the careful supervision of the World Ship Summit and the World Council, can return to its explorations.

Crises end only when growth resumes. Whether it is progress in the same direction as before the crisis or in an entirely new direction is irrelevant. What is vital is that the crisis is put behind. The world moves on. Crisis only becomes disaster when no growth occurs.

PROGRESS

The jump plane launched itself away from the International Airport in Cairo, Egypt. The passengers were pressed tightly into their seats by the G-force acceleration as the plane climbed for orbit. Doctor Matthew N'bunga closed his eyes until he felt the fluttering, falling sensation that meant the plane had achieved orbit and zero gravity. He slipped on his console headset as the plane began its trek east, towards Los Angeles. From there, N'bunga would be taking another plane further east-southeast to New Mexico and the World Ship Preserve. On the eyepiece viewscreen of his console was a representation of the Ship's periodic table of elements; two hundred and twenty-seven in all.

Doctor N'bunga was one of the world's top theoretical physicists; he had worked a number of years ago with the Nairobi Seven; an international group of physicists, chemists and astrophysicists who had worked for years to successfully disprove the Unified Field Theory; a several-decades-old fallacy that had hobbled physics for far too long. N'bunga was joining the Ship Survey Expedition at the World Ship Summit's request. With the Special Investigative Subcommittee's recommendation to continue the SSE endorsed by the World Ship Summit, work was finally about to resume. N'bunga accepted a sip of coffee from the stewardess and studied the two

hundred and twenty-seven elemental symbols before him. He smiled, deep wrinkles creasing his wide, square face. N'bunga had been considered a radical in the physics world because of some of his theories. Among them, his pet theory which had landed him the job with the SSE: It was an established fact that some higher elements on the periodic table could only be created in a laboratory. Even then they were so unstable that they could only exist for a fraction of a second. Many scientists believed these elements simply too unstable to exist naturally and yet there was evidence that they were present in the universe. N'bunga's theory stated that the reason these elements were so unstable was that their atomic matrices were only capable of existing within the bounds of higher dimensional space. Those elements could no more exist within the bounds of three-dimensional space, than a Human being could exist exclusively within the limited bounds of one-dimensional space. N'bunga's equations, while sound, were discounted by much of the scientific community based on the notion that all matter existed throughout all dimensions, though humans were only capable of perceiving three or four. N'bunga promptly discounted this by using careful application of Everett's Multiverse Theory, Freidman's Quantum Reality Theory, Gavel's Multidimensional Time Law and Andrews' Probability Equations. In fact, N'bunga was an old friend of Professor Andrews and was looking forward to seeing him again almost as anxiously as he was anticipating encountering the Ship for the first time.

Colonel Bloom jogged her way along the track extending over the Ship, listening as her footfalls fused into the Shipsong's symphony. The Ship was aglow in the pre-dawn sky, an alien cityscape awash in blues and golds. Bloom had been back at Fort Arapaho for a week, having spent the last three on sympathetic leave at her daughter's side. Laura had undergone lung replacement surgery and returned home again. Bloom was in high spirits; Laura was expected to make a full recovery and when Bloom had returned to her duties at Fort Arapaho word had come down that the SSE was to resume work. As of today. They were expecting the arrival of one Doctor Matthew N'bunga, who once settled would be working with Doctors Kodo and Cole on the Ship's scientific readouts and with Doctor Aiziz in the Ship's language lab. Their goal at this point was still to enter into direct communication with the Ship. The Shipsong rang out around Bloom, as she completed her run; *she was going back to the Ship!* It was besides Laura's recovery the best news she

had heard since the United Trinity Observants had made their desperate, final attack.

The plane from Los Angeles touched down and powered off. Soon a door in its side opened and a boarding ramp extended. Bloom stood by the ramp with Major Benedict and Professor Andrews. After some moments a tall, thin and older Black man stepped from the plane. Andrews moved forward to greet him. When Doctor N’banga saw Andrews approaching, he rushed down the ramp to greet his old friend with a warm hug.

“Michael!” N’banga exclaimed. “It’s been far too long!”

“How are you, Matthew?” Andrews asked. “I haven’t seen you since your guest lecturing days at Cambridge!”

“And the last I’d heard, old friend, you held the Chair for Maths over there.” Andrews’ smile seemed suddenly very strained.

“Yes,” he said. “That...didn’t exactly work out.” He turned around, gesturing to Colonel Bloom and Major Benedict, both of whom were left wondering just how many universities Andrews had been expelled from.

“Matthew, allow me to introduce you to Colonel Margaret Bloom, base commander at Fort Arapaho and head of the Ship Survey Expedition.”

“Pleased to meet you, Doctor N’banga,” Bloom said, shaking his hand.

“And this is Major Jack Benedict,” Andrews said, “head of security for both the base and the SSE.” Benedict shook N’banga’s hand.

“Welcome to Fort Arapaho,” Benedict said.

“Doctor N’banga, I’m sure, given the time difference, that you’re anxious to get settled,” Bloom said. “Your bags are being taken to your quarters. If you like I can take you over there right away.”

“That won’t be necessary, Colonel,” N’banga said. “I’ve actually been taking flight-lag medication and I’m quite anxious to see the Ship.”

Bloom smiled.

“A feeling I know all too well,” she said. “Our daily briefing is in one hour. That’ll give you time to get settled. I’ll see you, then.”

Andrews took N’banga from the airfield.

“Come along, Matthew,” he said. “I’ll take you on to the commissary and some food and then we’ll go to the main research lab. Doctors Aiziz, Cole and Kodo are already at work.”

“I can’t wait to get in,” N’banga answered.

“What is the latest report from the Ship, Mister Chairman?” the British Defence Minister asked. “With the Ship Survey Expedition about to resume, has there been any sign of Colonel Jude, or Gabriel Ashe?”

It was her go as head of the Committee meeting and it was being held on London time.

“No,” the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs said in reply to her question, “Jude’s men made a final sortie to the Ship last night. They found no trace of either of them.”

The Minister re-focused his attention on the matter at hand and stifled a yawn. It seemed that since he’d allowed the Prime Minister to appoint him Defence Minister he’d not had a proper night’s sleep.

“Was that prudent?” the British Minister asked the Chairman.

“Every precaution was made to minimize risk of exposure,” the Chairman said. “Microwave suppression fields to cut out existing surveillance systems...digital simulations of the environment channeled simultaneously into surveillance banks...stealth approach...the usual gamut.”

“And what did they find?” the British Minister asked.

“Nothing,” the Chairman replied, “not a damn thing. It looks as though Ashe and Jude somehow made their way deeper into the Ship.”

“Then there’s still the risk of a discovery when and if the SSE find a way into the Ship?” the Natural Resources Minister asked, from his seat next to the Minister.

“At this juncture I suspect that if they find anything, it’ll be two dead bodies,” the Chairman said, “but without foreknowledge of what the rest of the layout of the Ship looks like, we have no way of knowing. Jude and Ashe could have gotten anywhere within the inner hull or the airframe.”

“Are they now presumed dead, then?” MI-6 asked. “And if so, what do we do when and if their bodies *are* discovered? We don’t have any containment of the situation.”

“With Major Benedict in place,” the Chairman said, “and Colonel Bloom under General Harold’s thumb we can anticipate containment.”

“Would either of them be capable of a sanitization?” the British Minister asked. The word alarmed the Minister when he heard it spoken. It only had one meaning in this context; and a sanitization was one of the most extreme measures imaginable. To the Minister it was downright unthinkable.

“If necessary I believe Major Benedict might,” the Chairman said, “however, Colonel Bloom would not and would most certainly fight such an order if she heard wind of it.”

“You *believe* Major Benedict *might*,” MI-6 repeated. “Not exactly what I’d call a glowing recommendation.”

“When the bloody hell did we become a league of assassins?” the Minister interjected. “First the Chairman orders a hit on Gabriel Ashe, now you’re talking about a death warrant on whoever discovers the corpse? This isn’t what the Committee is here to do!”

“There is precedent, Minister,” his British counterpart explained. “Antecedent of the Ashe slaying: the Ukraine, two years ago, for example.”

“I was not party to that mass killing,” the Minister said. “I wasn’t even a member of the Committee then. Thank God. And what happened in the Ukraine was *barely* justifiable under the charter of suppressing evidence of extraterrestrial life. That entire mandate’s been obliterated with the unearthing of the Ship. Now you’re talking about killing people for discovering the bodies of a lunatic and a government killer.”

“The Minister raises an excellent point,” the Curator of the Smithsonian Institute added. “Surely an appropriate cover can be found to explain the bodies should they be discovered? They’ll be badly decomposed to be sure; enough so that no cursory identification of Gabriel Ashe will be possible. The bodies can always disappear after being discovered.”

“It isn’t likely that any explanation we come up with will be wholly believed,” the Chairman replied.

“That’s often the case with the real truth as well,” the Minister countered. “I move that we prepare a contingency strategy for the discovery of the corpses of Gabriel Ashe and Colonel Jude that does not involve terminal sanitization.”

“Seconded,” the Curator concurred.

“And what if they’re discovered alive?” MI-6 asked.

“After nearly eight weeks it isn’t likely they’ll be discovered at all,” the Minister said. “If any one of them comes out alive I think we can agree it’s going to be Colonel Jude. And from what I know about him he’ll sanitize witnesses, himself.”

“There is a motion before the Committee,” the British Minister said. “All in favour?”

It was with great reluctance that a small majority of hands were raised. A bare majority for the motion, but since joining the Committee it was only the second motion the Minister had seen carry without unanimity; the only vote he had ever seen the Chairman and MI-6 lose and the only time he had dared vote against both the Chairman and MI-6.

Bloom couldn't help the spring in her step as she strode into the briefing room. In less than two hours she would be going back into the Ship.

"Good morning," she said, sitting down at the conference table, "I trust most of you have had the chance to meet Doctor N'banga, the newest member of the SSE."

N'banga nodded his head and smiled. Bloom pulled out the screen for her console and continued.

"So, let's get right into it," she said. "I'm as anxious as anyone else to get back to the Ship. First off: as per new directives from the World Ship Summit, Major Benedict and a team of security officers will be accompanying us to and into the Ship. When and if we get deeper into the Ship security officers will be present with us at all times. Doctor Cole, you'll have two guards posted at the lift inside the First Chamber, inside your infirmary. Sonia, two more will be stationed just outside the Language Lab. The major's asked me to relay all this as he is coordinating last-minute efforts to ensure our safe passage to the Pyramid."

Bloom referred to her console again.

"Sonia, how are things coming on the language front?"

"We've been working with linguists, mathematicians and cryptographers from around the world over the Grid," Aiziz said. "We have been able to determine that Shiplanguage is largely contextual; each runic symbol can have any number of meanings depending on its position in a sentence, the runes adjacent to it and finally, the total number of runes in a sentence." She referred to her console and continued: "We've also discovered basic meanings for over a hundred runes. We now believe that we have a sufficient basic written vocabulary to begin learning Shiplanguage in earnest. From here we should be able to quickly establish a direct dialogue with the Ship."

"Excellent news," Bloom said. "Any idea how long that'll take?"

"We should be in full communication within eight to ten days," Aiziz replied. Bloom took a long swallow of her coffee, making a note on her console.

"That's terrific," she said. "Doctor Kodo, anything to report from biology?"

"Well we now know that a great deal of the Ship, including parts of the interior and exterior hulls, is made of living tissue," Kodo replied, "much of which is capable of nourishing itself by photosynthesis and osmosis. We haven't seen evidence of neural pathways, muscle tissue, or even circulatory systems; it looks like the Ship's cells are generalized instead of specialized;

they do a little bit of everything. We know the cells generate more energy than they need, but I think this energy is passed on to other cells as well as used in cellular mitosis. I don't believe, however, that these cells produce enough energy on their own to be the source of the Ship's power."

"Neither do I," Bloom concurred. "However, I would like to know what purpose all the biological components have."

"We've discussed this with Mister Paulson," Doctor Cole replied.

She turned to look at Peter.

"Looking at the Ship from an anthropological point of view," Peter said, "it seems to have been built by a society that was on a developmental cusp; a transition from a mechanical-based technology to one that was driven purely by living, biological technology. The Ship is a biomechanical hybrid and may have been one of the last of its kind to use mechanical components at all."

"The living tissue within the Ship has been grown into the existing airframe and inner and outer hulls," Cole continued. "The biological components very probably serve many functions. Not the least of which is the lift tube that carries us from the Pyramid into the Ship. But until we can get further into the Ship we won't know for sure how extensive the biotechnology is."

"Peter, I understand you also made discoveries within the Ship?" Bloom asked. Peter nodded and swivelled his chair from side to side as he spoke:

"I've identified about ten different alloys that we've never seen before," he said. "I've got a full report, but just glossing over: there are materials stronger and lighter than titanium; one metallic compound that is completely non-conductive—it doesn't even get warm when exposed to flame. Another alloy conducts direct current, but not alternating current and another alloy that reacts to different wavelengths of visible light. I've only just begun cracking their molecular structures. I'll have more for you, later."

Bloom made a further notation on her console and then turned her attention to the newest member of the Ship Survey Expedition.

"Doctor N'banga," she said, "granted, you've only been with us for two hours, but do you have anything to add?"

"Actually, thanks to Doctors Aiziz and Andrews' help I've been able to start studying many of the physical laws described in the Shiplanguage lab database," N'banga said. "I've seen quite a number of basic laws that concur with many of our own findings and a few new equations that, if I translated properly, are quite enticing and bound to shake up academia."

N'banga referred to his own console, pulling up the now-familiar two hundred and twenty-seven-element periodic table.

"Most importantly, I think I've cracked the Ship's periodic table of elements."

"And what have you found?" Bloom asked.

"All the elements we've been able to predict are present. However, many of the new elements reported on the Ship's table can only exist when fused with lesser elements, creating, perhaps, some of the alloys Mister Paulson reports having isolated but not yet classified," N'banga said. "Other elements, only a very small number, can only exist in spacetime states in which the known laws of physics break down completely: higher dimensions in spacetime, within the destructive environment of a black hole, et cetera. But there are still other elements on the table, by far the vast majority of the new elements, that don't work under either condition. I have ideas about what specific conditions would allow for these elements to exist, but I have to model out the equations."

"You've been busy," Bloom observed.

"I've had the help of some of the best minds around," N'banga acknowledged. Bloom smiled. Andrews cleared his throat.

"Tell me, Matthew, what do you make of the fact that the number of elements reported on the Ship's table is a prime?" Andrews asked, "Specifically, two hundred and twenty-seven elements? And that two hundred and twenty-seven is the fifty-ninth prime number and that fifty-nine is itself a prime number?"

"Fifty-nine is the seventeenth prime number," N'banga replied, after a moment's reflection. "And seventeen is also a prime number. It is the seventh prime number and seven is also a prime number." He paused. "However, seven is the fourth prime number on the list and four is not a prime number as it is divisible by more than just one and itself. Therefore, I think the significance of there being two hundred and twenty-seven elements on the periodic table is that it makes for an excellent intellectual exercise for paranoid and obsessive mathematicians." Everyone, Andrews included broke up laughing at this observation.

"That about wraps up this meeting, kids," Bloom said. "Let's go make ready to go down, into the Ship."

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They stood on the edge of the Ramp leading towards the Pyramid. Doctor N’banga looked out, awestruck by the sight before him, his equipment pack slung forgotten over one shoulder. The golden surface of the Ship was spread out across the horizon, shining brilliantly in the morning sun; the Shipsong a loud, crystalline chorus of alien canting echoing in the air.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” Doctor Andrews remarked, standing beside his old friend. “None of us here can get enough of it. Everyone on the base spends much of their free watching it, listening to it.”

“I’ve seen images of it,” N’banga said, shaking his head. “Three-D’s, also; but nothing...nothing compares to this. Nothing could have prepared me for this. The...*immensity* of it...Dear God in Heaven, Michael; wars have been waged over less.”

After a moment’s contemplation, he added: “And one war was indeed waged over it.”

“You should have been here when we did the flyover,” Andrews said, “back before they had dammed up the Rio Salado. There was a waterfall.”

N’banga looked at him, grinning dubiously.

“A waterfall?”

Andrews nodded.

“Ten kilometre drop. Not nearly as impressive as Victoria Falls mind, but still quite spectacular.”

“I can imagine,” N’banga said. “Do you think they could arrange another flyover? I *would* love to see it from the air.”

“There are two flights every hour,” Andrews replied. “They barely have time to refuel before taking off again.”

N’banga grinned.

“Come along, then,” Andrews said. “The transports are loaded and waiting.”

The transports rolled to a halt a few meters from the Pyramid. Benedict left to confer with his security crew, already in place within the Ship. Support personnel unloaded cargo from the transports and began hauling it into the Pyramid. The senior members of the SSE gathered together in a tight knot, save for Doctor Cole who was working with her medical staff in their efforts to re-equip the infirmary.

“This trip down is basically to continue working in the Language Lab,” Bloom said. “However, there are a couple of other jobs that need doing. First, I want everyone within the Ship to be recording video and audio on their

headsets. Doctor Kodo, after looking over the images taken on our last descent I've seen some structures within the Ship that I want us to take a look at. Based on what you and Doctor Cole report, I think they might be points where the biological and mechanical components of the Ship meet. And Peter, Major Benedict will need your help setting up a proper Ship-to-surface communications relay. Sonia, the rest of the show is yours. Let's go start talking to the Ship."

N'banga's first descent into the Ship was as dumbfounding an experience for him as it had been for all members of the SSE. Even now, the veterans of the Ship Survey Expedition were as awestruck as N'banga as the lift car dropped from the outer hull down through the airframe. The cavernous gap between inner and outer hulls revealed a cityscape of structures woven into the inner and outer hulls, the airframe and the space between. Bejewelled with shimmering lights, the wondrous structures held their awe until at last the inner hull rose up to meet them and consume them.

Aiziz led the way back to the language lab. The columnar central display had recessed itself into the dais and the wall panels ringing the room were blank. But as the SSE crossed into the chamber the language lab came back to life, the black column rising and flooding with gold runic symbols and numeric glyphs. As the keyboard from the central display unfolded itself all the smaller panels burst to light in with gold runes on black, displaying arrays of information. Aiziz approached the main terminal while Andrews led N'banga behind it to the panel from which the Ship's physics archive was accessed. Aiziz adjusted her headset, ensuring her camera boom was properly framing the scene. Over her left eye the display boom showed everything the camera was recording. Satisfied with the display, Aiziz turned her attention to the keypad she wore on her right forearm. She entered a sequence on the keypad, calling up her careful notations on Shiplanguage. Based on what she'd translated of the main display this first message was a greeting of sorts, as well as a command prompt. Given the contextual nature of Shiplanguage she wasn't entirely confident of her translation; there were a couple of possibilities that made sense, but Aiziz believed she knew what the message said and what it was asking for. Selecting runes from her study list and double-checking the sequence, Aiziz typed a short message onto the Ship's runic touchpad: *We wish to learn of your language*. Suddenly the main display went blank; for a horrible minute Aiziz thought she had entered the

wrong sequence of runes into the tablet before her. Then a new message in runic Shiplanguage appeared. Aiziz translated it quickly, while referring to her notes. Roughly translated, the Ship's response said: *This Emissary aspires to teach our language*. The voice of the Ship burst out a new, complex chain of alien syllables. Aiziz took this to be the vocal equivalent of the written language. A half-second later the Ship printed another line of text below the first. In perfect English, the message was repeated: *This Emissary aspires to teach our language*.

Bloom and Kodo stood in the middle of the short hall between the First Chamber and the Language Lab. There was a break in the gold mosaic along the wall: a quarter-meter wide area of grey-black which interrupted even the luminous blue band that bisected the walls. The black strip ringed the corridor, floor, walls and ceiling.

"See what I mean?" Bloom asked.

Kodo nodded.

"Yeah," he said, using a laser pointer to trace a line where the gold wall and grey-black material wove together. "This is almost identical to a graft-point between living tissue and a prosthetic limb. You can only see where it interweaves from up close."

"I think it's a bulkhead stress joint," Bloom said.

"I found something else over here," Kodo said, moving a little ways back towards the First Chamber.

He used the pointer to trace around an area above the blue energy line. On their eyepieces, the detail surrounding the area Kodo had traced out blurred and faded, so only the area he'd highlighted was in sharp, clear focus.

"This segment is a shell of polymerized cells," Kodo explained. "They blend in almost perfectly with the surrounding wall. You can just see where their colouring is slightly different and their patterning doesn't quite match that of the surrounding wall."

"They're definitely not superfluous or decorative," Bloom said. "Look there: what is that?"

She took Kodo's pointer and highlighted a subtle curvature on the lower end of the section of cells that Kodo had identified. It sloped down along the wall, towards the band of energy.

"I hadn't noticed that!" Kodo exclaimed, reaching to touch it, "It seems to be coming out of the wall, but it isn't a component. It looks like a pipe; a conduit. Look where it meets the cells. There are thin veins of blue." Bloom

leaned closer to the wall. Indeed there were snakes of blue, less than a millimetre wide snaking through the pipe-like structure up into the patch of polymerized cells. In the center of the cell body she saw a dull, blue spot, slightly recessed.

“What’s this?” she asked, pointing it out to Kodo.

“It looks like a dirty blue crystal,” Kodo replied. “What does it do, I wonder?” He took a sudden look around the hallway, his eyes widening in shock.

“Oh, my God,” he said.

“What?”

“Look,” Kodo said. “Now that we’ve found *one* of these things look how many there really are.” Bloom looked around. Plainly visible now along both walls down the entire length of the corridor were off-colour patches of polymerized cells, each with a dull blue orb nested in its center.

“God,” Bloom said in wonder, “I’d love to know what they are.”

“You and me both,” Kodo replied, “I’m going to want to take some samples down here. Run a biopsy on one of these structures; see what the whole thing looks like from the inside out.”

“I think we’ll hold off on that,” Bloom cautioned, “wait and see if the World Ship Summit clears such an act. I don’t want the Ship to think we’re attacking it.”

“Attacking it?” Kodo asked, incredulous. “Are you kidding, Colonel? The Ship’s almost thirty-two kilometres across. A vessel this size isn’t going to notice the loss of a few hundred cells. It’d be like having a mosquito bite you in your sleep: you just wouldn’t notice.”

“No, but what happens if the Ship wakes up and decides to swat the mosquito?” Bloom countered. “We’ve seen that the Ship has a pretty big hand. I don’t want to have it coming at me.”

Kodo frowned, as he looked around the hall.

“Look, Doctor Kodo,” Bloom said, “I can clear PET and CT scans, even MRIs, if you want them. But I don’t think we should take invasive action without the World Ship Summit’s approval. Not given the power that the Ship’s demonstrated.”

Bloom’s linx chimed.

“Bloom here,” she said, toggling open the channel.

“Colonel it’s Doctor Aiziz; we’ve begun a direct dialogue with the Ship.”

THE UNEARTHING

Peter and Benedict were crouched over a pile of photonic systems components, making modifications to a high-power microwave relay. They were in the Pyramid, trying to align their relay with its twin in the First Chamber and complete a signal network between the Ship and Fort Arapaho.

“I really wish James were here,” Peter said. “He’s the real tech hound. He’d have had this whole relay up and running, by now.”

“That’s James Johnson?” Benedict asked. “He’s the one who sent the signal from Laguna to INN about the Unearthing, right?”

“Yeah,” Peter replied, “but it wouldn’t have made a lick of difference if you guys aboard Concord 3 hadn’t sent that signal.” Benedict smiled.

“We only got out a partial feed,” he said.

“That’s not what I heard,” Peter said. “But no, James did get a good, strong signal out to INN; and he cracked into a portable US Army Grid backbone to do it.”

“That’s no easy feat,” Benedict said, as they completed calibrations on the microwave relay’s signal beacon. “In fact, before your friend James did it, there were experts who would have said it was impossible. It sounds to me like you miss him.”

“I miss him a lot,” Peter affirmed. “I haven’t spoken to him since the Prof’s funeral. I tried linxing him, but he hasn’t been getting back to me.”

They worked in silence a few more minutes before standing up. Benedict checked the beacon with a handheld device.

“This looks okay,” he said. “There are a few more adjustments that need to be done on the one downstairs, though. Let’s pack up our tools and go.”

They put away their equipment and leaving the beacon where it was, stepped into the waiting lift car. The crystalline egg sealed itself and began its descent to the First Chamber. Peter’s face was troubled with grief, as they crossed the cavernous gap of the airframe into the Ship. Peter remembered the first time they’d dropped into the Ship; the SSE newly-formed, still not quite gelled as a group. James had stared out the crystal walls of the lift car at the gargantuan airframe with as much humbling awe and wonder as any of them. But in James’ eyes Peter had seen a glare; a fire of anticipation, desire. And that night the Prof had died, shot and killed by Francis George Franck. Whatever fire had been in James’ eyes had died with him. Peter heard from Laura Echohawk after one of Peter’s many linxes to James had gone unanswered. James wasn’t doing too well since the attacks by the United Trinity Observants. He was hitting hard drugs, suffering panic attacks, withdrawing...Peter’s friend was lost and there was nothing he could do to help.

The lift car sank into the inner hull, halting inside the First Chamber. The crystalline wall parted to allow Peter and Benedict to exit. Doctor Cole, on constant vigil within the infirmary stepped up to meet them.

“You’re just in time, gentlemen,” she said. “Doctor Aiziz has just entered into direct communication with the Ship.”

The senior members of the Ship Survey Expedition were gathered around the central column in the Language Lab. Aiziz stood with her back to it, seven pairs of eyes focused on her. Even to such a familiar group of people as her colleagues in the SSE she found speaking to a group terrifying.

“I have spent the last little while learning from the Ship the meanings and contexts of many of the runes in Shiplanguage,” she said, her voice faltering. “We have the whole Shiplanguage runic alphabet already, as found on the Codex in the First Chamber. There are two hundred and twenty-seven runes in Shiplanguage.”

“That’s the same number of elements on the Ship’s periodic table,” N’banga added.

“Yes,” Aiziz said, “and fortunately for us, the periodic table is represented by its own, different set of symbols. Otherwise Shiplanguage might become impossibly confusing.”

“How are you managing to learn the definitions of the runes?” Bloom asked.

“The Ship generates pictographs beside each rune, the meaning of which becomes clear with examples. The only complexity is with certain abstract concepts that the Ship does not express the same way we do. However, we are able for the most part to work around them.”

Aiziz referred to a handheld console and continued:

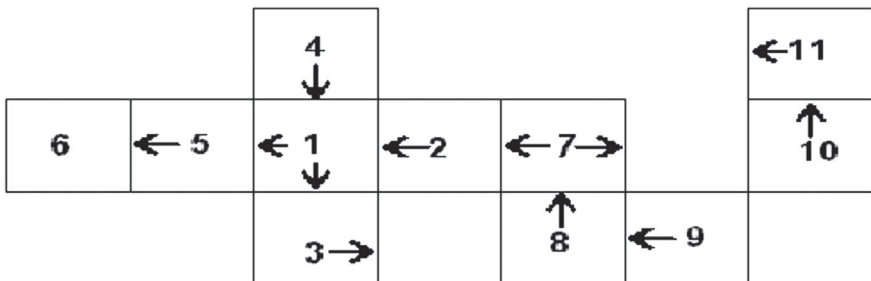
“We believe the individual runic meanings that we’ve missed will become evident as we continue to communicate with the Ship. Professor Andrews has worked out the means of determining the context and meanings of the runes. Professor?”

Aiziz stood aside as Andrews came to stand in front of the black dais. He handed out sheets of paper to each of the members of the SSE. On each sheet was a diagram.

“The Ship has provided us with equations that allow us to determine the definition of each of the two hundred and twenty-seven runes according to their numeric value between one and two hundred and twenty-seven,” Andrews said. “The numeric placement of any given rune within a

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Shiplanguage sentence, which can contain a minimum of three or a maximum of eleven runes and the numeric value and placement of the runes immediately adjacent to each particular rune determine the meaning and context of said rune, as you can see on the diagram I've just given you. You can see by the arrows which runes in which order affect the context of which other runes." Here Andrews paused, so they could study the diagram in question:



"Shiplanguage is complex and highly evolved. However it is also easily translated, once the rules governing Shiplanguage and the definitions of the runes themselves are compiled," Andrews concluded.

"We are also aided by the fact that the Ship seems to have already mastered several Earth Languages," Aiziz said.

"It's *what*?" Bloom demanded.

"The Ship has mastered English, German, Japanese, Farsi, and Cantonese and Spanish," Aiziz replied. "They represent the six most important languages on the planet for commerce and diplomacy. However the Ship wishes us to demonstrate a mastery of Shiplanguage before entering into a full dialogue with us."

"Why?" Bloom asked. "Wouldn't it be easier for us to converse with the Ship in one of our native languages? Why make us go to the trouble of learning Shiplanguage?"

"The Ship wants to determine that we are sufficiently intelligent, sufficiently advanced as a species, to communicate with us," Aiziz answered. "And learning Shiplanguage, with its complexities and subtleties would seem an appropriate test."

Upon being informed of the status of communications with the Ship, the World Ship Summit immediately set up a video-conference with the senior members of the Ship Survey Expedition. Bloom and her people sat around the conference table in the SSE's briefing room facing the large wall console opposite them. Onscreen were the senior delegates to the World Ship Summit sitting around a far more elegant table in far more opulent offices in Geneva.

"Good afternoon, Colonel Bloom," Helmut Danielewski, the World Ship Summit's chairman said.

"Good evening, Helmut," Bloom replied, in deference to the time difference between the World Ship Preserve in New Mexico and Geneva.

"Needless to say, we were quite surprised by the report you filed today," Danielewski said. "We had expected it to take several days—weeks, even, to begin direct communication with the Ship."

"This isn't a case of accelerated progress, ladies and gentlemen," Bloom said. "Doctor Aiziz and the SSE linguistics team have spent every day since the Expedition was suspended working on this. Very likely had the attacks not occurred, we would have reached this point two or three weeks earlier."

"We understand this as well, Colonel," Selah Hamadi, the Egyptian delegate replied. "What concerns us is that we have barely begun exploring the Ship; we know next to nothing about it and we have gone from just barely learning the basics of Shiplanguage to being on the verge of dialogue with it."

"Then the World Ship Summit should also realize," Aiziz spoke out, emboldened by her frustration at these bureaucratic hesitations, "is that the Ship doesn't simply wish to communicate with us; it wants us to learn how to communicate with *it*. Very likely, if the Ship wanted to it would be able to join this video-conference and speak for itself. Instead, the Ship is teaching us by giving us problems to solve, based on our own acquired knowledge. We can only learn what we have the capacity to recognize, which makes learning Shiplanguage an especially challenging—and rewarding—task."

"Would it be fair to say that the Ship is testing us, to find out our level of development?" the American delegate asked.

"I'd say the Ship has a fair idea of our level of development, already," Bloom replied. "We dug it out of the rock, established a small city around it, began flying over it several times a day, blasted microwave transmissions out from around it on an hourly basis and we've hit it with every type of scan imaginable, from Alpha-particle bombardment, to X-ray spectrography. The Ship knows where we stand as a species, developmentally speaking. What the Ship wants to establish, unless I miss my guess, is if our intelligence and

maturity as a species is as far along as our technology.”

“I think my colleague’s question was directed more towards the Ship’s intentions,” the Israeli delegate said.

Most of the SSE fought the urge to roll their eyes.

“The threat assessment against the Ship was made, a long time ago,” Bloom said. “And as I recall, it was done by this very Summit.”

“We have new information, now,” the American delegate said, icily.

Bloom didn’t like his tone. She got to her feet, walking around the conference table to where the vidcam was mounted.

“If you freeze up the Ship Survey Expedition every bloody time we discover something new,” Bloom growled, “we won’t be getting much work done. The Ship is not doing anything we can deem threatening. We’re already operating under orders to wait for the World Ship Summit before we initiate real communication with the Ship. We have the potential to be in full communication with the Ship within days. I would suggest that *now* is the time to prepare whatever list of questions and statements you want us to deliver to the Ship. We’ll abide by our orders and wait for your authorization, but keep in mind the Ship is probably going to expect us to have something to say sooner rather than later. I think it’s in all our interests, therefore, if we go forward. I’m sure that the World would agree given the trillions of dollars that the World Ship Summit and the Ship Survey Expedition has already cost its voters...and its taxpayers.”

CONVERSATIONS

The time it takes most users of Oil to become addicted to the drug varies somewhat, but as a rule the average user needs one week or less of habitual use to become addicted. Habitual use is defined as between one and three doses daily. Some people take to a drug like fish take to water. Others try a drug once and move on. James Johnson fell squarely into the former category. Having used Oil steadily already for nearly four weeks, James was an Oilhead, a “forty-weight” in common vernacular. Within a week James had gone from stabbing himself in the leg with a fast-injector whenever he had a panic attack to using Oil three or four times a day. Within two weeks Allison and Laura had discovered he was using. Of course they tried to get him to stop. But they couldn’t hope to understand. They didn’t know how horrifying the fear was; how much it hurt to feel. Laura and Allison couldn’t hope to know the rush, the bliss the orgasmic peace that Oil gave him. James knew the statistics even as they lectured him on them: Ninety-eight percent addiction rate; twenty percent rehab and among addicts, one hundred percent fatality within three to seven years. James knew that the very thing he’d turned to for release from the fear of Death would kill him. He knew how the toxins would build up, crippling and destroying his organs, or that he could simply die from one shot too many. and James was surprised to discover, he didn’t care. He was free from the fear and he was in constant bliss. Oil made Ecstasy, special-

K, acid, speed, even coke seem like pussy drugs. So at the beginning of his third week as an Oil addict, James moved out of Laura and Allison's apartment and their lives.

The delegation meant for Laguna and the World Ship Preserve gathered together for a final blessing from the Pope before leaving. Dozens of scholars, clerics, priests, acolytes, support personnel clustered around the Catholic Pontiff. Paul Santino looked out over the small sea of faces and wondered just what it was they all expected to find at the Ship and how. Not that he wasn't anxious to get his own look inside the Ship, but he couldn't fathom how just going there and looking around would lead them to anything. Granted, the Pontiff and his fellow heads of the religions represented here had drafted instructions more specific than just taking a look around the place, but Santino still wondered if their delegation would accomplish anything. He also wondered again, for the umpteenth time, why he had been "personally chosen" to lead this delegation by the head of a religion he had never practiced and never been a member of.

"I wanted to go, myself," Simon Peter had said, "and I must confess that not being allowed is one of the few disappointments I have experienced since becoming Pope. My handlers would not permit me to go to Laguna. Given the events that transpired there, they feel I would be at too much risk. So you, Elder Santino who have in so short a time become so dear to me, will go in my stead as head of our delegation."

Santino had never been a member of any religion because of his own personal absence of faith. But despite his lack of faith, both towards any potential god and the potential for success of the Fourth Vatican Council's Delegation to the Ship, despite his lack of conviction that he was the right man for this post, Santino's mood was far from sullen. In fact he shared much of the exuberant emotions he saw on the faces around the room. But only part of his enthusiasm was shared; most of them were excited that they would soon be among the few people in the world who had seen the Ship up close and actually been *inside* it. That was thrilling, no question. Santino would remember how it felt like to be told that he would be soon going into the Ship for the rest of his life. But the main reason Santino's mood was so light today was that he was going home. Soon he'd be back in Laguna and among the familiar faces and sights that he'd left behind when summoned to Rome.

Aiziz set the case down between her feet as the lift car began its descent into the Ship. Inside along with her console, scanner sets and other odds and ends, was a hard copy document that had been linxed over to her this morning. There were fifty-plus pages of ten-point type, single spaced in the document and it had the unwieldy title of:

Lists of Approved Questions and Phrases to Use in Communication with the Ship; Phrases and Questions Not to Be Used in Communication with the Ship; and Questions Which If Asked by the Ship Are Not to Be Answered Without Prior Authorization.

The title didn't exactly roll off the tongue and the text wasn't any easier to muddle through. Before they'd left that morning Peter had rigged up an aural context-recognition system which if it heard any of the phrases on the World Ship Summit's hit list it would flag to Aiziz's attention, immediately. Waiting for Peter to code out the ware and install it into her translator/recorder delayed the Linguistics Department's descent into the Ship by two hours. Aiziz was angry at the World Ship Summit and their damned delays. Michael was with her now as they made the descent into the Ship. With the last mathematical puzzle apparently solved he was free to come back down and help within the Ship. His presence was appreciated; the added burden of the *List*, as they called it, meant she needed all the help she could get. They were achingly close to real communication with the Ship. Their translator had to learn the meanings behind the rest of the runes in Shiplanguage and they had to demonstrate applied Shiplanguage knowledge to the Ship. It shouldn't be too difficult; the Ship's wetware was Heuristic—it learned as they and it attempted to communicate with one another. They were close, so close to being able to speak with it. It would still take time—a few days at best before they were at the level of communication that would truly necessitate use of the *List*. Michael's presence here would be an asset, but it was offset by Meg's absence. Colonel Bloom was playing host today. As commanding officer of Fort Arapaho it fell to Bloom to greet the dignitaries from the Interfaith Vatican IV as they arrived. In anticipation of their arrival most of the route to the Ship from the base was now well guarded and there were added security officers down within the Ship. Aiziz, having grown up in the Gaza during the Second Israeli-Palestinian War, didn't know whether or not to feel comforted by the fact that the soldiers guarding the Expedition today were all well armed.

THE UNEARTHING

Colonel Margaret Bloom, in full dress uniform, watched the plane circle around for final approach. It was a small-bodied jump plane and had shot into high-atmosphere orbit from Rome only a couple of hours before. Bloom was watching it on the 3D radar display in the base's air traffic control tower. This place reminded her, in an odd way, of Concord Station. She looked around at the banks of consoles, where military flight controllers kept a close watch over all the traffic in and around the World Ship Preserve. Flight paths had been detoured around its airspace since the Preserve had been formed, but it was still vital to make sure that all incoming traffic, such as the plane from Rome, were friendlies. The plane was coming in on a near-vertical landing approach, more of a touchdown than anything else. As it came in she watched from the tower windows as the retros fired, slowing its descent. The horizontal stabilizers fired twin spouts of blue flame above and below each narrow air fin, burning clearly in the morning sky. The landing struts extended and the plane touched down. As the engines shut down on the jump plane the struts each gave birth to a set of caterpillar treads which in turn began rolling, taxiing the plane in towards the hangars. Bloom was out of her seat and down the spiral staircase of the air traffic control tower and out towards the gantry where the jump plane was now berthing. A transport met up with her. Major Benedict, also in dress uniform, sat in the back, the passenger seat next to him empty. Bloom climbed aboard and returned Benedict's and their driver's salutes.

"Are the guest quarters ready?" she asked him.

"Everything's been taken care of," Benedict assured her as they drove towards the landing terminal where their guests would debark. "Each of our guests will have an escort: an armed but discreetly dressed Secret Service agent. They'll also have two shadows each, said shadows known only to us and the Secret Service agents assigned to protect them."

"Sleek setup," Bloom said. "A bit like closing the airlock after explosive decompression, but still good coverage."

"It's amazing what essentially unlimited funds from the World Bank will get you, these days."

"I know," Bloom said. "Back in the day, it would have bought at least *twice* as much security."

They chuckled together as they pulled in to the terminal.

"Let's go greet our guests."

Paul Santino debarked from the jump plane and followed the short gangway into the terminal building at the far end of Fort Arapaho. Behind him Rabbi Abrams, Brahman Radu, Father MacEndrick, High Priestess Walton Firestar and the other members of the Vatican IV delegation faded into periphery for him. Santino's awareness was more focused on the fact that he was home again. True, he was not in the town of Laguna, but much of this land made up the Laguna District. At least, he reflected, it had until it became part of the World Ship Preserve. At the exit from the terminal ahead two soldiers stood in dress uniform. One Santino immediately recognized as Mark Echohawk's ex-wife, Colonel Margaret Bloom.

"Hello Colonel," Santino said. "It's good to see you again."

"Hello Paul," Bloom said. "I'm glad it's under happier circumstances. Welcome home. Allow me to introduce you to my Exo and head of security, Major Jack Benedict."

"Major," Santino said shaking the young Black man's hand.

Santino turned and introduced Bloom and Benedict to his own entourage, the senior heads of the Vatican IV Council delegation.

"I'd like to welcome all of you to Fort Arapaho and to the World Ship Preserve," Bloom said. "We've assigned... attendants to each of you so that you can get more quickly settled into the routine of life on the base. If you'll follow me I'll take you to your accommodations, where your attendants will give you a quick briefing. We understand you'll all want to adjust to the time differential, so nothing beyond that is scheduled for the day. There will be flyover tours of the Ship available, as well as guided tours of the Village and the surrounding desert of the World Ship Preserve." Goddamn, she made a good tour guide. She clapped her hands together to punctuate the end of her announcement and turned to leave the terminal. Benedict and Santino followed beside her, the rest of the delegates from Rome close behind.

James had moved as far from Laura and Allison as he could. Minimum Quality of Life standards imposed upon all signatories of the World Council Act meant James had free room and board in one of LA's finest public housing facilities: a one-room rattrap apartment in Chino. James' fellow tenement dwellers were addicts, mental cases, slouches and other losers abandoned by or who had abandoned any pretence of society. James' only financial needs were for joints, drugs, cigarettes, booze and Grid access. As he had declared himself disabled by drug habit at an LA County Social Action Commission, James' rent and utilities were paid for by government voucher

THE UNEARTHING

and he was given credit chits redeemable for food at a local grocery. All he had to do was attend regular drug counselling. So to meet what he considered his “real” needs, James had taken an under-the-table job as a custodian in one of Los Angeles’ many swingers’ clubs. It paid enough to keep James Oiled, with the added benefit that he was allowed to copy the club’s “observation” camera’s optic slips for further masturbatory use. James had also taken to selling copies of said same OS’s on the Grid, for additional money.

In his moments of clarity James was horrified at how far he had fallen, of how much he had lost. In these moments James grieved for all he no longer had: the Prof, the Ship Survey Expedition, his sanity, Allison...above all else, above everyone else James mourned her loss. He had fallen deeply in love with her during their oh-so short time together. But it was no good. He was no good. Not now. Not as a forty-weight with poison in his blood. These moments of clarity never lasted long. James suffered sobriety long enough for self-pity to turn to self-loathing before dosing himself again.

He was careful never to wait for withdrawal to set in. It had once, going on two weeks ago. He’d been short on cash and had no dope to speak of. He’d scrounged for hours for the cash for one shot—*just one!*—as the excruciating pain began, seeming to fill his bones and veins and muscles. Then had come the nausea, forcing him to puke up what little he’d actually bothered to eat and the paranoid hallucinations were just starting when he’d reached his dealer. But by then the muscle spasms were so bad that his dealer had had to inject him. That was when James had started trafficking in illicit porn as an aside. The club owner enlisted his help setting up a sub-network on the Grid for buyers and sellers, paying him a cut of some of the sickest smut James had encountered. Not that it mattered; extra cash meant not running out of dope. When you were an Oilhead you always needed extra cash. James danced an ampoule of the poison called Oil across his leg.

He’d seen Allison, today. She’d followed him after running into him. It had been an ugly scene. She’d left, finally, after a long shouting match. She’d been crying when she’d gone and James didn’t know whether it hurt him more to hurt her or to see her hurting because of him. James was starting to get dull aches in his bones; the beginning...the forewarning of withdrawal. The Oil would take away the fear, the pain, the guilt...he’d forget Allison again for a while and soon enough. One stab into an arm, a leg and nothing

else would matter. But for now James wanted to suffer, to Feel, for just a bit longer.

The Ship Survey Expedition was already at work when the Vatican delegation had done being fully briefed on all the standard safety considerations and practical concerns regarding the Ship. It was midmorning by the time Colonel Bloom and Major Benedict escorted the eager delegates out to the base of the Pyramid. Their first exposure to the Shipsong made their eyes widen in surprise. Only Santino was unaffected among the delegates; he'd had the advantage of being present the night the Ship had unearthed itself. Their actual approach to the entrance to the Ship via the Ramp seemed to make the hairs on the backs of the delegate's necks stand up; for there on the Ramp, nearly on the surface of the Ship itself, the Shipsong commanded all. They paused outside the entrance to the Pyramid and Bloom turned to address the delegates one last time.

"You are about to become part of a very select group of people," she said. "Just under fifty people on the entire planet have seen what you are about to see. You may record your descent into the Ship; many people have. I've seen those recordings on the Grid. Even the three-D renderings do not do justice to the sights you're all about to bear witness to."

She turned and headed for the Pyramid's entrance. As the last of the delegates crossed into the Ship the lift car shot from its tube. They boarded the lift car and as usual only when the last of their number had crossed into its space did the car seal and begin its descent. Bloom herself felt a flutter in her belly. The descent into the Ship was always a marvel. The drop from outer to inner hulls was estimated at around a kilometre and a half. At its narrowest point, the superstructure arching down between the massive spars of the airframe supporting the outer hull was two clicks across. The comparatively tiny lift car was a speck, a mote of dust dropping through a cathedral ceiling. And all around the spectators inside the lift car was the shimmering, golden, city-sized interior of the Ship.

"...And I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of Heaven from God, prepared and ready in all splendour and glory, as is a bride when presented to her groom..." quoted Rabbi Abrams in a hushed voice.

"What's that from?" Santino asked, marvelling at the apt quote.

"The Revelation According to Saint John," Abrams said, "from the New Testament of our Christian friends' Holy Bible."

Father MacEndrick nodded his head absently. All were in awe of this

wonder, the Ship: a structure older than all their religions combined. As they dropped gently down the last few hundred meters to the Inner Hull, the men and women from the Fourth Vatican Council understood both the gravity and difficulty of the task to which they had been set by the heads of their faiths.

They were finally ready to begin dialogue with the Ship. The initial statements made and questions asked by the Linguistics team were scripted in advance by the World Ship Summit; banal stuff, mostly harmless. As the foremost expert on Shiplanguage (although she barely knew a dozen phrases in the language and was struggling somewhat to learn more), it fell to Aiziz to initiate true communication. She was waiting now for Colonel Bloom and the delegates from Vatican IV to arrive. They would be here shortly; security had reported that they had arrived in the First Chamber and were on their way to the Language Lab. They'd be here in moments. Before her the communication terminal in the center of the Language Lab stood patiently waiting for input. Michael Andrews, Matthew N'anga, Peter Paulson and several linguistic technicians were reviewing data on the smaller terminals in the horseshoe around the central line. The door from the Language Lab thudded and began rolling into the floor. Colonel Bloom, Major Benedict and the delegates from Vatican IV came in. Some of them were still in a daze from the miracle of their descent into the Ship. Aiziz had likewise been stunned when she had first seen it. She was still awestruck when she went to the surface, rising from the glorious airframe to stand outside breathing the air and listening to Shipsong.

"...And this is, of course, the Language Lab," Bloom said as she escorted the delegates inside.

With the additional people in the chamber, the cavernous Language Lab was suddenly cramped. Bloom turned to Aiziz.

"Sonia, would you care to bring the delegates up to speed on the progress we've made with the Shiplanguage?" she asked.

Aiziz cleared her throat a little too loudly and then began her summary with the discovery of the Language Lab. She found her voice mid-way through her summation and by the end as she explained the textual equations the Ship had given them, she was speaking with strength and confidence.

"...In fact, ladies and gentlemen," she concluded, "we are today ready to begin full communication with the Ship."

There were murmurs of interest from the delegates. Aiziz cleared her throat as they quieted down and continued:

“Following the directives issued from the World Ship Summit,” she said, “we will be initiating communication by using the following phrase...” she consulted her portable console, “In English, it says, ‘We represent the people of this world. We wish for peaceful dialogue between us and your entity.’”

A hand shot up from the delegates. Bloom acknowledged and identified the querent.

“You have a question, High Priestess Firestar?” she asked.

“Yes,” the Wiccan said, “I was just curious about the phrasing of the statement we’re going to use to speak to the Ship. Why don’t we mention the Earth by name and why do we refer to the Ship as an entity?” Aiziz nodded her head in understanding and replied:

“In Shiplanguage, there is no proper pronoun similar to ‘Earth’,” she explained. “The closest translation into Shiplanguage would be ‘dirt’, or ‘soil’. Not something we felt we wanted to name our world.”

There was quick laughter from the delegates. Aiziz resumed:

“And we have yet to determine whether the Ship has a name, or if it even has an identity. The neutral personal pronoun ‘your entity’ is a global term in Shiplanguage, covering all possible personal subject references.”

Aiziz turned to the terminal behind her, looking back over her shoulder at the delegates.

“And now, we are ready to initiate contact,” she said.

She entered the phrase into the translator running off her console. Within moments the value in phonetic Shiplanguage and runic symbols appeared onscreen. She entered the runes on the tableau before her in sequence and then spoke without hesitation to the Ship:

“Hy beza diti ditiza xyka poce poquti.”

There was a long, audible pause, a deep, resonating silence from the Ship. Finally, it rumbled:

“POCE POTIWU POBE. MI CEQU LEDIDIJY DITIZAMI RASE TIVUWY ZABE POQU.”

It took a moment for the interpreter to kick in. Aiziz smiled, reading the translation onscreen. She turned to Bloom.

“The Ship says it has been waiting for a long time to be able to speak with the intelligent life on this world,” she announced, to the ringing applause of the members of the Vatican IV delegation.

THE UNEARTHING

**TRANSCRIPT
INTERACTIVE NEWS NETWORK NEWSCAST
PLAIN TEXT FORMAT**

**PATH: INN<>SPECIAL REPORT>>THE
SHIP>>COMMUNICATION INITIATED WITH THE
SHIP><**

ANCHOR

**GOOD AFTERNOON AND WELCOME TO INN. AT THIS
HOUR THE WORLD SHIP SUMMIT HAS RELEASED A
STATEMENT TO THE PRESS DETAILING EVENTS THAT
BEGAN LATE THIS MORNING, YOUR LOCAL TIME, WHEN
THE SHIP SURVEY EXPEDITION'S SONIA AIZIZ INITIATED
CONTACT WITH THE SHIP.**

**PATH: INN<>THE SHIP>>WORLD SHIP SUMMIT
MEDIA RELEASE><**

WALTER QUINCY ROBERTSON

**THIS MORNING AT ELEVEN HUNDRED FIFTEEN HOURS
LOCAL SHIP'S TIME, THE FIRST COHERENT CONVERSA-
TION BETWEEN THE SHIP AND REPRESENTATIVES OF THE
WORLD COUNCIL WAS INITIATED. THE CONVERSATION
LASTED SEVERAL MINUTES AND THE OUTCOME AT THIS
TIME WOULD SEEM ENCOURAGING. IN PART WE NOW
KNOW FOR CERTAIN THAT THE SHIP UNDERSTANDS MANY
EARTH LANGUAGES. HOWEVER IT CHOOSES TO
COMMUNICATE WITH US IN**

**PATH: WORLD COUNCIL<>WORLD SHIP
SUMMIT>>SHIP SURVEY EXPEDITION >>THE
SHIP>>FIRST CONVERSATION>>TRANSCRIPT<>**

**TRANSCRIPT
FIRST COMMUNICATION WITH THE SHIP**

PLAIN TEXT FORMAT

NOTE: ALL SHIP DIALOGUE HAS BEEN TRANSLATED TO ITS CLOSEST ENGLISH EQUIVALENT

AIZIZ

WE REPRESENT THE PEOPLE OF THIS WORLD. WE WISH FOR PEACEFUL DIALOGUE BETWEEN US AND YOUR ENTITY.

THE SHIP

THIS ONE HAS BEEN WAITING A LONG TIME TO BE ABLE TO SPEAK WITH THE SENTIENT LIFE OF YOUR WORLD.

AIZIZ

WE ARE PLEASED. WE ARE AWARE OF THE LENGTH OF TIME YOU HAVE BEEN ON OUR WORLD. WE WISH TO KNOW HOW IT IS YOU CAME TO BE HERE AND WHY.

THE SHIP

THIS ONE AND THE CREW OF THE SHIP WERE EXPLORING. YOUR WORLD WAS REPORTED TO HAVE AN ABUNDANCE AND WIDE VARIETY OF LIFE. THE PURPOSE OF THE EXPLORATION WAS TO CATALOGUE AND SAMPLE THE LIFE OF YOUR WORLD AND TO MAKE CONTACT WITH THE SENTIENT LIFE HERE.

AIZIZ

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE CREW OF THE SHIP?

THE SHIP

THE CREW OF THE SHIP LOST PHYSICAL BEING DURING OR AS A RESULT OF THE CATAclySM. THIS ONE WAS LEFT WITHIN THE SHIP. THE SHIP SLEPT. THE SHIP HEALED. THE SHIP WAITED.

THE UNEARTHING

AIZIZ

WHAT HAS THE SHIP BEEN WAITING FOR?

THE SHIP

THIS ONE WAS REORDERED TO HEAL THE SHIP. THIS ONE WAS REORDERED TO WAIT FOR DISCOVERY. IN THE EVENT OF CONTACT WITH INDIGENOUS SENTIENCE, THIS ONE WAS REORDERED TO DETERMINE THE EVOLUTIONARY LEVEL OF THE INDIGENOUS SENTIENCE AND IF APPROPRIATE TO INITIATE CONTACT WITH IT.

AIZIZ

AND WHAT HAS YOUR ENTITY DETERMINED?

THE SHIP

THIS ONE IS STILL EVALUATING THE INDIGENOUS SENTIENCE. NO DETERMINATION HAS YET BEEN MADE.

James stared apathetically at the information on the screen before him. The Ship spoke. He wondered if that meant it had anything to say; anything worth hearing. *Probably not* he reflected, letting his console screen roll back into the case and tossing the device onto the table by the sofa he was sprawled out on. Bobby “Bobsled” Sleeman, the forty-weight he connected through, was sunken into a chair across the room.

“If you were so fucked by the Ship,” Bobsled asked, “why is it you still check up on what’s going on there, every fucking chance you get?”

“I don’t know,” James said. “Something to do?”

Bobsled leaned forward in his chair and produced an ampoule of Oil from somewhere on his person.

“This,” he said, “*this* is something to do.”

Which he then promptly did, stabbing the needle at the end of the packet hard and deep into his neck. His neck, like his arms, legs and chest, was pockmarked with bruises and old holes. Bobsled had been using for so long his body had permanent dead patches where he’d injected himself. James’ own legs were beginning to get splotchy. He thought about switching to his arms, or his side. For some reason, thinking about Oil and his dick made him think of the Ship again. At least he didn’t think about death anymore. Well, hardly ever.

“I just wonder,” he said, talking to himself while Bobsled sank back into the chair in a blissful, orgasmic Oil-haze, “I just wonder if the Ship will be able to tell us anything we want to know. Anything we *need* to know.”

“Yeah, like Oil should be free,” Bobsled grunted.

“No I mean about the universe. Whether or not there’s a God; what our purpose is here.”

“There *are* no fucking answers,” his compatriot slurred. “There’s nothing in this whole shit world that makes any fucking sense and no good goddamn reason to try doing more than what feels good. We all die; we all drop out of existence. We all have to face up to the fact that there’s no fucking point. God’s a fucking bedtime story made up by people who can’t handle the fact that they’re going to die. Best way to handle that particular piece of bad news is to Oil.”

This little philosophical tirade represented a supreme effort on Bobsled’s part; he had to stay focused and fight off the blissful sedative effect from Oil, long enough to speak. To make sure he didn’t have to speak again he tossed an Oil ampoule at James. Maybe if he dosed, James would shut the fuck up. He did. Oiled up and dosed, James was silent, apathetic to all that wasn’t the dose. Nothing mattered but the high, nothing to do but wait for their shift to start downstairs.

“The doors are now sealed,” the Curator said from the screen on the wall opposite the Minister. “This meeting of the Committee is now called to order. Let everything said within these walls stay within these walls.”

The Minister made himself comfortable. The secure linx in his office on the Hill was relaying him directly to the Committee meeting, taking place in Washington.

“We’ve all heard the news of the Ship,” the Curator said. “They’ve initiated contact and the reports are, to say the least, interesting.”

The main display on the Minister’s console screen shifted to highlight the Chairman, who cleared his throat and delivered his report.

“The Ship has definitely stated that it’s evaluating our level of intelligence,” he said. “The question is why and what happens when its evaluation is complete. We have not—you are no doubt aware—been able to gain access to the rest of the Ship.”

“Have we attempted to get the door combination from the Ship?” the Natural Resources Minister asked, from the smaller display on the Minister’s console screen.

“Yes we have,” the Chairman replied. “The Ship replies by saying that the door will be opened to us in time.”

“Given that the Ship’s been sleeping under the dusty soil of the New Mexico desert for the better part of eighty million years,” MI-6 growled angrily. “How much time are we to wait?”

“I’d say that depends entirely on the Ship,” the British Minister said.

“What exactly is it trying to determine?” the Natural Resources Minister asked. “I mean, as Colonel Bloom pointed out a few days ago to the World Ship Summit, it must have an idea of how technologically advanced we are by now.”

“Technological advancement and intelligence are two separate things,” the Ambassador said, “as was proven over and over again in the years leading up to War Three: Our ability to use technology responsibly was outstripped by the technology, itself.”

The Ambassador was one whose voice had been leant against the Committee’s wishes to the campaign against continuing the exploration of the Ship.

“One wonders what we can expect if the Ship decides we’re not nearly intelligent enough,” the British Minister said.

“And what we can do to protect ourselves from the Ship, if it does something we don’t like,” Natural Resources added.

“Oh, I think we already know the answer to that,” MI-6 said with dark certainty, “absolutely nothing.”

“We...*could* conceivably haul several high-yield nuclear devices into the First Chamber,” the Chief of Staff said, “set them all off...”

“Assuming we did, then what?” the British Defence Minister asked. “The Ship is composed of both living tissue and alloys we’ve never even seen before. Its outer hull is a kilometre thick and we don’t know how thick the inner walls beyond the First Chamber are.”

“It isn’t very likely that the Builders designed the Ship with internal atomic explosions in mind,” the Chairman countered.

“Isn’t it?” Natural Resources asked. “We don’t know what kind of power source the Ship has. They might have to conceivably protect against very powerful explosions, indeed.”

“In any event,” MI-6 said, “a pre-emptive atomic strike against the Ship might stand a good chance of failing and if it does then the Ship would very likely want to strike back. So long as we can’t determine the threat the Ship poses to us, pre-emptive action is ill advised.”

Bloom was in her office by oh-seven hundred. There was an hour and a half before the SSE was to descend to the Ship so she was using her time to tie up loose ends that she hadn't been able to be bothered with at the end of the previous day. It was also strategically scheduled as her time for "drop in" appointments with members of the Ship Survey Expedition. Precious few members of the SSE would be up early enough for an appointment between seven and eight in the morning; those that were usually waited to speak to her on the ride from the base to the Pyramid. The exception to that was usually Doctor Kodo, whom Bloom suspected didn't sleep. He always had fresh information he wanted to share. She appreciated his enthusiasm. Part of her also wished he were fifteen or twenty years older, or she the younger. Bloom's door chimes sounded, stirring her from thoughts not entirely focused on the paperwork before her. She toggled the door cam onto her console. Santino stood outside in the hall with another two delegates from the Vatican Council. She released the lock on her door.

"Enter," she called and they did.

Bloom rose from her chair to greet Santino, Abrams and Firestar. The smell of the patchouli oil filled the room as Firestar entered.

"Good morning," Bloom said, sitting back down. "There's coffee to your right if any of you are interested. It's a bit early, I know."

Santino moved to help himself to a cup. Firestar (was that her real name, Bloom wondered) brandished a water bottle, indicating her beverage of choice. Abrams fixed himself a coffee as Santino finished.

"Actually," the Rabbi said, "none of us have been to sleep, yet."

"Well," Bloom said, with a bemused smile on her face, "that certainly gives a new meaning to interfaith relations."

Abrams chuckled. Firestar smiled. Santino, obviously tired yet, took a moment longer to get the joke. He smiled and nodded his head as he and his fellow delegates sat down.

"Actually, the whole delegation's been discussing the Ship," Santino said. "We have a series of questions we feel it is necessary to ask the Ship now that you are in communication with it."

Bloom stiffened slightly. She'd been dreading this moment, because the most likely questions they would want to ask were already on the World Ship Summit's forbidden list.

"Anything said to the Ship has to be approved first," she said. "The delegation was issued a copy of the *List*, so you can use that as a guide—"

Abrams held up his hands.

“We already spoke to Geneva this morning,” he said. “Actually, His Holiness Pope Simon Peter kindly contacted Geneva on our behalf. I suspect you’ll be receiving a courier pouch from the World Ship Summit today, sometime before ten.”

“I see,” Bloom said and was tempted to add: *So, you just up and went right over my head.*

“We went over the *List* last night,” Firestar said, “and this morning. Most of our debate was over whether or not the importance of the questions we want to ask outweighed the potential threat they posed. We understand the World Ship Summit’s reasoning, but ultimately decided that their reasoning is wrong.”

“And of course you decided you were right,” Bloom observed. “Very well; I’ll want to look at the questions myself. I have final say on anything that is a potential risk to this base or to the members of the SSE, but if the Summit says it’s a go I don’t think there’ll be a problem. I’ll book you some time with Sonia in the lab this afternoon if that’s all right with you.”

It was. She bid her unexpected guests good day and looked over the sheet handed her from the Vatican delegation. It looked like her quiet morning had just become a whole lot busier.

Sonia Aiziz sighed heavily as she looked over the orders that had just come down the pipe. The World Ship Summit and the head of the Ship Survey Expedition wanted her to devote a serious portion of the afternoon’s talk time with the Ship to the delegation from the Fourth Vatican Council. It was a request that normally she wouldn’t mind granting. She’d seen the questions the delegates wanted to ask and approved of them wholeheartedly. Her problem was scheduling an ever-increasing load of demands on her time in communication with the Ship: There were of course the physicists, all clamouring to find out just how much they didn’t know about the universe; chemists screaming for details on the “lost” elements found only on the Ship’s periodic table; astronomers wanting access to the Ship’s star charts and planetary information; engineers wanting to know how the Ship was built; biologists wanting to know how the Ship was *grown*; computer and software engineers eager to learn about the Ship’s computronics; sociologists, behaviouralists and *psychologists* wanting to *interview* the Ship...the list went on and on; each new petitioner and each new request more unbelievable than the last. A lawyer from Glasgow wanted to depose the Ship in connection to a lawsuit being filed by his client, who claimed she

had been impregnated by the Ship just after it unearthed itself.

“Teach me to love my brothers, God,” Aiziz had prayed after reading that one. “Not just those who don’t know your Law, but those who are too stupid to know any wisdom, at all.”

In order to accommodate the delegates from the Vatican IV, Aiziz had needed to bump no lesser person than the current holder of the Lucasian Chair of Cambridge University. Not an easy task, especially when the physicist in question was a devout atheist and resented the fact that delegates from the Vatican IV talks had even been *allowed* into the World Ship Preserve. But now schedules had been reorganized and things were ready to proceed. The delegates would be descending to the Language Lab in a few minutes. Cameras and recorders had been set up to preserve every second of the upcoming conversation. A direct Grid linx had been set up to both Geneva and Vatican City. The most recent appointment with the Ship, a mathematics team led by Michael, was just wrapping up.

“Mind if I stick around for this next one, love?” Andrews asked. “I’m rather intrigued to see how the Ship is going to respond to questions of a philosophical nature.” He was quite obviously amused by the whole prospect. Aiziz was of the opinion that these were questions that needed answering and didn’t care for Michael’s attitude.

“Ninety-five percent of the people on the planet believe in one form of deity or another,” she reminded him.

“Though a thousand people may believe a lie, they shall not make it true,” Andrews countered.

“The questions the Vatican delegates are going to pose the Ship are questions most people would want to ask,” Aiziz said. “The answers the Ship has to give us are important to everyone. I think it’s interesting that Shiplanguage has a word for ‘religion’, don’t you?”

“Ah, now there’s the thing,” Andrews said. “It has a word for ‘religion’ but as of yet we cannot find a word in the language for ‘God’. Just what should we make of that? And what does or did the intelligence that created the Ship believe? You grew up in Palestine during the Second Israel-Palestine war. You of all people should know that religion is the one topic guaranteed to make otherwise reasonable men and women disagree, argue, fight and even go to war over the slightest perceived offence to their beliefs. How do you suppose the Ship will react if asked something about religion that it finds, or is programmed to find, offensive?”

THE UNEARTHING

T O P S E C R E T

TRANSCRIPT

**VATICAN IV DELEGATION'S CONVERSATION WITH
THE SHIP**

PLAIN TEXT FORMAT

**NOTE: ALL SHIP DIALOGUE HAS BEEN TRANSLATED TO
ITS CLOSEST ENGLISH EQUIVALENT**

SANTINO

**I HAVE BEEN ASKED TO SPEAK TO YOUR ENTITY ON
BEHALF OF THE FOLLOWERS OF OUR WORLD'S MANY
DIFFERENT RELIGIONS. WE WISH TO ASK YOUR ENTITY
ABOUT RELIGION OR RELIGIONS FROM WHERE YOU COME
FROM.**

THE SHIP

THIS WILL ANSWER YOUR QUESTIONS.

SANTINO

**FIRST WE ARE INTERESTED IN KNOWING IF THERE IS
ONE OR MANY RELIGIONS WHERE YOU COME FROM.**

THE SHIP

**THERE ARE MANY RELIGIONS AMONG THE PEOPLE
FROM THE SHIP'S POINT OF ORIGIN. ALL RELIGIONS
SERVE THE SAME PURPOSE.**

SANTINO

**IS THERE IN THE ESTIMATES OF THESE RELIGIONS, A
SUPREME BEING? A CREATOR, AN ULTIMATE ENTITY?**

THE SHIP

**THE CREATION ENTITY IS EXPRESSED IN MANY
FORMS, BY MANY BEINGS. IT IS REFERRED TO BY MANY
DIFFERENT NAMES, IN MANY DIFFERENT PLACES. NO
LESS SO THAN BY THE CREATION ENTITY, ITSELF.**

SANTINO

ARE WE TO UNDERSTAND THAT YOUR ENTITY MEANS TO SAY THAT THE CREATION ENTITY DOES INDEED EXIST?

THE SHIP

CORRECT. THE CREATION ENTITY, THE FOCUS EXISTS AND EVERYTHING THAT EXISTS ARE ITS PRODUCTS.

SANTINO

THEN, IS THERE A PURPOSE TO LIFE? IS THERE A PURPOSE TO ALL LIFE THROUGHOUT CREATION?

THE SHIP

CORRECT.

SANTINO

THEN WHAT IS THE MEANING OF LIFE?

THE SHIP

THE MEANING OF LIFE IS TO SERVE THE MACHINE.

SANTINO

WHAT IS THE MACHINE?

THE SHIP

THE MACHINE IS THAT WHICH SERVES THE PURPOSE.

SANTINO

AND WHAT IS THE PURPOSE?

THE SHIP

LIFE.

“Life,” Aiziz said, reading the translation onscreen. Before anyone could begin talking, the Ship made another statement:

THE UNEARTHING

“THIS HAS FINISHED ITS EVALUATION,” the Ship said, in perfect English. “THE INDIGENOUS SENTIENCE OF THIS WORLD IS ASSESSED AS BEING SUFFICIENTLY INTELLIGENT.”

As the Ship finished speaking, Bloom leaned into her earpiece.

“Holy shit,” she said.

Everyone turned to look at her.

“What?” Santino asked. “What is it?”

Bloom looked at them; shock, disbelief and wonder shimmering in her eyes.

“We just got full access to the Ship.”

Successful first contact between alien civilizations is followed by dialogue between these civilizations. Where this dialogue is peaceful, cultural and technological exchanges soon follow. As a post-contact civilization's evolution is forever changed by that contact, so is that civilization's culture forever shaped by the new horizons opened up to it through the exchange.

INVITATIONS

With the Ship's statements made the sealed door down off the First Chamber dropped open with a deep, resonate thud. Panels previously unseen in the walls—panels Kodo and Bloom would recognize as previously unidentified biological components of the Ship—lit up, displaying information in each of the Human languages the Ship had mastered. Benedict had security officers guard the now-open doorway leading into the whole of the Ship.

Thousands of kilometres away in the chambers of the World Ship Summit in Geneva and in the Pontiff's private suite of offices in Vatican City, reaction was swift and chaotic. An argument had already erupted between the two powers, lines drawn and sides taken.

"The Ship has just told us, told the *world* exactly what we've wanted to know, since it was unearthed! It's answered the question that has probably been plaguing everyone but the truly devout, since the dawn of time," Pope Simon Peter exclaimed, his zeal fuelled by the confirmation of his greatest hope. "The Ship has declared that God exists! This information *must* be made public!"

"The Ship didn't come out and say that God existed, your Holiness," the liaison officer from the World Ship Summit cautioned. "It spoke of a creation entity—."

“—A Creation Entity that is known by many names, in many different places,” the Pontiff countered. “The question posed to the Ship asked it specifically if there was a creator, a supreme being in the universe.”

“The Ship could just as easily been making reference to the ruler of the known universe,” the American delegate to the World Ship Summit said.

The Pope turned away from the main viewer set up in his private offices. Such pig-headed stubbornness exasperated him. Why would no one dare publicly make a declaration of faith, of belief, even when presented with such evidence as this?

“Can anyone truly doubt, given the context of the questions asked the Ship that it was speaking of no lesser person than God? The Ship only opened itself, *only gave the Ship Survey Expedition full access* after Elder Santino asked it those questions!”

“Let’s assume for a moment that it was indeed God the Ship was speaking of, Your Holiness,” the Pakistani delegate postulated. “The Ship also said that the Creation Entity was expressed in many forms and by many names in many different places. As much as you would have us concede that the Ship mentioned God if not by name than by office, would you then concede that the Ship also expressed a confirmation of the argument that all religions are essentially valid?”

The Pontiff paused a long moment, thinking hard on the question before turning back to the screen.

“There is part of me,” he said, “that would rush to immediately say yes, to concede the point,” he held up a single finger, eliciting silence from everyone in his presence, both in his offices and on the viewer before him, “but as head of the Holy Roman Catholic Church, a church that both religious history and historical tradition teaches us was founded by the Son of God Jesus Christ, through His appointed Head of the Church on Earth, Sainted Pope Peter the Apostle, I have to say I cannot make any conclusion either for or against that statement without putting the issue to much thought, prayer, consultation and meditation. I would not want to betray my God and the founder of my Church because I rushed to judgment.”

“Then surely you can understand our reluctance to not announce these most recent occurrences to the world?” the Pakistani delegate asked him.

Simon Peter looked away from her image, nodding silently as he stared at the floor a long moment both chastised and contemplative. Finally, he turned back to the people on the screen before him a new determination on his face.

“But I feel the world has every right to know what has been said by the

Ship today,” the Pontiff said. “The Ship’s builders and programmers obviously believed that there is a God. This is information that is not ours to keep secret.”

Fighting the urge to simply charge right on down into the Ship required Herculean willpower. And even as Bloom, Benedict and the other members of the Ship Survey Expedition reacted to the opening of the rest of the Ship, Aiziz continued to pick up more words and phrases being fired off at them from the Ship. The Ship had switched from its ancient, esoteric alien language to perfect English. Aiziz thanked everything holy that they had recording devices aplenty going; otherwise much might have been lost. The Ship was proposing many things. She wanted to leave the Language Lab; she wanted very badly to see what was down that final passage, what the rest of the Ship looked like. However, all non-essential personnel were being herded out of the Ship. The heads of the SSE had to palaver with the World Ship Summit and they had to do so, as soon as possible.

“The World Ship Summit just linxed me,” Bloom said. “We’re being called to the surface for debriefing. They’re shutting the site down, *again*.”

Aiziz smiled. Bloom considered it an odd reaction.

“I don’t think we’ll be shut down for very long,” Aiziz said mirthfully, “especially when I inform them about what *else* I’ve learned from the Ship.”

“Our sources at the Ship have both reported in,” the Chairman said to the faces on the console screen before him. “All reports are consistent with our sources in Geneva: The Ship is open,” here the Chairman paused, his face taking on an incredulous and embarrassed shape, “and apparently, the indication is that the Ship has also confirmed the existence of God.”

“I don’t think we can afford to jump to that conclusion,” the British Minister said, “although we can be certain that the popular press will. All the Ship has really done is to repeat its creators’ faith in the existence of God. As for tangible evidence, the Ship has offered none.”

“Excuse me,” Natural Resources asked from his place at the table next to the Minister, “but what were the anthropological estimates on the comparative level of development between us and the builders of the Ship?”

The Curator consulted a portable console off-screen from those who had been able to attend this special meeting of the Committee.

“Anthropologists and technologists have been studying the issue since the Unearthing,” he said. “They’ve studied our own technology versus what’s

known about the Ship, our technological evolution over the last two hundred years and projections about how fast our own advancement will continue to grow.”

“Bottom line?” the Ambassador demanded, irritably.

“Bottom line,” the Curator said, “the Builders were at *least* a million years more advanced than us when the Ship was built. We don’t know for sure, because we can’t accurately predict our own technological progress beyond a hundred years.”

“So the Builders were at least a million years more advanced than us,” Natural Resources repeated, “and yet they obviously believed in God. As advanced as the Builders were they held on to a theological concept that our society has found itself collectively losing grasp of as we’ve progressed. Assuming they became more and more scientific, more and more empirical, as we have, who’s to say the *Builders themselves* didn’t discover evidence of God’s existence?”

“Perhaps the Builders simply programmed the Ship to think of them as God,” the British Defence Minister countered. “Perhaps the Ultimate Creation Entity to which the Ship referred was its manufacturers.”

It was a possibility that had occurred to them all but one which they hadn’t really cared to contemplate.

“Don’t you think it the least bit significant that the Ship remained sealed, until these questions were asked of it?” Natural Resources asked. “The Ship said we as a species had been determined to be of acceptable intelligence and granted us access only *after* Santino asked it those questions about God and the meaning of life. If the belief in the Creator was the determining factor in a test of our intelligence don’t you think that would count towards the probability of the existence of a supreme being?”

The British Defence Minister had no reply to Natural Resources’ argument.

“We’ll know more once the Ship Survey Expedition debriefing concludes,” the Curator said, breaking the ponderous silence that had descended upon the Committee. “They’re scheduled to return to the Ship this afternoon, so we can safely assume our sources in Geneva will be in touch with us before very much longer.”

“You say that the Ship continued communications with the Ship Survey Expedition, *after* the Ship was opened, Doctor Aiziz?” the World Ship Summit’s liaison asked. “And that it was speaking to you in perfect English?”

“That’s correct,” Aiziz said, speaking clearly and confidently.

Her normal fear and loathing of public speaking was gone. She was the only person who knew what she was about to tell the World Ship Summit. The video feed from this link to Geneva would eventually be released globally and would probably come to be the most heavily viewed data stream since the satellite images of the Unearthing were released. She was the only person on Earth with this news and she was about to deliver it to the world.

“I didn’t catch most of the dialogue as the Ship spoke,” Aiziz said, “because of the commotion caused when the Ship unsealed itself. However we had enough recording devices online that I was able to get the entire message and replay it.”

“And what did the Ship have to say?”

Aiziz couldn’t help the slightly smug smile that came to her lips. At this point the entire world would be hanging on her every word. She made a deliberate point of consulting her notepad though the message from the Ship was essentially engraved in her memory.

“The Ship proposes a full exchange of information between it and the people of our world,” she said. “The Ship’s technologies will be made available to us to study and adapt to our own—within reason. In return, the Ship wants to learn about our different cultures, histories and religions. As Humanity is the dominant form of intelligent life on the planet the Ship wishes to learn as much about us as it can.”

“Excuse me, Doctor Aiziz,” the Israeli delegate to the World Ship Summit said, “but you said that ship proposes a full exchange between us, but then you said the Ship’s technologies will be made available to us only within reason. That seems a bit of a contradiction. What does the Ship mean exactly, when it says it will give us access to its technology, within reason?”

“The Ship explained that certain of its technologies would prove dangerous in undisciplined hands,” Aiziz replied, “and it will therefore evaluate which of its technologies it will release to us.”

“That’s hardly a full exchange of information, Doctor Aiziz,” the American delegate responded.

“It’s a reasonable exchange; a responsible exchange,” Aiziz said. “One that ensures we don’t destroy ourselves by using technologies we have no business playing around with.”

She held up a hand as several members of the World Ship Summit began to object.

“That is not all the Ship proposes to give us,” she told them. “The Ship is

also a vast storehouse of culture and information from the many thousands of worlds it has known. The Ship is ancient, ladies and gentlemen. It was millions of years old before it ever entered this solar system. The knowledge it will provide to us will be richer, vaster, than anything we have experienced or could ever hope to experience on our own. You cannot possibly say that the gift of knowledge the Ship is bestowing upon us is an inadequate one.”

“No, Doctor Aiziz, we are not,” the liaison officer said. “We are not suggesting that it is an inadequate gift. However the fact that the Ship wants to know everything about us without letting us know everything about it is distressing.”

“When a child wants to play with a knife,” Aiziz said, “or a book of matches, do the parents allow them to? The Ship knows better than we do what technologies could be potentially dangerous to us. What it permits us to use will be of benefit to us and not of detriment. How we use the technologies it releases to us will most probably determine what else is permitted. Given our level of advancement versus the Ship’s it is in the best position to judge what we are or are not ready to handle and it is in our best interests to let the Ship make that decision.”

“I think I would prefer to decide what I can and cannot handle for myself, Doctor,” the Israeli Delegate replied.

“As no doubt would the child.”

“Doctor Aiziz,” the Liaison intervened, “according to your pre-briefing report the Ship proposed more than just the exchange of technology and cultural information. Would you elaborate, please?”

“As I said, the Ship is a repository of knowledge from thousands of worlds, across hundreds of galaxies,” Aiziz said. “For millions of years these worlds and their civilizations have coexisted peacefully in a loose cultural League. The Ship and its crew came here originally in hopes of making contact with intelligent life on this world in order to bring us into that League. The Ship still wishes to carry out that mission.”

“How does it propose to do that?” the American Delegate asked. “After sixty-plus million years that League might not even exist anymore.”

“The nature of the League is multi-generational,” Aiziz replied. “As many planets as there are in a galaxy, as many galaxies as the Ship and its like have visited, it would take millions upon millions of years to catalogue them all. It is possible that some of the races from this League have become extinct since the Ship arrived here. However it is also more than likely that new races have since joined. As to how the Ship proposes to introduce us to the League,” she

consulted her notes again; she wanted to get the phrasing of this correct, “the Ship wants to take a representative sample of humanity back to its point of origin.”

The Ship Survey Expedition was cleared to return to the Ship the following day. The SSE would now be divided into teams: Aiziz Andrews and N’banga would remain in the Language Lab, Aiziz to further her study of Shiplanguage and coordinate requests for communication with the Ship in accordance with the information exchange. Andrews and N’banga would continue to study the Ship’s scientific catalogue. Benedict, Bloom, Peter, Kodo and Cole would begin exploration of the Ship.

They followed a long, wide corridor to a balcony. It looked out over a vaulted chamber surrounded on three sides by a deep channel; the floor of the chamber was some five meters below, accessed by two gradually sloping spiralled ramps. The chamber was dominated by one central feature: a stark silver sculpture, an alien shape with strange and varying textures; once smooth then pitted, striated and corrugated, branching and stretching out from the center of the dais on which it had been mounted before folding back upon itself, new textures new angles new shapes emerging from this alien Rorschach. Strange features in its geometry made it difficult to look at, as if doing so was pulling at the fabric of Bloom’s sense of reality and sanity. It was only as she pulled her eyes away from the hypnotic and maddening artwork that Bloom noticed the platform below. She was already moving down the ramp to her right before Benedict could approach. She glanced at the sculpture upon reaching the platform. From this angle it seemed a different piece of artwork altogether. Doctors Kodo and Cole came down the ramp close behind Bloom. Bloom scanned the chamber: A large, crystalline conveyance sat in the recessed channel, three doors on the side facing the platform open in its transparent skin. Bloom turned back to Benedict.

“Do you realize what this is?” she asked, excitedly.

“Yes,” Benedict said, “it’s a transitway; *the* transitway; the gateway to the Ship.”

Bloom looked around and noticed the panels that stood every few meters beside the channel. They were location markers, clearly indicating where the track went. Bloom stepped up to one and began working the touch screen. A new image appeared, tracing a trail down the transitway to the next destination. The image resolved itself, showing a massive construct several

levels high, tram tunnels going to and from each level. A bank of lifts ran up the center of the massive station and from the illustration Bloom counted over fifty levels. A series of Shiplanguage runes appeared on the bottom of the display. To their left, in English were the words *Central Station*. Benedict approached.

“The whole Ship is ours,” Bloom whispered reverently. “The whole thing is open to us from here.”

An inner base camp was soon set up inside the first station, complete with mobile mess and toilet facilities, a small infirmary and a communications relay to Fort Arapaho and the World Ship Summit beyond. Despite Benedict’s insistence that the balance of the Ship was unexplored and therefore potentially dangerous, Bloom refused to back down from being one of the first to breach its inner levels.

“I’m going in first, Major. Have no fear of that,” she told him. “You’re not keeping me from this one.”

She stared at him defiantly, unblinking, silently daring him to challenge her authority on this one again. Benedict was the one to blink first.

“Very well, Colonel,” he said sighing heavily before turning his tone sharp, “but at the first sign of *anything* I don’t like I’m getting you out even if I have to knock you cold and drag you the hell out to do it. Ma’am.”

Bloom smiled. The major had balls. She was glad of it and hoped that her guidance had helped him grow them, given the naïve pilot she’d first known him to be so years before.

“Let’s go,” she said.

Bloom, Benedict, Peter, Kodo and Cole boarded the tram. The tramcar sealed itself seamlessly shut and began moving around the track to the exit point.

On the back wall of the tramcar was a terminal displaying an animated map of their progress through the transitway. The screen also displayed a short list of some of the locations accessible to them from Central Station: points of notice that the Ship expected them to find interesting. A short text began printing out in the lower left-hand corner of the terminal. Peter leaned in to read it.

“The Ship suggests we go to see the habitat, in the center of the inner hull. It also points out the...life archive, apparently where it has stored its catalogue of biology.” Peter looked at Kodo. The young biologist’s face was

bright with intense attention. Peter continued:

“Apparently it has a catalogue not just of early life on this world, but of all the worlds it has visited.”

Kodo looked as though his knees might buckle. It was as if he was a drunk handed the keys to the largest liquor cabinet in the world.

“There’s also a list of other sites in the Ship; the drive decks, I would assume that’s main engineering; an astronomy archive; an archive of culture; it even lists hangars for support vehicles.”

“Support vehicles?” Bloom repeated, her voice guarded.

She couldn’t help but wonder if there were entire fleets of Bug craft cradled somewhere in those hangars; hundreds if not thousands of wasp-like ships sitting just waiting to be taken into the sky.

“There are hangars all over the inside of the primary hull,” Peter said. “There are directory terminals on each level of the Central Station and we have full access.”

He looked up from the panel as the tramcar crossed through a major bulkhead and entered an open space. They all stared awestruck by the sight before them: Platform after platform rose from the center of the great vaulted chamber; the spherical bulkhead that surrounded the levels shining great beams of light onto the structure. The central station was suspended by giant honeycomb lattices through which countless transit tubes flowed. Shining with an eerie twilight blue, the connecting tubes of the transit system and the lift banks rising through the center of the platforms connected each level of the station to each section of the Ship. Bloom was reminded of a passage from the Torah: *behold a ladder set upon the earth and the top of it reached to heaven...the angels of God ascending and descending it...* Had the Builders seen the perfect beauty of this colossal construct? Had they understood the majesty of their creation? Or was this as everyday a structure to them as a house or an office building was to Bloom and most of the Human race? As their tramcar approached, swiftly closing the distance between them and Central Station, Bloom wondered on the culture that had spawned the Builders, on the world that had created the creators of the Ship. If the Ship was only a single vehicle, one of a fleet of many, what did the rest of their world look like? What wonders had they made to grace their home and what inspired them to feel the humbling awe Bloom felt now? The tramcar entered the station, slowing and halting near to the bank of lifts that would take them to the other levels of Central Station.

“So,” Bloom asked, “where do we go first?”

“We should go down to the habitat,” Kodo suggested. “If the World Council does finally agree to allow the Ship to take a sample of humanity with it back to its point of origin, it’s there that they’ll live.”

“I can’t imagine being cooped up inside a ship, even this Ship, in space for years at a time,” Peter said.

“Let’s go see the habitat then,” Bloom said. Kodo consulted the directory.

“Let’s go,” he said. “This way.”

They followed him to the lifts. It was no surprise to anyone that the lifts were transparent here as well. The elevator car was equipped with a control plate rising from a stand to the right of the now-sealed doorway. Peter found and pressed button for the level that would take them to the habitat.

“The tram to the habitat is on the lowest level of the station,” he said as their car began dropping. As they debarked from the lift Peter once again consulted the directory before leading them across the level to the right platform. They peered down the tunnel for the tram; it spiralled gradually downwards and out the lower bulkhead.

“We’re actually not that far from the habitat, relatively speaking,” Peter said as they stepped aboard.

“The Ship has adjusted the atmosphere of the habitat to more closely match our own,” he said, “although it has taken the liberty of removing the toxins from the inner atmosphere; it says the habitat has been adapted to be suitable to life on this world.”

“Holy God,” Bloom rasped, staring ahead of them.

She’d caught a glimpse of something down the end of the pipe ahead.

“What is it?” Benedict asked.

“That,” Bloom said.

They crossed the bulkhead into the transparency of the tram tube and were shocked into silence by the scene below them. The tramway was spiralling down towards a landing platform at the top of a massive sphere below them; the sphere of the habitat. A floating island easily seven kilometres or more in diameter, the habitat was ensconced in a sky of the purest blue and was covered in lush green foliage from one end to another. It rotated slowly on its own axis below them, the equatorial ring of the small globe lined with edifices of alien construct.

“What in the hell?” Kodo rasped.

“It was populated long ago,” Peter said, “with flora native to primordial Earth. These are the plants that have evolved from those originally put here. The Ship says the sky and sun are images generated to create the illusion of

a perfectly natural environment. Most of the air circulation and filtration is done by the plants themselves.”

The tramcar stopped at the polar station. They stepped off onto the gently rotating surface of the sphere. Bloom steadied her balance a moment.

“It’s like the Garden of Eden,” Kodo exclaimed reverently. “This...this has been here, *waiting* for millions of years. The air is so fresh...so clean...”

“And we’re the first people to see it,” Bloom said. “The first life on this world to set foot in here.”

“These plants,” Kodo said, wandering, looking at the vast canopy of jungle spreading out just beyond them, “I’ve never seen anything like them. Isolated as they were, they must have followed different evolutionary paths. Everything Darwin theorized during his trip to the Galapagos is true; this place *proves* it.”

“And this is only the outermost level,” Peter said. “Living quarters are spread out along the equator. Then inside the sphere itself there are hundreds of sublevels. The Ship can adjust areas of the surface to suit our needs for farming, agriculture and such.”

“Let’s get back,” Bloom said. “We should tell the others. We should tell the Summit.”

“We should explore this,” Kodo said, panning his head around so his headset cam recorded as much as possible. “Explore the whole habitat.”

“All in good time,” Bloom said. “We have to stick to procedure. There are rules...”

She looked around the splendour before her, smelled the air and listened to the rushing of water, somewhere nearby.

“Mind you,” she said, “I can’t see anything wrong with spending a *few* minutes looking around. Major, would that be a problem for security?”

Benedict could barely register her question. The perfume of the exotic plants, the air, the sights before him were completely enrapturing. Even the sky and sun looked real, felt real from the heat generated by the simulated yellow orb.

“I don’t see why it should be, Colonel,” he said at last, “as long as we don’t touch or eat anything. Christ knows if any of this is toxic, or not.”

“Good point,” Bloom said. “So, let’s look, but not touch. Got that, Doctor Kodo?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, “but I do want to collect samples.”

“All in good time,” Bloom said. “Right now, let’s just go for a walk.”

REVELATIONS

Now that the Subjects had sufficiently demonstrated their intelligence, the Ship had granted them nearly unlimited access. It hardly expected that every one of these beings would want to or be able to learn the subtleties and complexities of its language so it was more than happy to communicate with them in their native languages. The one known as Soniaaiziz continued to converse with the Ship in its own language and was fast becoming fluent. The others would speak to The Ship in the common language of this world, a language known as English and the Ship obliged them by communicating with them in kind.

“Minister,” MI-6 said, shaking the Minister’s hand, “it is so very nice to meet you in person at last.”

The Minister smiled.

“With the conference in London and a meeting scheduled I thought it might be an interesting opportunity to sit in on the Committee with my British colleagues.”

“Our sources on the World Ship Summit have confirmed that the Summit will be making a press announcement,” the British Minister said. “They are revealing almost everything that has occurred since the delegates from the

Vatican Council first spoke with the Ship.”

“And what has the World Ship Summit decided regarding the Ship’s offer?” the Solicitor General of Canada asked.

“The World Council is accepting the Ship’s offer,” the Curator said, “and the Summit is now working out the logistics of the technology exchange and how to proceed with finding people for the...cultural exchange.”

“Isn’t there some way to delay the announcement?” Natural Resources asked. “Allow us time to gather intelligence from within the Ship? Once the announcement is made the Summit will begin sending in teams to extract information and technology from the various archives in the Ship. Once the technology mining begins our chance at the Ship ends.”

“Then perhaps it’s time we closed the book on the Ship,” the Minister said. “It certainly no longer falls under our mandate to keep secret alien artifacts.”

“I agree, Minister,” MI-6 said. “The Ship is public domain now and once the Summit makes its announcement it will be all the more so. However we still have a narrowing opportunity to acquire technology from within the Ship and Colonel Bloom has presented us with the very means to do it.”

“Namely?” the Curator asked.

“Mister Chairman,” MI-6 asked the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, “would you be so kind as to run the video from Colonel Bloom’s report to General Harrod?”

Seconds later each member of the Committee beheld images from Bloom’s headset cam. Bloom narrated:

“We’ve just returned to Fort Arapaho from our initial drop deeper into the Ship,” she said. “There’s a transitway system within the Ship; a network of high-speed pods analogous to a subway that accesses every part of the Ship. Through it we’ve been able to access the habitat; a biosphere set up to be the living quarters for the Ship’s passengers and crew.”

The image changed, showing visuals of the approach made to the habitat and their walk through the dense foliage of the habitat itself and of the series of buildings that ringed the biosphere’s equator.

“The habitat is an artificial planetoid suspended in the core of the Ship,” Bloom narrated. “The Ship’s measurements put it at around seven point two-three kilometres in diameter. The vegetation is directly descended from plant samples taken by the Ship when it first landed here eighty million years ago. We have so far been able to identify several ferns, pine trees and fruit-bearing shrubs that are close evolutionary cousins to plants found in our current environment. There’s a large freshwater lake located along the southern pole

of the habitat. The entire biosphere seems to be fed by its own micro-environment, with regular rainfall plant growth and a heated core. The ring of buildings along the equator that extends to a small network of support systems, storage and empty constructs beneath the habitat's surface. The tram station at the northern hemisphere is accessed from several foot paths and mini-car lines that run from the equator to the North Pole. There's an incredibly well simulated sky; the air is fresh...it's the ideal environment to support human life."

The images changed continuously as Bloom spoke. This time it was showing detail maps from the Ship's display.

"These are maps to the other points of interest in the Ship," Bloom's voice-over continued, "and the next areas we'll be exploring. I'm anxious to look for the Bugs. We have more than enough information to indicate that the Ship is the point of origin for the Bugs. I'd like to request that the engineers I worked with at the Facility be transferred to my command as part of the Ship Survey Expedition's engineering team. Their expertise will help us once we do find the Bugs."

The recording ended and the lights came up. Outside the windows of the London headquarters of the Committee, snow was falling in the late evening sky.

"I don't see much cause to refuse the colonel's request," MI-6 said.

"Nor do I," the Chairman said, "especially considering it now affords us the opportunity to extract a Bug from the Ship."

TRANSCRIPT

INTERACTIVE NEWS NETWORK NEWSCAST

PLAIN TEXT FORMAT

**PATH: INN<>HEADLINES>>THE SHIP>>SPECIAL
REPORT>>WORLD SHIP SUMMIT MEDIA RE-
LEASE><**

ANCHOR

**GOOD MORNING AND WELCOME TO THE INTERACTIVE
NEWS NETWORK. WE ARE MOMENTS AWAY FROM A PRESS
CONFERENCE IN GENEVA, WHERE THE WORLD SHIP
SUMMIT IS EXPECTED TO DISCUSS ONGOING**

THE UNEARTHING

COMMUNICATIONS IT HAS BEEN HAVING WITH THE SHIP. ALTHOUGH DETAILS OF THE ANNOUNCEMENT ARE SKETCHY, INN HAS LEARNED THAT PART OF THE ANNOUNCEMENT WILL DETAIL PLANS FOR AN EXCHANGE OF CULTURAL INFORMATION AND TECHNOLOGY BETWEEN THE SHIP AND HUMANITY.

PATH: WORLD SHIP SUMMIT<>WORLD SHIP
SUMMIT MEDIA RELEASE>>LATEST><

TRANSCRIPT

WORLD SHIP SUMMIT MEDIA RELEASE

PLAIN TEXT FORMAT

GOOD MORNING LADIES AND GENTLEMEN. WE'D LIKE TO FIRST OF ALL THANK ALL OF YOU FOR COMING OUT HERE SO EARLY. WE KNOW THAT IN THE CASE OF THOSE STANDING BY IN THE AMERICAS MANY OF YOU STILL HAVEN'T BEEN TO BED YET. HOWEVER THE NEWS THAT WE'RE BRINGING YOU WILL MORE THAN MAKE UP FOR THE EARLY HOUR OF THIS ANNOUNCEMENT I PROMISE.

IN THE LAST SEVERAL DAYS A SERIES OF DIALOGUES HAS BEEN UNDERTAKEN BETWEEN THE SHIP MEMBERS OF THE SHIP SURVEY EXPEDITION, THE WORLD SHIP SUMMIT AND THE INTERFAITH FOURTH VATICAN COUNCIL. WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED FROM THE SHIP IS TO SAY THE LEAST, REMARKABLE. THE SHIP HAS GIVEN US ALMOST FULL ACCESS TO ITS SYSTEMS, DATABASES AND TECHNOLOGY. WE WILL BE VERY SOON SENDING IN TEAMS TO EXTRACT DATA AND TECHNOLOGY FROM THE SHIP, INCLUDING BIOLOGICAL, ASTRONOMICAL, PHYSICAL AND CULTURAL INFORMATION. WE EXPECT TO GAIN A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF OUR PHYSICAL UNIVERSE AND QUITE POSSIBLY THE METAPHYSICAL AS WELL.

THE SHIP HAS ALSO MADE AN UNPRECEDENTED OFFER TO HUMANITY. THE SHIP IS A VESSEL OF

EXPLORATION AND DIPLOMACY THAT BELONGS TO A VAST LEAGUE OF AFFILIATED WORLDS. WHEN IT ARRIVED HERE MILLIONS OF YEARS AGO THE SHIP CAME IN HOPES OF FINDING INTELLIGENCE AND TO INTRODUCE THAT INTELLIGENCE TO THE LEAGUE. THE SHIP IS NOW PROPOSING TO TAKE A REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE OF HUMANITY WITH IT ON A RETURN VOYAGE TO THAT LEAGUE. THE WORLD SHIP SUMMIT HAS DELIBERATED LONG ON THIS ISSUE AND WE HAVE DECIDED TO ACCEPT THE SHIP'S OFFER. PLANS ARE NOW UNDERWAY FOR A WORLDWIDE LOTTERY TO DETERMINE WHO WILL BE PART OF THE SHIP'S PASSENGER MANIFEST. THE SHIP HAS LEFT IT TO US TO SET THE TIMETABLE FOR THIS EVENT SO THERE IS NO RUSH, NO PANIC. SEVERAL GRID SPARS WITH DEDICATED SUPPORT HAVE BEEN ESTABLISHED TO PROVIDE INFORMATION TO EVERYONE. WE WILL MAKE REGULAR ANNOUNCEMENTS AS MORE INFORMATION BECOMES AVAILABLE AND THE GRID SPARS WILL BE UPDATED DAILY.

The archives that the SSE wanted to visit were all housed in the same complex within the Ship. However the complex itself was spread out over ten kilometres and several hundred decks.

Mark Kodo and his team took the tram from Central Station through the massive sciences complex to a point along the outer ring of the inner hull where the biology archives were located. Kodo watched their progress through the transitway tunnels on the display at the back of the tramcar. In its thunderous Shipsong voice the Ship gave Kodo the details on the archives:

“THERE ARE FIVE HUNDRED LEVELS TO THE BIOLOGY ARCHIVES; TWO HUNDRED AND FIFTY ABOVE THE TRANSIT STATION LEVEL, TWO HUNDRED AND FORTY-NINE BELOW. ARCHIVE LEVELS ARE NUMBERED FROM THE HIGHEST FLOOR, DOWN; ONE IS THE HIGHEST FLOOR, FIVE HUNDRED THE LOWEST. THE ARCHIVES FOR YOUR WORLD ARE ON THE LAST OCCUPIED LEVEL, WHICH IS LEVEL THREE HUNDRED AND EIGHTY-SEVEN.”

THE UNEARTHING

“Can you tell me where on that level we should start looking?” Kodo asked.

“EACH LEVEL IS DIVIDED INTO TWENTY-FIVE HUNDRED SECTIONS,” the Ship replied. “EACH SECTION HAS AN APPROXIMATE DIMENSION OF ELEVEN POINT THREE ONE SQUARE METERS. SECTIONS ARE ARRANGED IN A GRID PATTERN OF FIFTY SECTIONS BY FIFTY SECTIONS. TRAVEL BETWEEN SECTIONS CAN BE DONE BY MEANS OF MOBILE PLATFORMS WHICH RUN ON TRACKS BETWEEN EVERY FIVE SECTIONS. SECTIONS EACH CONTAIN BETWEEN FIVE THOUSAND AND TEN THOUSAND SAMPLES. BETWEEN EVERY FIVE SECTIONS ARE TWO STATIONS FROM WHICH SAMPLES CAN BE VIEWED. SAMPLES OF LIFE FROM YOUR WORLD BEGIN AT SECTION THIRTEEN AND END AT SECTION EIGHT HUNDRED AND NINETY-THREE.”

“Thank you,” Kodo said. He turned to his team of biologists, “We’ll be splitting into two teams: my team will start at Section Eight Nine Three and the second team, led by Doctor MacLean will begin at Section Thirteen. The idea will be for us to pinpoint exactly how long the Ship has been here based on the animals found at the start of the collection and those found at the end of the collection. We can also expect to discover several heretofore never-seen species. That’s why two palaeontologists and two geologists are accompanying our group.”

Goodrich, one of Kodo’s palaeontologists, raised her hand.

“Yes, Doctor Goodrich?”

“Doctor Kodo, exactly what form will the specimens sampled take?”

Kodo shrugged.

“Why not ask the expert?” Kodo asked.

Goodrich looked self-conscious. Kodo nodded his head to encourage her.

“Umm...Ship?” Goodrich asked, hesitantly. “What form do the biology specimens take?”

“EACH SPECIMEN COMPRISES BOTH FLUID AND TISSUE SAMPLES FROM EACH SUBJECT SAMPLED. MICROBIAL LIFE IS CLASSIFIED BY A NUMBER SEQUENCE BEGINNING WITH FIVE-ZERO-ZERO. VEGETABLE LIFE IS CLASSIFIED BY A NUMBER SEQUENCE BEGINNING WITH FIVE-ZERO-FIVE. ANIMAL LIFE IS CLASSIFIED BY A NUMBER SEQUENCE BEGINNING WITH FIVE-FIVE-ZERO.”

The tramcar pulled into station. As Kodo and his team debarked heading to the lift banks, the Ship continued its summation:

“THE SAMPLE CASES CAN BE PLACED INTO SCANNERS AT ANY STATION. GENETIC SEQUENCERS CREATE ANATOMICALLY PRECISE HOLOGRAPHIC IMAGES OF THE SELECTED SAMPLE, WHICH CAN THEN BE DISSECTED, DOWN TO A MICROMOLECULAR LEVEL.”

They reached the lift bank.

“Level Three Eight Seven,” Kodo said.

The car began dropping, taking them to their destination.

“Let’s get to work,” Kodo said.

Andrews and N’banga discovered a science facility to rival the greatest laboratories on Earth. The Ship described to them chemistry and physics labs, astronomy and astrophysics systems far in advance of anything as yet imagined by the Human mind.

“The Ship actually *recorded* the Betelgeuse Supernova event,” N’banga exclaimed. “It has mapped black holes, isolated Hawking’s virtual particles; my God, Michael; the catalogue of what the Ship’s Builders have discovered and recorded about the physical universe is astounding. They disproved so many established theories and proven so many more...it will take us centuries just to catch up on the *reading*, never mind duplicating their experiments.”

“Whoever it was that built the Ship seems to have done so primarily with research in mind,” Andrews remarked.

“Ah yes,” N’banga agreed, raising an exclamatory finger, “but to what end? So much of Humankind’s scientific research has come from military need. Was the research performed by the Ship’s civilization done for academic, economic, political or military need?”

“You’re anthropomorphizing,” Andrews countered, “ascribing Human emotions and Human values to alien beings: we don’t know that the drives of the Builders were in any way similar to our own. Everything in Human civilization from residential communities to politics is almost uniformly dominated by alpha males and alpha females. This has its roots in the behaviour of the primitive animals Humans evolved from. We don’t know how *anything*, let alone primitive animal behaviour occurred where the Builders came from.”

“Evolution is evolution,” N’banga said. “Survival of the fittest.”

“I don’t think Doctor Kodo is an evolutionary biologist, but he would argue differently. Evolution and survival of the fittest aren’t necessarily synonymous. Likewise, Darwin’s theories have been proven to be incomplete at best, incorrect, at worst. The most advantageous adaptation or mutation is a determining factor both of animal survivability and behaviour. Aggressive and predatory behaviour is not necessarily a universal trait.”

“Could you explain what you mean?”

“Several decades ago, an author by the name of James P. Hogan wrote the *Giants* novels; required reading for most scholars of speculative fiction; a trilogy about an alien race that evolved as completely nonaggressive vegetarians, who did not have the same violent civilization that we, Humans to this day still have. Predatory behaviour all but died out on their world because in primitive times the animals of their world that were prey evolved highly poisonous tissue that all but killed off their predators and allowed them to flourish. Suppose, then that the Builders evolved along those lines? Or for the sake of argument, that their evolution took forms we can’t even imagine? Only the Builders can say for sure why they built the Ship. And they aren’t around to tell us.”

The cultural archives were unique: a gigantic museum with hundreds of floors of tools, clothing, artwork, histories, literature, music and musical instruments, technology, relics and mementos from thousands of worlds, thousands of civilizations. Peter couldn’t even begin to decide where to start. He would have to request the World Ship Summit send curators from the world’s great museums be brought here to help. As an anthropologist he wanted very much to explore the gigantic gallery. But as a Human with a very limited lifespan Peter knew that he could not. Instead he found the first workstation he came across and sat down to talk to the Ship.

“I guess the first question I should ask would be about the people from your own civilization.”

“WHAT SPECIFICALLY WOULD YOU KNOW, PETERPAULSON?” the Ship asked, in reply.

“Tell me of them. What were they called? What did they look like? What were their goals as people? How long did they live? General information.”

“THE PEOPLE WHO DESIGNED THIS ENTITY WERE KNOWN AS THE EOULF. HERE IS A REPRESENTATION OF THEM.”

Suddenly there appeared beside the workstation an alien being. Peter nearly fell out of his chair before realizing it was as the Ship had said: a

representation. There was nothing in the being that Peter could even recognize as remotely similar to Human. The Eoulf was roughly two meters tall; at least half as wide. Peter couldn't tell if the creature itself was naturally a translucent, luminous blue or if that was simply how the Ship's imaging made the Eoulf appear. It looked as though bunches and bunches of fine, delicate strands had been woven together into a large, cylindrical stack. They graced the floor, spreading out in a pool. The upper end of the Eoulf looked much the same, the tentacles fanning out around the top of the...*torso*, Peter supposed. The upper tentacles ended in long, slender fibres that looked almost like hair. Peter wondered if they weren't the Eoulf equivalent of hands. Between bunches of the fibrous strands long, fanlike membranes fluttered in the air currents. A thick disk was centered above the top of the tentacles, sitting atop a round, slowly pulsating mound.

"I've never seen anything like them," Peter said. "No. They look...*almost*...like some form of jellyfish. Has Doctor Kodo seen this image, yet?"

"MARKKODO IS OTHERWISE PREOCCUPIED. IF YOU WISH, I WILL TELL YOU, NOW, MORE ABOUT THE EOULF."

"Please," Peter answered. "I'd like that, very much."

Bloom and her team went to the drive decks and moved on. They had only been allowed a glimpse of the Ship's main power core; the Ship would not tell them what it was, or how it worked. But the image Bloom had recorded and would remember through all the long days of her life: They had stood together on one side of a large window. On the other side was a chamber kilometres across and kilometres high. In the center of the chamber, was a massive, brilliant star of whiter than white light. Constant arcs of energy the size of expressways shot from the white up to a ridged cone above. Around the star like orb spun several large, black slabs of undetermined material. They spun so fast they created a strobe effect in the observation room Bloom and her team had gathered in. Further out, another series of larger slabs of black spun. Between the two rings, there seemed to pass an invisible wave; a barely-perceptible distortion of space and time that fed the smaller ring. They were looking at the Ship's power distribution node. The power was channeled from a ring that ran around the lower half of the Ship, which its control entity explained to them was its power core, a spinning toroidal black hole. The Ship said the technology involved was beyond their level of development to understand, or use. It would say nothing more. The engineer in Bloom was enraptured by the site.

At last they had come to the hangars. The hangars were all located along the upper half of the outer hull. Bloom had discovered not so much a hangar bay as a hive. The rows of the bay were lined with alcoves, five high. In each alcove was a Bug. On the left side of the bay the alcoves held the same bugs that Bloom and her team had worked with at Groom Lake. On the right side were larger, wider, fatter looking craft, more Beetle than Bug. Bloom suspected they served as either cargo or personnel transport. She also expected that both “breeds” of craft could be adapted to fit several different purposes. Each ascending level of alcove was accessible both by lift and by gantry. A series of recessed tracks were laid out on the floor of the bay, which led up and out through valve-like doors along the far bulkhead. Multiple craft could be launched at once it seemed. That could prove a tactical advantage, especially on a vessel the size of the Ship.

“There are hundreds of bays like this along the outer hull,” Bloom said. “How many craft do you count, gentlemen? There are at least ten rows of five here.”

“According to the Ship, the alcoves themselves serve as complete work bays for each craft,” Brubaker said. “Repair, refuelling and regeneration are all done from within. Apparently there are five ships in each alcove; the vessels can be launched in waves.”

They made their way onto the main deck of the hangar bay. Bloom crouched down to examine the nearest track. There were a series of rails spaced laterally down the length of the track on floor and sides.

“Guys, look at this,” she called to her team.

They came over and examined the track.

“What do you make of it?” Bloom asked.

“They’re spaced out like the mag couplings on a high-speed tram,” someone observed. “It looks like an accelerator bed. Maybe that’s how they launch the Bugs. Zip ‘em along, each magnetic rail pulling it faster than the last...shit they could shoot out of the Ship fairly close to the speed of light, if necessary.”

“Yeah,” Bloom said, nodding her head, “yeah. Of course, there *is* only one way to find out,” She said, rising, “and that’s to fly one out of here.”

Bloom walked away from the launch rail towards the nearest alcove and Bug waiting within.

“I think I could take her up,” she said to no one in particular. “I think I could even fly it out of here.”

“That’d be great for our mission directives,” Brubaker said. “The DIA’s told us to capture one of these but how would we get it through World Ship

Preserve airspace without being noticed?”

Bloom considered this. When the engineering team from Groom Lake had shown up as part of the Ship Survey Expedition only Bloom had known where they had actually come from. She'd also spoken with the Chairman Joint Chiefs prior to their arrival. His orders to her were crystal clear: Locate and if successful acquire a Bug from the Ship. Provisions would be made, the Chairman had said, to get it past the security system.

“That’s been taken care of,” she told Brubaker. “Right now, let’s get this thing into the launch trench and see if we can’t figure out how to the bee out of the hive.”

She made her way into the cockpit. The chamber filled up with the strange, warm liquid, just as she'd experienced at Groom Lake. The controls appeared around her. Only this time, the symbols on the panels had been translated into English. She brought up main power and activated the Bug's zero buoyancy fields. The null field, as Groom Lake called it, set off an interesting system within the Bug; one that the best techs had yet to understand: it neutralized the Bug's kinetic and inertial mass, making it nearly as weightless as a large balloon. Bloom pushed forward on her sticks and the Bug slipped slowly from its alcove. From somewhere outside the Bug in the hangar itself a series of loud mechanical noises sounded and suddenly some invisible force was guiding the Bug into the nearest trench. The Bug sat there, Bloom at the controls staring at the far end of the trench.

“That was cool,” Bloom purred.

“Now all we have to do is fly the thing out of here unnoticed,” Brubaker said. “Just how do we do that?”

“That would be where I come in.”

They all turned at the new voice. There in the open doorway of the launch bay stood Major Benedict.

“Major,” Bloom said when she'd climbed from the Bug, the fluttering shock of discovery still fresh in her stomach, “what are you doing here?”

“My job,” her security chief said with grim authority.

He stepped forward as Bloom and her engineering crew gathered together in a nervous group. Bloom watched him carefully, wondering what was going to happen next, not particularly caring to find out. Benedict toggled his headset and spoke:

“Go central security voice command link,” he said, waiting for the connection to establish itself.

Within seconds, it had.

“Run Blind Eye program,” Benedict said.

As Bloom opened her mouth to speak, Benedict cut her off.

“The security field is running a pre-recorded loop, now,” the major said. “You can dick around with the launch bay mechanisms and hopefully fly this thing out of here to your rendezvous. I’ll clear a path for your team back out. To Fort Arapaho it’ll look like you’ve gone back to the surface with them.”

Bloom studied Benedict long and hard before making her way back down into the launch trench. About halfway down, she turned to look back at him.

“Major I once told you that one day we’d have to sit down and talk about all the things we’re not supposed to talk about,” she said. “I think that day has come. Meet me in my office tonight, at nineteen hundred hours.”

“Yes, Colonel,” Benedict said. “Will do.”

The biology archives were gigantic. The scale described by the Ship hardly did justice to the vast, warehouse-like structure. The floors and ceilings were polished black, lit from above. Gold columns every few dozen meters supported the construct. They’d studied several specimen cases already. Reports from his team members had yielded many surprises: among them a number of dinosaur species that bore feathers; not just crests or rills of feathers but were feathered from head to tail. Then there was never-before imagined colour patterns of the dinosaurs: camouflage to blend in with the jungle; wild colours to stand out. They weren’t simply mottled green or brown reptiles as had been imagined. But the most dumbfounding discovery was only about to be made.

“Doctor Kodo!” The urgent cry over his linx made Kodo immediately think that someone had been injured.

“What?” Kodo asked. “What is it?”

“This is Doctor Perkins,” came the reply. “I’m at section Five Twenty-One. Doctor, you’d better come see this.”

Kodo rode a transport platform to the ascribed section. There he found several of his scientists gathered around a workstation staring at the holographic image of one of the creatures in the Ship’s bestiary. When Kodo got a good look at what they were watching he was struck dumb. He approached, his head dizzy, his face struck into an expression of incomprehension. He asked the Ship a question, then another and another. Finally, looking at the image before him, he was only able to utter two words:

“Dear God.”

Pope Simon Peter licked his lips nervously. Only three times before in his life had he felt this anxious: On the day he was married to his late wife; on the day, years later when he was ordained a Priest in the Holy Roman Catholic Church and when he had been elected Pope. The Fourth Vatican Council had come to an end. Its findings were being printed by the Vatican Press for mass distribution in over two hundred languages. The Vatican's Grid Spar was being updated with the news. But he would make the first announcement of what was to be revealed today. There were no cheers, no applause, as usually greeted the Pope when he stepped onto the balcony of Saint Peter's Basilica to say mass or make announcements of importance to the faith. Instead a hive-like buzz of anticipation issued from the crowd. As the Pontiff emerged from within the Basilica, the buzz died.

"My Brothers and Sisters in Christ and to our brothers and sisters among the world's faithful: May the peace of the Lord our God be with you. Ladies and gentlemen, I am here today to announce the findings of the Fourth Vatican Council into the Doctrine of the Roman Catholic Faith."

Pope Simon Peter paused, listening to his voice echo from speakers concealed throughout the square.

"Two weeks ago," he continued, "the Ship was opened to us, to the world and the greatest exchange of cultural and technological data in the history of the whole of Humanity began. This much the world has known since the beginning. However what has been kept secret until now so that the World Ship Summit and the members of the Fourth Vatican Council could study the issue was the catalyst for this great event.

"Two weeks ago a delegation from the Fourth Vatican Council was sent to the World Ship Preserve to examine the Ship and if possible communicate with the Ship to question it in regards to spiritual matters. It was these questions that opened the Ship to the world. It was this dialogue that made the Ship decide that we are advanced enough as a species... as *one* species, to be allowed access to its secrets.

"One of the inevitable questions asked of the Ship, was whether or not there is a God. The Ship answered in the positive, that there is indeed a God and that it is known by many names and through many systems of belief throughout the known universe. The next question that was asked was if there is a God, or a 'Creation Entity' as the Ship refers to it, is there therefore a meaning to life? Indeed, the Ship answered this in the positive as well. Our best interpretation of what the Ship said is that life's purpose is to serve Creation and the purpose of Creation is to serve life.

“This Council sat down with this new information from the Ship, this strange and mysterious Divine revelation, the new Divine Truth and began to debate its meaning. We have spent every moment of the last two weeks trying to determine what the weight of this message means. We can come to only one conclusion, a conclusion that will affect *all* religions; a conclusion that can *only* validate all religions and not favor any one faith over another.

“The greatest question that has confronted us all as faithful of one religion or another has been how do we know that the way we follow God is the way God intended? How do we know what is the right way? All of us have been taught that *ours* is the way to salvation and that everyone else must hope for Divine mercy in order to reap the rewards of God’s graces. I tell you now that this is only a half-truth. The way to salvation is as it has been revealed to each of us! As you have been taught to worship God is how God intends you to worship Him!

“We, Christians have been taught to believe that Jesus Christ is our Lord and that He died for our sins and rose again to ensure our place of communion with God. I tell you now that this is true: Christ was indeed the Son of God and God sent Him to us so that another pathway to salvation could be found. Similarly those of the Jewish faith believe in the laws of Moses and that they are the chosen of God. And indeed they are and God calls upon them to preserve the way of life He revealed to them. Muslims follow the teachings of the prophet Mohammed and the laws and the ways God revealed to them through him. Allah’s way is the way for those who have been called to Islam, for that is the way God calls you to follow. God is revealed to the Pagans as the Mother of Creation and the laws of Wicca and the traditions and history of the Goddess are the way that they are called to Divine Reward. God does not want us to all be alike. God gave us different races, different cultures, different histories and different religions not to find out who is the best among us but to teach us that it is our differences that unite us and make us great. Too long we have all turned away from God by resenting our differences and turning our backs on one another. This is not what God wants. God wants us to overcome our differences and to celebrate them. All the knowledge of the world is scattered throughout her people.”

Now Simon Peter had to shout to be heard even with the loudspeakers. The uproar had begun. Many of those assembled were outraged; horrified at the perceived blasphemy in his words. Many more were discussing animatedly what the Pontiff was saying. Others exclaimed shock. The Pope knew that as with any great revelation a period of turmoil was beginning with

his words. And it pained him and pleased him that God had chosen him to herald this news.

“Ignorance is to *not* learn all that we have to teach one another!” he bellowed as if to counter the outrage he was hearing. “*This* is why the Ship was sent here! And *this* is the message God had for us. This is why the Ship has asked for a representative sample of humanity comprising *all* cultures and *all* peoples: so that they can show us the way to unite into one world of many cultures. The time has come to end a million years of fear, of hatred and of ignorance. The time has come for us to make Heaven on Earth by learning to love one another as we are, by *celebrating* our differences as God has called us to. *This* is God’s message to us and this is why He so long ago sent the Ship here to wait for us: so that we now might learn this final truth of God’s existence and of His love for us *all*: different, as He intended us to be!”

The Ship Survey Expedition was meeting after their first full day within the Ship’s archives. The expressions on the faces of the members of the expedition told Bloom they had all discovered much. At Bloom’s direction Peter started off by telling them all a little about the history and culture of the Eoulf, the people who had built the Ship. They were a millions-year-old civilization that had evolved a gerontocracy: the eldest among them led. They were peaceful, having known conflict and war only ever as a last resort. What was more, the Ship had told Peter that it had been hundreds of thousands of years since the last recorded death of an Eoulf.

“Apparently they found a way to beat death,” he said. “At one point the Eoulf simply . . . disappear: the individual beings vanish, apparently into some higher existence. Hence the gerontocracy; the older you are, the wiser you must be. Death by accident or disease were normal occurrences, but also rare as their technology advanced. The Eoulf who were within the Ship died as a result of the Death Star impact sixty-seven million years ago.”

“Then it’s possible the Eoulf are still out there?” Bloom asked.

Peter nodded.

“They were only one of many thousands of worlds in the League,” he said, “and the Eoulf civilization has tens of millions of years old before the Ship even came here.”

“Incredible,” Bloom said, ponderously.

She turned to N’banga.

“Doctor, you said that you and Professor Andrews discovered the means the Ship uses for propulsion.”

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“Not exactly,” N’banga said. “What we uncovered is how the Ship would be able to traverse deep space so apparently quickly.”

He used a remote control to lower the large display screen facing them. On it a rune in Shiplanguage appeared:

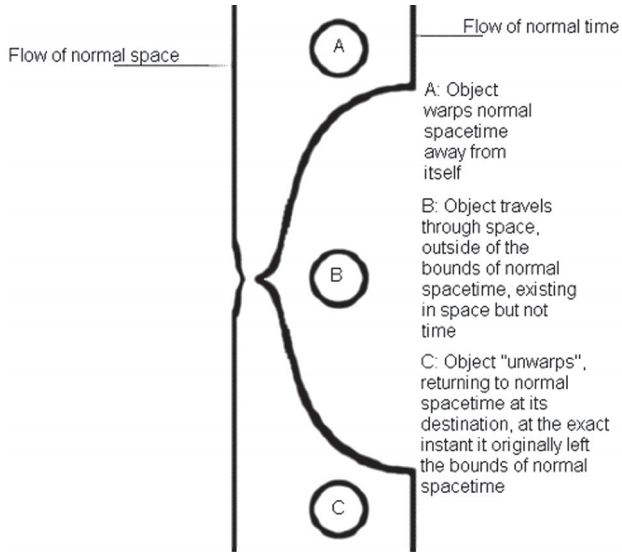


“The rune looks astoundingly like the letter K,” Andrews said, “and has several stand-alone meanings, including the verbs to *voyage*, to *decide*, *present*, as in the temporal state of being and *time*. It is this last definition that would seem to concern us most.”

“The rune actually serves as part of a diagram,” N’banga said. “The diagram shows the mechanics of what the Ship does, to travel through the vast distances of the universe. Apparently the Ship has been grown and or designed to live indefinitely. It does not age and it does not break down. It has been built to cross the vast distances of space. But the question is: how does one bridge these distances effectively? If it takes a million years round trip to get to the next galaxy space travel is impractical. The problem for the Ship isn’t crossing that distance but the time it takes to cross that distance. Even at its fastest speed, which the Ship indicates is one hundred times the speed of light, it would take millennia to travel some extragalactic distances. What the Builders of the Ship have done is removed time from the equation relative to the point of origin and the point of destination of the travelling object.”

“How have they done that?” Bloom asked.

“It’s...complicated,” N’banga said, “but this diagram might help, a little:” He switched the image on the main viewer:



“What the Ship does is remove itself from time relative to the points of origin and destination,” Andrews explained. “Essentially it enters into time warp. The Ship still experiences the time it takes to travel between those two points, but for all intents and purposes it reaches its destination instantaneously. The equations the Ship described are actually quite sound.”

But their fellow members of the SSE still didn’t quite understand what they were saying. N’banga intervened:

“Imagine if you will that passengers and crew boarded the Ship on Earth for a voyage to Andromeda, the nearest galaxy,” he said. “To an observer who was monitoring both Earth and Andromeda, the Ship would appear to travel between the two places instantaneously, appearing at Andromeda the exact moment it disappeared from Earth. However, relative to the Ship time would elapse normally between point of origin and destination. It would still experience the full measure of time as it travelled between the two points.”

“How would the crew survive such a journey?” Peter asked.

“In hibernation,” Andrews said. “More precisely, in perfect stasis.”

“Stasis?” Bloom asked.

She’d heard the term bandied about during her time at NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory when they would talk about deep space exploration.

She never quite understood it.

“An advanced form of suspended animation,” N’banga said, “in which the crew of the Ship are essentially frozen in time becoming non-event masses with a quantum probability of zero. Time stops for them. They experience nothing; do not age, do not even technically *exist* until the Ship removes them from stasis as it reaches its destination. Neither the passengers and crew nor the people at point of origin or destination would be aware of any passage of time. For them the trip would be instantaneous. Given the time it would take to cross the galaxy or to cross extragalactic space the Eoulf’s solution is quite ingenious and practically applicable; especially if you have a power source as unlimited as the Ship’s.”

“About that,” Bloom said, “the Ship described its power source as a torroidal black hole. What exactly is that and how is it possible for the Ship to even contain a black hole?”

“Essentially a torroidal black hole is a black hole which has been stretched into a ring shape,” N’banga said, “By rapidly spinning it on its polar axis until it starts to flatten and expand. The event horizon of the black hole is what shapes it into a torus; the outside ring would have one magnetic polarity and the inside ring, another. The energy released from a spinning, ring-shaped or torroidal black hole would take the form of vast amounts of Hawking radiation and could then be collected and focused, probably in the chamber you observed, Colonel Bloom.”

“I thought that it was impossible for a black hole to be anything other than a point,” Benedict said.

“It is,” N’banga replied, “at least, it is, according to everything we understand. But some theorists still insist that a torus-shaped black hole is possible. If you could capture or create such an object and then cause it to spin, it could be made to generate vast amounts of energy which could then be collected. Such a captured object would be able to generate nearly limitless amounts of energy; certainly enough to provide the Ship with the power to warp time away from itself and just as easily accelerate the Ship to one hundred times the speed of light. However, even I am forced to admit that I have no idea how any of this is possible. The technology behind the Ship must be millions of years ahead of us.”

“Thank you,” Bloom said.

She turned to Doctor Kodo.

“Doctor, you said that something important was discovered in the biology archives.”

“Yes,” Kodo said, “and I’m surprised we didn’t figure it out, sooner. We know that the Ship came to Earth in the hopes of making contact with intelligent life and bringing that life into the League. We all knew that. We all knew that the crew of the Ship was so keenly impressed by the variety of life on this world that they began an extensive exercise to catalogue the life they found.”

Kodo took the remote from Doctor N’banga. He keyed up an image he’d taken from within the archives. He let everyone stare at the picture with the same dumbfounded expression he’d worn when he first saw it.

“The Ship came to Earth with the goal of making first contact with intelligent life,” Kodo said, “and, they did. About seventy million years ago.”

Onscreen, was a reddish-green, bipedal dinosaur. Its snout was short to the point that mouth and nose were very nearly separate structures. It had narrow shoulders, wide hips and thick legs with back-bending knees and a short stump of a tail. The large eyes faced forward and the brainpan of the skull was large, ovoid in shape and sat on the end of a thick, elongated and powerful neck. Its tiny hands were articulate, with opposable digits at either end of the hands. It was also wearing a sash around its waist that covered it to its knees.

“Ladies and gentlemen, meet the Hthaask,” Kodo said. “They evolved from omnivorous scavengers. When the Ship arrived, the Hthaask had an advanced civilization that used metallurgy, vegetable and alcohol-based fuels and geothermal power. The Hthaask hadn’t yet developed space flight but they had already built large cities and had advanced computronics. They were even sending radio messages into space the same way SETI has.”

“But...why is there no evidence of this?” Bloom asked. “Where are the ruins of their cities? Where are their machines?”

“According to the Ship, most of the Hthaask culture was based on biomechanical and biodegradable technology, including their cities,” Kodo said. “Their civilization wasn’t based around fossil fuels, the way ours is. In fact there *were* no fossil fuels back then. That we can’t find evidence of their metalworks and other undegradable products could owe much to simple geologic reformation. If they had nuclear fuel we’d never know it today as it would have long ago degraded into baser elements. We’ve dug up much of the earth in archaeology and in mining and construction...we may have stumbled across their technological remains and never known. Over the last sixty-eight million years the cataclysm and natural geological events have eroded away much of what the Hthaask had left behind as monuments.”

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“How ironic,” Andrews said dryly, “that the first civilization to grace this world was so much more in tune with the environment, while ours has done so much to destroy the environment by mining and burning our predecessors’ remains.”

“It’s been a Human conceit since the dawn of our civilization that we were the first intelligent life form on this world,” Kodo said, “and that ours is the pinnacle of technological success. It appears that neither is the case.”

Bloom was still reeling from Kodo’s statements when later that night Major Benedict came knocking on her office door.

“Colonel,” he said.

“Hello Major. Have a seat.”

She fixed herself a coffee and sat back down at her desk.

“I won’t pretend to know how you found out about my little black op,” she said, referring to her “liberation” of a Bug from the Ship earlier that day, “but the fact that you aided me in it tells me you’re either working for Justice, investigating me and those above me or you’re working for the same people I am.”

“I imagine that I’m working for the same people you are, Colonel,” he replied, “though I think I’m working from a position a little higher up the food chain.”

Bloom arched an eyebrow at this.

“What do you mean?”

Benedict grinned.

“Ladies first.”

Now it was Bloom’s turn to grin.

“Major, I am working under a G-1 security clearance on this one so I don’t have to tell you that anything I reveal will get me court-martialled with the highest applicable punishment,” Bloom said, her eyes narrowing seriously. “G-1 security violations are considered to be capital offences. So let’s be perfectly clear on this: I am about to trust you with my life. Therefore if anything I say to you leaks and you *will* find yourself eating the business end of my sidearm. Understood?”

“Perfectly,” Benedict replied, dryly.

Bloom nodded, sipped her coffee and then continued:

“I am working for a branch of the DIA commonly referred to as Area 51.”

“The Groom Lake Facility,” Benedict said. “Officially denied, not on any books and considered the Military’s Worst Kept Secret since William

Jefferson Clinton signed papers essentially saying that the US did not have to acknowledge that it existed.”

“This is why it’s the best place for the black flag research projects that are run there, to be run. Nobody really knows what’s going on there, except for one man.”

“I know, Colonel. I’ve put in my time there as well.”

Bloom couldn’t hide her surprise.

“Really,” she said.

He nodded.

Bloom continued: “They had their hands on an original crashed Bug from the Ship. That little bee I took from the hive is going to answer a few million questions for them. Probably give them about a billion more. I’ve been working for the DIA the whole time I’ve been here at Arapaho feeding everything we give to the World Ship Summit to my handler before I send it on to Geneva.”

“I’ve been running a similar filing process with our handler the whole time I’ve been here as well.”

“*Our* handler?” Bloom repeated.

“The Chairman Joint Chiefs,” Benedict said. “That *is* who you report to, isn’t it? You’re still not reporting directly to General Harrod, are you?”

Bemused, Bloom shook her head.

Benedict continued: “In any event, where you report to the Cee-Jay-Cee in his capacity as titular head of the DIA, I report to him on a much higher level. You mentioned G-classifications, before. I’d qualify as a G-0 classification, if such a level of classification even officially existed. Fact is we both work for the same people; you just don’t know it yet.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I don’t expect you would, Colonel,” Benedict said, “but you’re a good person in a bad situation, the same as me. You wouldn’t do anything to betray our government any more than I would. But we don’t, strictly speaking, work for the US government right now.”

“You mean the World Council?”

“No. Let me explain: Groom Lake, for all intents and purposes is a facility of the United States government. And although it was set up for that purpose originally—witness the Ghost Rider Project, commonly referred to by its biggest mistake, the *Philadelphia* Experiment—The US government hasn’t actually run Groom Lake since the end of War Two. At the time that Bug was found in the Alberta Badlands an international body was formed, led and

staffed by members of three governments, yet reporting only to themselves. The organisation is known as the Committee and is run by members of the American, British and Canadian governments. Their job is benefit their respective governments by cataloguing acquiring and studying alien artefacts like the Bug, like the UO from Roswell, and—.”

“And like the Ship,” Bloom rasped.

“Exactly; the founding members of the Committee occupied the same positions in government that its current members hold. The Canadian Minister of National Defence, the Canadian Natural Resources Minister, the Canadian Solicitor General...the British Ambassador to Canada, the British Defence Minister, the head of MI-6 and from the US, the Curator of the Smithsonian Institute, the White House Chief of Staff—.”

“And the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff,” Bloom said.

Benedict nodded and continued:

“An advisory council of past members of the Committee and certain captains of industry also occupy the sphere of power. Beneath them there are two levels of subordinates: Tier One personnel like myself, aware of the Committee, aware of who the players are and a second level referred to as the double-blinds, who think they are working for their respective governments. People like you, like General Harrod and like our dear departed friend Colonel Jude, are double blinds.”

“But...you were with me aboard Concord 3,” Bloom said, “before the Ship was unearthed.”

“That’s right,” Benedict replied. “I’m only called to work for the Committee at certain times. When your late ex-husband first started digging up the Ship and ordered the orbital scan, the DIA became aware of it. The DIA’s standing orders from the Pentagon are to send in a black ops team to acquire or destroy alien artifacts upon discovery. They’re also expected to run a complete sanitization of the site; eliminating any witnesses. The Committee became aware of this because General Harrod, the head of the DIA reported to his superior officer, the Chairman Joint Chiefs. The Committee didn’t want to risk something as significant as the Ship being destroyed and the Chairman couldn’t simply rescind standing orders. Luckily, I was aboard Concord 3 to sabotage Harrod’s mission. At least I would have if you hadn’t beaten me to the punch by hijacking Concord 3. When you sent that pirate Grid link to INN you actually did a lot to help. I doubt you’ll be surprised to learn that the black ops team sent in by the DIA to the Ship was commanded by Colonel Jude.”

“Fuck.”

“Basically Colonel, I was ordered to facilitate your theft of a Bug from the Ship, so that the Committee could get their hands on a fully functional sample and begin reverse-engineering it before anyone else did. The US is out of favour with the World Council. The likely candidates for the contract to reverse engineer one of the Bugs will be either Germany Japan, or Russia.”

“So the Committee had me steal a Bug for the DIA so that the US and Canada would have first shot?”

“The US and Great Britain more likely; Canada’s role on the Committee seems to be more as a moral and ethical voice from what I can tell.”

Bloom shook her head in disgust. She’d been used and she felt like a ten-dollar whore.

“Those goddamn motherfuckers,” Bloom swore, angrily.

She stared at her desk, at the console screen where the K-rune reflected back into her eyes. As her anger at being manipulated began to subside, she turned back to Benedict.

“So, why are you telling me all of this?”

Benedict sighed and stretched.

“Because,” he said, “you are something of a darling among members of the Committee. You even have a benefactor on the Committee, to whom you owe your current position as commander of Fort Arapaho and the Ship Survey Expedition.”

Bloom was taken aback.

“The Cee-Jay-Cee?”

“No,” Benedict replied, “actually the Canadian Defence Minister: seems he went to the mat to put you where you are, *because* you never let your ethics take a back seat to your orders.”

Bloom sneered.

“I knew getting repeatedly court-martialled would pay off eventually.”

“The reason I’m approaching you right now is because aside from my orders from the Committee to help you steal the Bug, the Minister asked me to unofficially recruit you to Tier One.”

“Why?”

“Because the World Ship Summit is very likely going to put the Ship and its passengers under military control, when it launches for its home base,” Benedict said. “The Committee’s going to want someone in its hip pocket in the driver’s seat. The Minister wants to make sure that the Committee’s influence is tempered by the Ship’s Commander’s code of honour. More simply put Colonel you’re being groomed to command the Ship.”

The process of first contact between the Ship and Humanity was complete. The Ship and its technologies and resources were now very much part of the World and the World was now living in a new era. And with the exchange about to take place, Mankind hoped to join the greater commonwealth of worlds and take its place among the stars.

19

BOARDING CALL

TRANSCRIPT

INTERACTIVE NEWS NETWORK
PLAIN TEXT FORMAT

PATH: INN<>HEADLINES>>THE SHIP>>WORLD
PREPARES FOR THE LAUNCH OF THE SHIP<<

ANCHOR

GOOD AFTERNOON AND WELCOME TO INN. IN THE TWO MONTHS SINCE THE SHIP PUT FORTH ITS INVITATION TO THE WORLD, THE WORLD SHIP SUMMIT HAS BEEN WORKING AROUND THE CLOCK IN PREPARATION FOR THE DEPARTURE OF THE SHIP AND TWO HUNDRED THOUSAND OF OUR FELLOW HUMAN BEINGS.

THE GLOBAL VILLAGE SURROUNDING THE SHIP HAS GROWN TO A COMMUNITY OF MILLIONS AS INDUSTRIES HAVE SPRUNG UP TO HARVEST TECHNOLOGY AND SCIENTIFIC INFORMATION FROM THE SHIP. NEW RESIDENCES HAVE BEEN BUILT FOR THE PEOPLE COMING

THE UNEARTHING

TO BID FAREWELL TO EARTH AND BOARD THE SHIP. ACCOMMODATIONS ARE ALSO BEING CREATED FOR THEIR FRIENDS AND FAMILY WHO WILL BE BROUGHT IN FOR A FINAL FAREWELL WITH THEIR LOVED ONES BEFORE THE SHIP LAUNCHES.

AS OF YET NO DATE HAS BEEN SET FOR THE LAUNCH OF THE SHIP ALTHOUGH SOURCES CLOSE TO THE WORLD SHIP SUMMIT HAVE BEEN QUOTED AS SAYING MID-JULY IS THE MOST LIKELY TIME. THE RESULTS OF THE WORLDWIDE LOTTERY TO DETERMINE WHO WILL MAKE UP THE PASSENGER COMPLEMENT OF THE SHIP ARE BEING TABULATED AND NOTICES WILL BE SENT OUT TO THE TWO HUNDRED THOUSAND PRIMARIES AND FIFTY THOUSAND RUNNERS UP.

PATH: INN<>THE SHIP>>THE
LOTTERY>>SUMMARY><

IN ORDER TO DETERMINE MAKEUP OF THE PASSENGER MANIFEST OF THE SHIP THE WORLD COUNCIL, ACTING THROUGH THE WORLD SHIP SUMMIT HAS DEVISED A LOTTERY SYSTEM BY WHICH NEARLY EVERY CITIZEN OF THE PLANET WOULD BE ELIGIBLE TO BECOME PART OF THE PASSENGER COMPLEMENT PROVIDING THEY MEET THE PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL GUIDELINES SET OUT BY THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION. RESTRICTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL ELIGIBILITY ARE FURTHER LIMITED TO PEOPLE OVER THE AGE OF FOURTEEN AND UNDER THE AGE OF SEVENTY.

BECAUSE OF THE SIZE OF THE WORLD POPULATION, ALL CITIZENS WITHIN THESE QUALIFICATION RANGES ARE AUTOMATICALLY CONSIDERED TO BE ENTERED INTO THE LOTTERY. ONLY THOSE WHO CONTACT THE WORLD SHIP LOTTERY COMMISSION TO REQUEST DISQUALIFICATION WILL BE REMOVED FROM THE LOTTERY AND THERE IS NO TIME LIMIT IMPOSED UPON SELF-DISQUALIFICATION.

BECAUSE OF THE VAST SIZE OF THE SHIP AND THE

ABILITY OF ITS HABITAT TO SUPPORT LIFE ALL MEMBERS OF A QUALIFIED APPLICANT'S IMMEDIATE FAMILY, REGARDLESS OF AGE, ARE CONSIDERED PART OF THE APPLICANT'S TICKET SHOULD THEY WIN AND A WINNING TICKET IS TRANSFERABLE, BY NOTARIZED CONTRACT.

CERTAIN PEOPLE ARE AUTOMATICALLY ELIGIBLE FOR TICKETS ONTO THE SHIP, INCLUDING ALL PAST AND PRESENT MEMBERS OF THE SHIP SURVEY EXPEDITION AND SELECT MEMBERS OF THE LAGUNA BAND.

A SPECIAL CATEGORY OF THE LOTTERY HAS BEEN SET UP FOR PEOPLE IN THE HEALTH SERVICES AND WELLNESS INDUSTRIES, INCLUDING NURSES, DOCTORS, DENTISTS, OPTOMETRISTS, ETC. HEALTH AND WELLNESS PERSONNEL REGISTERED WITH THEIR LOCAL AND NATIONAL ASSOCIATIONS WILL BE REGISTERED IN A SEPARATE LOTTERY DESIGNED TO PROVIDE THE ENTIRE POPULATION OF THE SHIP WITH ADEQUATE HEALTH AND WELLNESS COVERAGE.

SIMILARLY, THE SPIRITUAL NEEDS OF THE PASSENGERS ON THE SHIP WILL BE TAKEN CARE OF THROUGH ANOTHER SPECIAL LOTTERY DESIGNATION SET UP BY THE VATICAN INTERFAITH COUNCIL TO ENSURE THAT THE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES OF THE SHIP'S POPULATION ARE PROPERLY REPRESENTED.

AS TO SAFETY ISSUES SUCH AS POLICING, FIRE, ETC. THE WORLD SHIP SUMMIT HAS DECIDED TO LEAVE THESE UNDER THE JURISDICTION OF THE SHIP'S COMMAND CREW TO BE COMPOSED OF MILITARY PERSONNEL WHO WILL BE SELECTED FROM A LIST OF QUALIFIED VOLUNTEERS FROM THE ALLIED WORLD ARMY AND ITS MEMBER NATIONS.

PATH: INN<>THE SHIP>>INFORMATION ARCHIVE>>CREW MANIFEST><

SORRY! THIS SPAR IS STILL BEING ACTUALIZED.

PLEASE TRY AGAIN LATER.

Allison McQuire shut down her console's viewer and selecting music, put it down beside her chair. She needed to stand up. The package had come for her first thing this morning. She'd had the day off and had gotten up early to enjoy a full day of lounging around in her underwear, drinking coffee and smoking up when the doorchimes sounded. It was a courier dropping off a package from James.

As a former member of the Ship Survey Expedition, he'd been automatically qualified for a ticket. He knew he'd be rejected when it came time for the physical; the World Health Organization looked none too favorably on Oil heads. And although he'd been offered what amounted to a personal fortune to sell his ticket, James wanted her to have it. He still loved her, he'd written and if she didn't want the ticket, she could do with it as she pleased. He'd taken the time to have the necessary notarized forms filled out and the ticket with her name and information on it was now sitting there before her, printed on thick, embossed and platinum-leafed paper; a hundred thousand security devices to prevent fraud built into it, including sixty interconnected microchips.

The note and the ticket had been the first contact Allison had had with James in more than two months. Along with everything the ticket represented for Allison's future came everything that contact with James represented: the heartache he'd caused, the pain of what she saw as her failure to help him, to save him. She was over him; at least, she thought she was. But the wounds were still too fresh. She pulled a joint from the pack she'd bought that morning and lit it up. She and James hadn't been together that long; they hadn't even known each other that long. It wasn't like her to fall that hard, that fast...but she had and it was over, ended all too soon.

Sad ballads were blasting from the wall console's speakers, but Allison couldn't get pulled into the tide of grief the way she wanted; the ticket kept calling her back as it sat patiently on the coffee table, her name engraved on its surface. The Ship. *She* was selected as one of its passengers. She could be one of the people to be aboard; be one of the truly few members of Humanity to leave this small, blue world and do what no one in all of Human history had

ever done: leave its cradling solar system behind. The most dreamed-of Human adventure was within her grasp if she wanted it. If she was brave enough; if she dared.

Dressed in his heaviest sweater with a large mug of coffee steaming in his hand, Michael Andrews stared out at the Ship, listening to its siren call as the lightening morning sky weakened the influence of the Ship's luminosity on the landscape. It was good to stand here in the chilly morning air, staring at the greatest wonder mankind had ever beheld. It was a sight that he would forever remember, though he knew it was a sight that he would not witness for much longer. Sonia came out from their quarters, approaching him from behind and wrapping an arm around his waist as she came to stand beside him.

"I can't get you to change your mind, can I?" she asked.

He heard the bitter sadness in her voice and had to swallow against the lump in his own throat.

"No more than I could ask you to change yours," he rasped, gently.

"They'll need me in there Michael," she said, "and they'll need you, too."

"There are others, equally and better qualified than I," he said, "who will be able to fill whatever scientific role they'd bestow upon me. This world is my home, Sonia. I've never wanted to leave. I've never even been to space other than on jump flights."

"Michael..."

She buried her face in his shoulder, which soon became damp with her tears. She pulled at him, turning him to face her.

"Then ask me to stay," she begged. "Ask me to stay and I will!"

He kissed her and sadly shook his head.

"That I would need to ask tells me you don't want to," he said, "and if I did ask and you did stay how long would it be before you came to regret your decision? How long after that before you came to resent me for having you make it?"

"Then come *with* me," she sobbed.

"I can't," he whispered, "I can't."

"You won't!" she snapped, pulling away from him, turning to go.

"Sonia..."

She stopped, turning to face him again.

"Sonia, I would be lost among the stars. I would be lost without the sights and sounds and seasons of this world. This is my *home*. The entire universe

is available to me but *here* is where I want to be.”

She took his hand in hers, pulling him back towards the shelter.

“Then come,” she said. “Come be with me, while we still have time.”

Paul Santino sat in the office of the Chief of the Laguna Band Council for the first time in months; but from his perspective he was sitting on the wrong side of the table. Sharon Raven, the former police chief had been elected as head of the Band Council and she sat across from him in the chair that had once been his. She was on her linx and working a console, wrapping up some business before they went for lunch. Santino remembered when not so long ago, he had been sitting there, Chief of the Laguna Band, watching the Famous Archaeologist Professor Mark Echohawk go over photos taken of the tip of a pyramid, unearthed by a couple of teenagers riding around in contraband dune buggies. It had been a different world, then. It had seemed a darker place with so much less hope. In the aftermath of a devastating war almost fifty years gone, people expected the world to waste away from the ruin done to it. The Ship had restored hope it seemed, but in many more respects it had instilled chaos and too much of it. Sharon finished her work on the linx and looked up from the console as she took the device from her ear.

“Thank God that’s out of the way,” she said, smiling. “Well, Mister Santino, I understand that congratulations are in order.”

A slight smile touched Santino’s lips, as Chief Raven continued:

“One of the Men Who Discovered God has been asked by the World Ship Summit to be the head of the Ship’s Civilian Authority,” she said, making reference to the cover story from the *Time Online* that had come out following the Vatican Council’s announcement. “It must be an honour to be mayor of the Garden of Eden.”

Santino smiled. He’d been the only name on the World Ship Summit’s list to lead the ad-hoc governing council for the passengers of the Ship. They hadn’t even waited for him to confirm that he was indeed going to be on the Ship, though Santino wouldn’t have passed the opportunity to be aboard when it launched.

“That title is going to stay with me for the rest of my life,” he lamented, “or, at least until I leave Earth.”

“Paul you *earned* that title as part of the Fourth Vatican Council. For all intents and purposes the Ship confirmed the existence of God. The world’s churches and temples are overflowing with worshippers and converts!

People are actually beginning to make peace with one another because you all confirmed the validity of the truth of all the world's religions."

"The fundamentalists are all up in arms," Santino said sadly. "We're going to see problems; another Night of Blood at the very least. Revealing that truth to the world may have done more harm than good. That's *why* I voted against revealing that knowledge. Look at what's going on in India and Pakistan: the Islamic and Hindu fundamentalists have been fighting escalating clashes for weeks; it looks like something's going to happen in Israel between the Orthodox Jews and Christians."

"There's never going to be complete peace Paul," Sharon consoled him, "but there will be considerably less conflict, less bigotry. People are truly realizing, probably for the first time in world history that we are all one race and that we all believe in the same divinity, expressed through different cultural traditions. The message is the same for all of us."

"Things will still get bad here," he said, meaning on Earth. "They'll get very bad before they start getting better."

"But they *will* get better," Sharon said. "This time, they really will. War Four is not going to happen."

Santino leaned back in his chair.

"They said the same thing about War Three after the War of Attrition ended and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics collapsed. Then one lunatic ordered suicide bombers to nuke New York and another took control of the White House," he said.

Chief Raven smiled.

"That's what I'm going to miss most about you when you're gone Paul," she said. "You're such a fucking optimist."

Colonel Margaret Bloom looked out at the Ship from the now-familiar vantage of the running track that skirted the Ship's southern edge. The Shipsong sounded heavily in her ears, echoing off the canyon walls created by its unearthing. *Two months*. It had been two months since Benedict informed her of the Committee's plans and about a month since those plans had been confirmed to her by private communiqué from the World Ship Summit telling her that she was on a "short list" of candidates to command the Shipflight back to its Homeworld. She'd been sitting on this information all this time, as per orders from the Summit, until the list of command candidates was made public. She'd even refrained from discussing the matter with Laura, although that was for entirely different reasons. Bloom did not expect her daughter to want to join her aboard the Ship. Her reasons would probably

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be similar to Professor Andrews's reasons, in the long run. That would mean Bloom would be faced with choosing between her daughter and the Ship.

Any voyage from Earth to the Ship's Homeworld would have the potential of taking several years, or even several decades. Hell, the Mars missions took three years each and that was just a trip to the next planet and back. The Ship literally came from a galaxy far, far away. Bloom might be gone the rest of her life if she took command of the Ship. That would mean depriving herself of her daughter and worse, depriving her daughter of her. But at the same time she wanted the Ship. She wanted to be the one to command it, more than she could remember wanting anything. From the first time she'd laid eyes on it the Ship had been her most intimate companion; around her day and night, serenading her to sleep, providing alien background sight and sound for her morning runs...the Ship was ever-present and she could no longer imagine life without it. More addictive than any drug, this thing. Bloom hated herself for even feeling like there was a choice to be made; she knew her daughter should take precedence over all, but the Ship...If she could die to save Laura's life she would. There was almost nothing she would deny Laura and nothing she wouldn't do for her daughter's well being. But when it came to the Ship...Oh, how she wanted all the Ship had to offer. But not at the cost of her soul. Not quite. Bloom closed her eyes, breathing deeply through her nose. She imagined that the dry desert air was somehow infused with the Ship, that she was breathing it in. Millions of years old, it had counted the distance between stars a million times over and could probably count those distances a million times more. Oh Lord, how she wanted to be in it when it flew.

Doctor Mark Kodo inhaled the deep, musky vegetable smell of Habitat's jungles. Work was under way to begin furnishing the homes along the Equator for Human use. Parkland and farmland was being generated by the Ship to support their needs and much of the primordial jungle of Habitat was being cleared, tamed and domesticated for the use of Humanity on the long voyage back to the Ship's Homeworld. Kodo was therefore spending as much time as he could in the unspoiled jungles of Habitat. He had seen to it that the displaced species, most of them unique to the Ship were transplanted either to the botanical gardens the Ship had established or to one of a hundred such places on the surface of the Earth already clamouring for parts of the biological record found within the Ship. There was no question for Mark Kodo as to whether or not to remain with the Ship; he'd already made

arrangements to have his parents and his sister and her family moved aboard when the time came. They were all happy for the opportunity. Somehow, Kodo doubted he'd see them much; he'd either be lost somewhere in the archives, or busy with the botanists classifying new plant species. The Ship was paradise to an academe like himself. He wouldn't have stayed on Earth even if his entire family had decided to remain behind. There was just too much here for him to refuse. That he might actually be afforded the opportunity to see firsthand some of the fantastic creatures he had glimpsed only in images on a console in the Archives was another opportunity he couldn't turn down. He stared up at the simulated sky. It was an exact reflection of the sky outside the Ship, right now. In space the Ship would reflect the wonders of the universe upon the passengers living on Habitat; the sky would always amaze and humble them as they made the great voyage across the universe.

James was lying on the couch in his squalid little apartment. He was dizzy and it felt as though his extremities were made of lead. His head rolled over whenever he tried to move, sending waves of thrilling vertigo through him. He'd thrown up a couple of times and his breathing was laboured. Despite this, James was relaxed, happy. He'd been dosing up on Oil all day now, taking hit after hit to sustain and enhance his high. The message had come from his notary: Allison was going to use the ticket; she was signing aboard the Ship as a passenger. The news made James happy. There was no greater gift he could think of to give her and he'd caused her so much grief...he'd caused them all so much grief. He'd loved Allison; he loved her still...but it was over. It would always be over. No second chances. But she'd be aboard the Ship, on the greatest adventure of recorded history and she'd remember that this was his legacy to her.

James reached for another Oil ampoule, injecting it. James threw up again as the next wave of nicotine-enhanced heroin hit his system. His temples pounded and his vision blurred. This was far beyond the usual orgasmic rush and blissful high from the Oil...but it felt so unbelievable...James' vision cleared. He was heading for overdose country but it was true what they said: the more hits you did the better the rush, the higher you climbed before you peaked. What would that last fatal mind-blowing body orgasm feel like as he pumped the terminal hit into his system? How good? How incredible? What would it feel like when the Oil blew out his brain, generating a stroke that

turned his eleven pounds of grey matter into so much slush? So close to overdose...so close...James sighed, making a supreme effort of will to move, to not simply pass into the murky blackness of unconscious oblivion. Reaching for the table...there on the table...death or life...his headset and another hit. His hand fell on one; tightened around it...James leaned back, bringing the prize back, uncapping it and moving it towards the crippled vein in his wrist...

Colonel Bloom was greeted at the airport by her daughter with a tight, warm hug.

“Mom!” Laura exclaimed. “It’s great to have you back!”

Laura made her usual futile grab for Bloom’s duffel bag, but the colonel swung it onto her back before her daughter could take it. They began walking out towards Laura’s car again.

“How have you been, Laura? What’s new?” Bloom asked, as the familiarly damp air of Los Angeles hit her nostrils.

Climate change had long ago shifted the rainy weather of Seattle and Vancouver south over most of Northern California’s coastal region, turning a large portion of its desert into marshy woodland.

“My lungs,” Laura said, still not yet tired of the joke.

“That joke’s starting to get old though,” Bloom sniped.

Laura shrugged. “Allison was given James’ ticket onto the Ship.”

“James didn’t want it? I mean, I’m happy for Allison, but...”

“James wouldn’t have passed the physical,” Laura said, bitterly. “He’s turned into a forty-weight.”

“Fuck,” Bloom rasped as they reached Laura’s car. “I never thought he’d wind up...I mean, he was always such a good kid...”

Laura opened her trunk and Bloom tossed in her duffel bag.

“Well, he wound up like that,” Laura hissed, slamming the trunk shut, “and the only good thing he’s done for her was give her his ticket.”

“Is she taking anyone with her?” Bloom asked casually, hoping to not have the conversation with her daughter she’d come to Los Angeles to have.

Laura shrugged, as they got into the car.

“Her parents are gone,” she said. “She never hears from her sisters or brother, so she’s asked a couple of her friends; including me.”

“What did you say?” Bloom asked. Laura turned to look at her as they waited at the exit of the parking lot for the light to turn green. She smiled sadly at her mother.

“I told her the same thing I’m going to tell you,” she said, gently. “I’m not going. My life is here. My world is here. I’m going to miss her...I’m going to miss you...but I want you to go; both of you. I love you, Mom, and I know that’s where you want to be.”

She choked back tears and smiled.

“It’s not like you’ll be gone, forever,” Laura continued. “The trip might take ten years or more, but we don’t know that it’ll be forever.” She put the car in gear and drove towards the parking lot exit.

“Laura...”

“Mom, I’m a grown woman leading my own life now. I love you very much and I want you around, but I don’t want you to sacrifice your life and your dreams for me. You have to live your own life. We’ll be together again. I know you’ll come back.”

Bloom had to choke back tears of her own. What Laura was saying was true, on a rational level. Bloom felt it and agreed with it. But emotionally, Bloom felt like she was abandoning Laura just after her father had died.

Laura wanted her mother around, but the Ship and the chance to be aboard it was the kind of opportunity that she knew only came once in a million lifetimes. They turned out onto the expressway and began the journey back to Laura’s.

“Can I ask,” Bloom choked. “Can I ask your reasons for not wanting to go?”

Laura shook her head, indicative of her not quite being able to say.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I guess a big part of it is that the Ship reminds me in a lot of ways about how Dad died. I’d rather remember Dad, than think about how he died. But it’s not just that; it’s a thousand things...it’s Grandpa and that I’m the grandchild he’s closest to; it’s the fact that I could very soon be working with one of the best art auction houses in the world; the fact that I’ve never wanted to be anywhere else; I don’t want to leave the Earth behind. My whole life is here. Everything I want will be here, even if everyone I love won’t.”

“I don’t want to leave you,” Bloom said, choking back tears.

“Don’t stay if you don’t want to,” Laura said, allowing her own tears to flow. “Don’t stay because you think I’m holding you here, Mom; stay because it’s what you want to do or go because the Ship is where you want to be. I love you, Mom, and I want you to be happy. How can I ask more of you than you would ask of me?”

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Peter had long ago said his goodbyes to his family; long before he'd ever even met Professor Mark Echohawk, or stumbled across the Ship as part of what was supposed to have been a routine investigation in the New Mexican desert. Peter and his family had a basic understanding: Neither wanted anything to do with the other. His friends were few and far between, mainly because of the solitary, academic lifestyle he'd chosen for himself as an anthropologist and field archaeologist. James, his only true friend was now gone, disappeared off of Peter's scanners not long after picking up a serious Oil habit. So there would be no one accompanying him on his ticket aboard the Ship and no real reason for him to stay behind on Earth. The people he knew best, namely the people he worked with would be aboard. He therefore saw the Ship as a unique opportunity: He could ultimately find himself alone on Earth or alone on the Ship. At least on the Ship he'd have the potential opportunity to study alien civilizations firsthand. He'd all but taken over the role of chief archaeologist for the Ship Survey Expedition after the Prof died, albeit that role had been mainly academic until the discovery of the Cultural Archive and more importantly the Hthaask. However he would likely find his skills as an anthropologist and archaeologist brought back into play on far off alien worlds. The chance to study an alien civilization whether living or long dead would have been more than enough incentive to sign on if nothing else. But the potential xenoarchaeological revelations awaiting him were merely icing on the cake. Truly, Peter was feeling relief at the thought of leaving this dying mud-ball behind. There were better hopes out there among the stars.

When she arrived home it was well past ten o'clock. It had been a tiresome day for the British Minister of Defence; a day overdue to be done. She wanted only a long bath and some time to herself. The tub was nearly full, the hot water steaming the bathroom and filling it with the sensual scent of her favourite bath oils when the linx chimed.

"Oh, bugger," she muttered, halfway out of her pantyhose.

She reached for her headset and slipped it into her ear.

"Whoever this is you're between me and a hot bath so this had better be good," she barked into the phone, dipping her free leg into the water.

She'd not give up her bath and the promised relaxation lightly.

"More's the pity," came the flat humourless reply.

She recognized the voice immediately: the American Chairman, Joint Chiefs.

“Mister Chairman. How can I be of assistance?” she asked, knowing full well it was Committee business unless the United States was bombing another Third World dictatorship again.

“I’m afraid I’m the bearer of bad news,” the Chairman said. “I’m surprised you haven’t heard yet: MI-6 is dead.”

The surviving members of the Committee were gathered in the Italy offices within three hours. Full representation on almost no notice; difficult to pull off, though not impossible. The chair that MI-6 had occupied for the better part of twenty years stood empty, his absence from the Committee a shadowy void filled by the fact of his death. The traditional ceremonials to open the session were finished and a ponderous silence hung over the conference. They were none of them of a young age. Though MI-6 had been drawing close to his hundredth and had been by far the eldest on the Committee, his death still served to remind them the time they had remaining was short. It was well and good that life spans were reaching past a hundred and thirty years and well and good that the degradation of the aging process wasn’t noticeable until the last fifteen or so of those years, but the old were generally still dying in their eighties and nineties. The Canadian Minister of Natural Resources was perhaps the youngest member of the Committee, at fifty-three. And although at fifty-eight, the British Minister of Defence still had the smooth skin and supple body of her middle years, she was keenly aware of the years remaining to her; her own mother had not lived to see ninety and her grandmother had died at seventy-nine. Time grew short for them all; the Eternal Footman bought himself a bike to race, as they said. And the solemn duties of chairing tonight’s meeting fell to her.

“Very well,” she said, her voice echoing through the paneled chamber. “There are two matters on the table before us: The first and most pressing one, evidently, is to review the candidates that the PM will be looking at to replace MI-6 and secondly, whether or not the Committee will require operatives to be aboard the Ship.”

She toggled a switch on her console and six faces appeared on everyone’s screens.

“I have the PM’s ear on matters of this nature, though it should be noted that I am not the only one. Ultimately the decision is his, though I think I can help persuade him to a certain extent.” She looked at the faces on the screen.

Only the oldest among them approached her in years. Hard to believe that any of these young faces were qualified to run MI-6.

“Of these candidates I would suggest we push for one of the last four,” she said. “I know the first two on the list and although they would certainly be trustworthy with regards to the Committee’s secrets I doubt they would last long as the head of Six.”

“How long before the PM moves to fill the void at MI-6?” the Canadian Solicitor General asked.

“We expect him to wait at least a week after the funeral,” the British Ambassador said, “so we can safely assume anywhere from ten to fourteen days, from now.”

“In the meantime we will be redistributing MI-6’s responsibilities to his subordinates and to other members of the Executive,” the British Minister added. “We should take the time to study the files on the candidates to replace him and come up with the best selection possible. Although contrary bastard that he is, I don’t know that the PM will even likely listen to me.” There was a grim chuckle around the table. The British Minister nodded and began to study the dossiers on the six candidates for the post of MI-6 as did the others. Only two of them were women; it would be nice to have another woman on the Committee again. She’d missed the company of the last Canadian Defence Minister in more ways than one. At least with the World Ship Summit soon to wrap she would be able to rekindle the contact on a personal level once her old friend returned from Geneva.

As for the current Canadian Defence Minister, he was engrossed in the choices for MI-6; particularly that it presented him with an opportunity to gain a little more influence on the Committee; he would no longer be the junior-most member and he would also have a new potential ally in the new MI-6. The Minister frowned; he’d learned fast about the ridiculous level of intrigue within the Committee. He already felt like a veteran even as he narrowed down his choices for MI-6 from four to two. He could influence the Solicitor and Natural Resources easily enough; his fellow Canadians recognized his ambition to do the right thing and keep the Committee on a moral course. And the Curator of the Smithsonian was partial to the Canadian position on the Committee. That would give them enough votes at least to select the candidate the Committee would endorse to the British Prime Minister. The winds of change were blowing; the question would be whether they would be favourable to the Minister, or not. The Minister felt somewhat disgusted with himself. MI-6 was dead and here he was, manoeuvring his potential replacement into a position beneficial to his agenda. It didn’t matter

that the Minister had found himself on opposite sides with MI-6. It didn't matter that they had been rivals. It felt disrespectful to the man however necessary it might be. Not that it made a difference to him. The Minister had work to do, an agenda to advance. The Minister shuddered as he felt the oily corruption of his position on the Committee sink itself that much deeper into his bones.

The ticket-holders had all been notified and they had all sent in their confirmations. Five thousand primaries backed out making room for one tenth of the drawn alternates. A second alternate draw of ten thousand was planned in the event that more people backed out. The lottery results were made public as was the Ship's scheduled launch date: July Seventeenth. The passengers would begin arriving in the World Ship Preserve for pre-flight training within a week. The final crew manifest was being prepared, Colonel Bloom now confirmed as the mission commander and assisting in the selection of the crew. They would be moving very soon into the Ship which was even now concluding preparations with the Human engineers to the passenger and crew accommodations, medical facilities, the command center and other amenities and necessities for the well being of the Ship's Human cargo. The Earth's entire cultural database was being loaded into the Ship's computers and select works of art and relics of historical and religious significance were being brought aboard as well; Holy relics from the world's religions; treasures from the Alexandria Library; some original copies the writings of Kierkegaard and Chuang Tze, Aristotle, Sartre and Socrates; original works by Shakespeare, Tennessee Williams, Mark Twain, Chekhov, Dickens, Poe and Tolstoy; and classical compositions by Bach, Tchaikovsky, Beethoven, Brahms; works of art by Rembrandt, Monet, Michelangelo, Warhol, Dahli, Picasso, Vanderdonk; an original draft of the Magna Carta, the US Constitution, the original Treaty of the World Council and a thousand other pieces of Human history and culture. A living Human culture would be aboard as well. No less than nine motion picture directors nearly a hundred actors from around the world, three superstar music acts as well as other members of the performing arts were signed aboard as passengers, along with computer game designers, sixteen authors and playwrights, four composers and eleven artists who worked in different creative media. Nor would the regular members of the Ship's society lack for things to do: there would be shops to run and the Ship would accommodate small industries to provide the citizens of Habitat with all the amenities of home. There would be work and

leisure aboard the Ship, with schools for the children and even a university planned, open to any who would go there to learn.

Allison had to stop several times while reading over the centimetre-thick “brochure” sent to her by the World Ship Summit. Information overload. The information was supposed to assure passengers that every aspect of their life, every possible need they might have would be looked after once aboard the Ship. It wasn’t that the manual was that complex; She and every other member of the passenger and crew list would be given several weeks of full training before the Ship launched. It was the volume of information within the brochure that made it such a challenge. Much of the information including technical specifics about the Ship, the works of art and pieces of historical and cultural memorabilia that would be found in the “Earth Museum”, the religions represented aboard the Ship, by whom and how, access to the alien archives aboard the Ship and other similar minutiae Allison found could have been summarized or left out, altogether. However, the information was still appreciated; the journey she was about to take was both thrilling and terrifying. She would be leaving behind everything she had ever known for an unknown and unknowable future. And yet she felt...she *knew* that this was a journey she must undertake. Her bags were packed, all her personal business taken care of. She had given away many things to her friends and surviving family and she was looking forward now to these last two days’ time to spend with her closest and dearest friend over the last couple of years, her sister-plus, Laura Echohawk. This week Laura was spending time with her mother who would be full into her command duties aboard the Ship by the beginning of next week. This weekend would be their time, Allison’s and Laura’s and theirs alone; they would likely as not never see each other again and Allison wanted nothing but wonderful memories of the woman who’d shared an apartment and two years of her life with her. After this weekend Allison would be flown to the World Ship Preserve and not long after she would be gone from Earth altogether. Her last days on Earth had begun.

PREPARING FOR DEPARTURE

Nearly a year had gone by since Professor Mark Echohawk came to Laguna and discovered the Ship nestled beneath the desert floor. In that long, incredible terrible and tumultuous year, so much had happened. So much more was still happening. The last several months had been spent preparing the Ship for Human habitation and training its passengers and crew in the rigors of space travel. Now those preparations were nearly concluded. The seventeenth of July was fast approaching. The time to begin sequestering the crew aboard had come.

Colonel Bloom ran around the track overlooking the Ship listening to the Shipsong and the sound of her footfalls and breathing as they mingled like lovers with the alien harmonics of the Ship. She was drenched in sweat, her lungs burning, her knees spine and feet screaming. Bloom was taking her last run around the Ship. After today she would only be able to run *inside* the Ship. In a way she was saying goodbye; not to the Ship but to its siren call, to the New Mexico desert and to Earth. Her last run; working her body as hard and as mercilessly as she could; running like a madwoman, as if making love for one last time to a lover she would never see again.

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Bloom supported herself against the walls of the shower stall with her arms. Her legs were still shaky and she was still breathing deeply after ten minutes under the hot spray. She'd washed herself clean of the sweat from the morning's run and after rejuvenating herself a little with the soothing, hot shower spray Bloom dried herself off and changed into her new duty uniform.

The new uniform was made exclusively for the military and support personnel of the Shipflight and today was the first day the uniform would be worn; the day that the crew finally embarked. Ostensibly, the uniform was themed after the Ship's own colour scheme. It was a heavy cotton material made into a dark mustard (gold) flight suit consisting of cargo pants and a cargo jacket worn over a black half-neck tunic. The piping on the pant legs and the rank and ID insignia were done in blue on black. The uniform was military cut all the way, but Bloom found it strange, new. On the plus side she had more pockets than she knew what to do with; Bloom was of the school of thought that one could never have enough pockets. She looked at her reflection a long moment. The uniform was cut to fit her but it looked strange. She was used to her Air Force uniform and this was just not it. Bloom imagined that with time she would get used to the uniform. Tugging at the hem of her jacket and undoing the brass fasteners that held it closed Bloom left her quarters for the last time. Her bags were packed and within the hour would be loaded into the Ship.

Space readiness training of the civilian population of the Ship was nearly done and Allison McQuire couldn't have been happier. It had been an exhaustive six weeks of physical conditioning and emergency preparedness training as well as drills on the survival techniques necessary for spaceflight. The World Council had done things on an epic scale; an entire campus had been established with over a thousand teachers (many of whom had also been selected in the Lottery to sign aboard the Ship) and translators working to ensure that the two hundred and ten thousand people (ticket holders and their families) selected as primaries and the fifty thousand alternates would be adequately prepared for any space-related emergencies that might occur. Today classes had been suspended because of the embarkation ceremonies being held to honour the crew of the Ship.

When the Ship opened to the world, the ring of pyramids below the one at the summit of the outer hull opened and gantries extended to the Ramp and to the walls of the Ship's canyon, itself. Now a fleet of transport vehicles stood waiting to take the ten thousand-strong crew of the Ship on to their new home when the ceremonies had concluded.

The crew of the Ship, civilian and military alike were assembled on a vast parade ground on the far end of the Ramp. They sat grouped according to their divisions the heads of each division sitting just ahead of their groups. Of the Ship's crew only Colonel Bloom and her executive officer, Major Jack Benedict sat in the reviewing stands with the dignitaries and delegates and speakers at the ceremony that was about to begin. Among the military the divisions of the Ship's crew were as follows: Security, comprising both military security officers and civilian police officers for both policing and emergency preparedness; the Space Force, which besides Command, Bloom was attached to. The Space Force was made up of pilots who would be trained on the use of the different varieties of support vessels within the Ship; Systems and Engineering which, as the Ship was largely self-regulating, would be occupied monitoring the Ship's systems and learning more about their workings, though such unglamorous tasks such as water treatment and waste management would be in the scope of their domain; Logistics and Provisioning, looking after all the supplies, from food, to medicine to sundry miscellany and the supply, production and storage aboard the Ship of those goods as well as the mammoth task of loading the personal belongings of the Ship's crew and passengers aboard; and Communication and Documentation, which would cover both intra and extra Ship communications and the maintenance of both the existing Archives and the log entries for the Ship's voyage back to Eoulf. Civilian operations included the Medical facility, covering both the hospital and the paramedics that would patrol with Security; Alien Studies, which took over for the disbanded Ship Survey Expedition examining linguistics, xenobiology and xenoanthropology as well as astronomy and potentially, diplomacy; Education, as there would be both schools and a university aboard the Ship; and the Ship's Civilian Authority, made up of the community leaders, educators, religious leaders and Citizen's representatives who would be responsible for looking after the needs and concerns of the civilian population of the Habitat.

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The ceremony was long, solemn. These people were saying their farewell to the world and to those among their friends and family that would not be joining them aboard the Ship. Though most of the crew of the Ship would be accompanied by their closest loved ones they were all leaving behind many more. Bloom thought of her own sacrifice; Laura was staying behind and Bloom couldn't help feeling that she'd never see her daughter again. She realized with sudden horror that not once since Mark's funeral had she been to visit his grave. Tears filled Margaret Bloom's eyes suddenly and she wiped them quickly away with the backs of her index fingers. Mark...He'd be thrilled to see what the SSE had accomplished. But Bloom wondered if he'd have chosen to go aboard the Ship if Laura would still have elected to stay behind. Bloom doubted it. As much as Mark would have loved to have been part of the Ship's Alien Studies department he wouldn't have left without Laura. Not even *if* his daughter had told him to go as she had told Bloom.

"Some of you must certainly wonder if you are up to the task, up to this mission," the speaker, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was saying, "and many among your accompanying friends and family must be wondering the same thing about themselves..."

Certainly at that moment, Bloom found herself second-guessing her decision to lead this mission. Was it right? How could she leave Laura behind? She thought of all the time she'd spent with Laura since Mark's death. They'd grown much closer and had a better relationship now than before. And since accepting command of the Ship, Bloom spent as much of her downtime as possible with Laura. Last night they'd gone for supper and to see a film. Laura and the other family and friends of those departing aboard the Ship were being housed in the Village until the Ship's launch five days hence. Bloom and her daughter had said their last tearful farewell last night just before Bloom returned to Fort Arapaho.

"Don't feel guilty, Mom," Laura had told her. "Don't feel bad. This is what you're meant to do. This mission was *meant* for you."

But Bloom *did* feel guilty; she did feel bad. For she knew she would no more have been able to turn down the Ship had her daughter begged her to stay than if her daughter had given her permission to go. And because of that Colonel Margaret Bloom hated herself just a little.

Allison watched the crew embarkation ceremonies on her console from the outdoor terrace of the pub she'd started hanging out in, two months ago when her training for the Shipflight began. She had the luxury today of sitting

on the terrace in the dry afternoon desert air with her dearest and closest friend Laura Echohawk. They sat drinking beer and watching the ceremonies. In the background a constant reminder of what was to come the Shipsong's harmony folded itself around all other sounds. The camera panned and focused on the reviewing stand.

"Look!" Laura said. "There's my mom..."

She smiled wistfully.

"Are you okay?" Allison asked.

"Yeah," Laura said, "It's just that in the next five days, I'm going to be saying goodbye to the two people I care most about."

Allison took Laura's arm.

"Then, come with us!" she urged. "Laura, I'm sure it's not too late. You could still come on my ticket or your mom's!"

Laura shook her head.

"Allison...as much as I would want to go...as much as I would *love* to be among the people on board the Ship...I can't see leaving the Earth behind, forever. This is my home. I still have family here...I have my work...I can't leave."

Tears welled in Laura's eyes and in Allison's.

"I'm gonna *miss* you," Allison said. "I'm going to miss you so much."

"And I'm going to miss you," Laura replied.

At last the ceremonies were ended and the ten thousand strong crew of the Ship was making its way aboard. Several new access routes into the Ship had been opened and the embarkation would probably not take more than a couple of hours. Bloom's first order of business once aboard would be to interview her command staff and all department heads; a getting-to-know you situation Bloom was far from looking forward to. She had chosen most of her staff either because she knew them personally or because she knew their reputation and histories. Now as Bloom stood watching her troops embark from the ceremonial safety of the Ramp she turned her attention away from the small sea of gold uniforms with duffel bags slung over their shoulders marching down into the Ship to the Village spread out to the east and west of Fort Arapaho. The taller buildings, a dozen or so complete and near-complete structures ranging from fourteen to as many as thirty storeys high still looked strange and out of place among the shanties and prefabs of the Village. They bore the names of some of the most powerful technology companies in the world and a few upstarts as well. They put a strange stamp

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on the Village skyline where the tallest structure had previously been the water tower complex. The Shipsong sounded continuously behind her and created strange echoes in the streets of the Village—now being paved instead of macadamized—around these new buildings. The morning sky was a pale blue, the sun warming the air which had that dry, desert scent that Bloom had come to know quite well. She breathed deeply, thinking to herself of the damp, earthy smell of Habitat and how it reminded her so much of the springtime scent she remembered from growing up in the country.

“Taking it all in one last time, Colonel?”

Bloom turned. Major Benedict stood there his arms crossed behind his back. The new uniform suited him a lot better than it did her.

“You might say that, Exo,” she replied. “Just taking one last look around to make sure I didn’t leave something plugged in.”

Benedict, now her executive officer and second in command of the Ship’s crew, chuckled.

“In all my career I never expected anything like this,” Bloom said. “I’ve been to space...I’ve even done the Moon Run...I applied and was rejected for the Scorpio VII Mars mission...but I never thought I’d be going into space like this.”

As the troops boarded the Ship to make final preparations their families waited in the Village for the civilian boarding in two weeks; those whose families had opted to come aboard. The tickets onto the Ship had caused no small number of divorces and disownings. They had even made personal fortunes, in some cases in the billions of dollars, for those who opted to auction them. Bloom fell silent. She didn’t like thinking about the impact the Ship had had on families around the globe. She thought of Mark and how he’d still be alive if the Ship hadn’t been unearthed...But, no. She knew the truth of that. Gabriel Ashe and the United Trinity Observants were responsible for Mark’s death, not the Ship. The Ship had changed lives, certainly; some deaths were even directly attributable to its presence. Not a single person on Earth was untouched by the Ship. Personal destinies the world over had been forever altered. Some lives ruined no doubt. The only hope Bloom had was that most lives were changed by the Ship for the better. Only time would tell.

Allison stared out the window of her dormitory’s commissary at the spectacular view of the Ship. The sun, high in the sky shone down and was reflected off the brassy gold surfaces of the Ship’s outer hull. The Shipsong, though muffled could be heard through the window. Four days. Four days

from now she would be entering the Ship and leaving the world she had always known behind. It scared and excited her a little. To be leaving the world, to be going off...to be going *away*.

“Amazing, isn’t it?”

Allison turned away from the window. A young woman cradling an infant in her arms was sitting, looking out the window.

“It’s been an amazing year,” Allison agreed. She offered her right hand. “Allison McQuire.”

“Susan Roshenko,” the woman said, shaking Allison’s hand.

Only now did Allison notice the woman’s accent.

“And this little one is Vladimir,” Susan said.

Allison smiled at the sleeping infant.

“My husband Marcus and I are from Belarus,” Susan said. “We’d never taken a trip beyond the Russian Economic Union until we were told we were to go on the Ship.” Allison nodded her head.

“I know the feeling,” she said. “I’ve been around North America and down to Argentina once or twice, but I never got much opportunity to tour the world. I always wanted to, but now I suppose the opportunity’s gone.”

“Lose the chance to tour the world and tour the galaxy instead, yes?” Susan replied. “Possibly much...much? *Many* galaxies.”

“Seems like a fair trade,” Allison said.

“Was it hard for you?”

When Allison frowned quizzically, Susan rephrased the question.

“Deciding to leave the world and join the Ship,” she said. “Was it hard?”

Allison considered the question; the reasons she had to leave and the few loved ones that she was leaving behind.

“It...wasn’t *as* hard as I’d expected it to be,” she replied.

Susan smiled and nodded her head.

“It was difficult for us,” she said. “My husband has many friends and family at home. None of them wished to join us. In fact his parents...what is the word...refused the lottery?”

“They disqualified themselves,” Allison offered.

“Disqualified, yes; thank you. They disqualified themselves. My mother is coming with us, but none of my brothers and sisters. It is a hard thing to leave all those that we love behind. My brother Ivan won’t speak to us anymore because not are we just leaving, but my mother comes with us.”

“It must be very hard on you.”

“Where we come from, there is not much opportunity,” Susan explained.

“My husband is a programmer and all I know is to work in customer service linux center. We want something better for ourselves and of course for Vladimir. We hope that on the Ship or wherever the Ship takes us, there will be this opportunity.”

“It’s a big gamble, though.”

“No more so than the gamble anyone takes when going in search of a better life. That is why you’re going, isn’t it?”

This gave Allison pause. She was going aboard the Ship, yes. She wanted to see the stars, to live in the Ship, but what reasons did she have for going, beyond that? Was there any real purpose to her being aboard the Ship? James had given her his ticket but really, why had she accepted it? She could have sold it for *billions*...instead she had opted for the Adventure...but...why? It almost seemed to her that it had been an impulsive decision on her part, to go.

“To be honest I don’t really know *why* I decided to go.”

Mark Kodo rose from bed and went straight to the window of his room. The shutters were open facing out onto the lush green lawn, the pale blue sky growing gradually brighter as Habitat’s “sun” crested the narrow horizon to the East. Kodo inhaled deeply of the cool morning air and smiled. He was at least seven, possibly ten kilometres beneath the outer hull of the Ship and nestled in the Ship’s core. Yet the air was fresher, crisper, cleaner than anything he could remember breathing on the surface. There were no pollutants in the atmosphere down here. Nothing re-filtered, nothing purified. When he went outside, he’d actually feel the warmth of the sun beating down upon him. The atmosphere surrounding Habitat was perfectly attuned to the needs of life on Earth; more so than the damaged atmosphere of the planet above. Kodo was glad to be able to call Habitat home. He left his bedroom for the shower and once done there headed to the kitchen. The Ship was home, now and he was happily getting used to that fact.

Sonia Aiziz awoke slowly, body and mind working in concert to prolong her return to the waking world. It wasn’t that she was not sleeping well nor that she was particularly tired; she was still in mourning. There was simply no other way to describe what she was feeling. She’d been sequestered from Michael Andrews weeks ago when the members of the Alien Studies division had begun their pre-flight training. During training with its long days, intensive classes and physical conditioning Aiziz had had little time to consider the fact that she would never see Michael again. At night the long

days left her so exhausted she fell asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow and during meals there were the other members of her linguistics team around her to keep her company. Now however, aboard the Ship at last, repressed loss and pain welled to the surface and broke. She pulled herself from her bed. She wanted to be aboard the Ship; she wanted to touch the stars. As hard as it was, she knew she would get on and let go. Aiziz made her way into the shower. She had a staff meeting in an hour, one she could ill afford to miss. That was something to focus on.

It was three kilometres from Habitat's equator to the North Pole and the transitway station. Although many people chose to walk this short distance there were automated transport lines which circumnavigated Habitat. The transport lines followed a circuitous route around Habitat, stopping at various points of interest and a small shopping district. Most of the actual businesses ringed the bulkheads outside of Habitat, but there was no discounting the convenience of a corner store. Round trip, the ride around Habitat would take an hour; far more time than it would take to walk from the equator to one of the poles, but civilian life aboard Habitat was destined to be leisurely.

As Colonel Bloom left her residence, stepping outside into warm virtual sunshine the decision to begin her day with a morning run to Lake Echohawk (as someone in the World Ship Summit had decided to name the freshwater lake at the South Pole) and from there back up to the North Pole transitway station was firmly cast in stone. The only thing that would make this day better would be to have birds singing in the trees. That would come soon enough according to Mark Kodo; small fauna and insects would be imported to Habitat once the biologists finalized a way to properly balance the necessary micro ecology. Not that complicated a task and one they expected to have completed before the civilian passengers boarded the Ship. This place would be a small island of Earthly paradise out among the stars. For now it was like walking through a vast, silent garden with interesting properties; many Earth species of plant needed insect or animal help in order to survive and flourish. Here where the Ship had simply created a vast botanical garden the plants themselves had adapted new techniques to further their survival. There were forms of algae and fungus unique to the plants of Habitat that performed the work of the insects, invertebrates and animals that were so far absent on this artificial world. Nature always found a path, as Kodo had

pointed out to her. Looking around her as the morning began to warm, Bloom couldn't argue with the results.

The last two days prior to the final boarding of the Ship's passengers was spent loading their belongings and personal effects aboard. Day and night tractor trailers ran the route from the Passengers' Enclave to the ring of pyramids below the Ship's main Pyramid. Now the true waiting had begun. Not long now; just a brief eternity of time.

During the last two days before final boarding another six thousand, five hundred and eleven people dropped out clearing room for a second wave of alternate ticket holders. The Los Angeles Times scored the best headline about the sudden drop-out; their front page showed a wide-eyed, ecstatically happy family, waiving their ticket under the banner headline:

FLYING STANDBY ON THE SHIP

And then suddenly the last twenty-four hours before boarding had arrived. The passengers found themselves suddenly quiet, contemplative, spending much of their time outdoors looking at the sky, the desert around them, watching the Village, just marvelling at the natural and man-made skylines and vistas. People suddenly craved a walk in the Village or long conversations with family, friends and old high school classmates that they hadn't spoken to in years. There was a strange silence in the Passengers' Enclave even with the constant passage of the trucks. Looking out at the Enclave from her balcony, Allison McQuire recognized it for what it was: The calm before the storm.

Exhausted, elated, the citizens of the Ship were now preparing to celebrate what would technically be their last night on Earth. The following morning would begin the ceremonies, the tributes, the speeches; four hours worth, before they began boarding the Ship. Tomorrow night they would sleep their first night in Habitat and the following morning would see them depart for the heavens. A vast open-air auditorium had been built where the passengers of the Ship would assemble in the morning while below them and seen on gigantic monitors the official dignitaries would make austere proclamations heaping praise and prayers on the masses. Four hours of

ceremonies followed by six hours of boarding, all starting at the earliest hour possible. Tonight however, the inductees would celebrate. Parties were ongoing everywhere throughout the Passengers' Enclave. The Army had been called in from Fort Arapaho to serve as security, to ensure that the crowd remained under control. Allison and a bunch of people from her classes had been going from party to party to party and had settled on a big outdoor event in the courtyard of one of the dormitory complexes. Liquor and drugs abounded, seeming to have been brought in for the express purposes of making this night an apocalyptic celebration.

It was a measure of how excited people were to be going onto the Ship and how afraid. Not even midnight yet and the pairing off had already started; couples, trios, even quads and quintets were leaving the party arm in arm, heading by the fire escapes to the dormitory levels. Allison herself had been propositioned five times already by both men and women. Three of those offers she was honestly considering as the party and the atmosphere of excitement, inebriation and sensual tension mounted. The mood was infectious, especially as she got high and began feeling the languid effects of the toxins in her system and the revelry around her. For the most part the parties were well run and under control. There were a few exceptions, of course: a small outdoor orgy brewing in one corner of the common, bloody fights between intoxicated idiots scattered here and there with a fair share of minor injuries incurred, some damage done to property in the form of petty vandalism. There would thankfully be no sexual assaults this night, though sadly there would be several attempted sexual assaults broken up by the peacekeeping forces deployed throughout. In some quarters, where religious and cultural beliefs didn't permit such debauchery the parties were still in swing, though in a more reserved form. Many a faithful of many a religion spent the night instead praying for the souls of the revellers, that God would not judge them too harshly for their actions tonight, in light of the fact that they would soon be leaving this planet Earth behind.

Allison pushed her way through the crowd, feeling the warm press of bodies against the cool air of the desert night. Somewhere beyond the noise of the revelry the Shipsong could still be heard, blending in with the hundred different noises her ears could pick up as she moved through the mass of people. Only two more nights before the world never hear its eerie alien sound again. Only two more nights and *she* would never see the world again.

The crowd broke before her and Allison found herself in the middle of an empty space quiet and clam, littered but peaceful, like the eye of a storm. The area in question was a quiet and secluded circle of park and benches, left mostly untouched by the crowd as if through some collective will to leave one quiet space undisturbed and create a sanctuary those in the chaos could flee to when in need of a little order. Allison sat down, tilting her head back to take in the stars and breathe deep of the night air. Her head was light and the tilting motion sent a dizzy little thrill through her. On this night it felt so good to be alive. She wondered what spectacular vistas the night sky on Habitat would reveal to her once she was aboard the Ship; for surely she would never see these stars again as they appeared from Earth.

“Good morning, everyone,” Colonel Bloom said, sitting down at the conference table.

A buffet had been set up along the center of the large table; this was to be a breakfast meeting and everyone was picking at the buffet as things got started. The Senior Staff looked bleary this morning; there had been many late nights these last few days to get the Ship ready for launch tomorrow morning.

“We have the induction ceremony in another hour,” Bloom said. “So, let’s keep this as brief as possible. I’m just after status reports from each department. Let’s start with provisioning. Alina?”

“We’re good to go,” Captain Tanaka, the Ship’s engineering officer replied. “The Ship’s stores are full; the last of the heavy equipment for the in-house industries we’ll be setting up is aboard; Agriculture Systems are already producing and the passengers’ belongings are all aboard and being delivered to the specific quarters.”

An entire courier delivery system had been set up by Provisioning to make sure everyone got their baggage and belongings when they moved into their homes on Habitat. The logistics of this operation were like nothing Bloom had ever seen before. She’d helped with the evacuation of an entire city during the Australian Conflict and even then the preparations hadn’t seemed as elaborate as they were here. Of course, back then they’d only been moving people along with whatever belongings they could carry. Here the citizens of the Ship had in many cases packed up their entire lives. Then there were the pets; from dogs and cats to fish, reptiles, birds, horses and apparently even one full-grown sow. One vintage car collector had insisted on bringing his Millennium Edition Viper, Porsche Boxter and Audi A-8. The logistical

nightmare of transporting them to the Archives was unbelievable. There were things listed on the civilian cargo manifest that Bloom considered even more unusual than three old fuel-burning cars: a collection of over three hundred whips and riding crops (NOT belonging to one of the equestrians), thirteen antique suits of armour and a set of costumes, including two seven-foot tall fibreglass monstrosities from a pre-millennial syndicated science-fiction show.

“One day, I’m going to have to sit down and read this entire list,” Bloom said.

“Yes, Colonel you will,” Benedict agreed. “There are some pretty strange things put down there.”

“Linx me a copy,” Bloom said. “Systems?”

“We have a handle on most of the Ship’s functions, now. Once we’re skyside, we’ll be supervising and maintaining many of those systems, directly,” Captain Tanaka said. “We’ve also finished working with the Morale department, Lieutenant Tongu in Communications Documentation and Library Systems, on a Shipwide computer Grid, with access to the data, music, art and video we downloaded into the Archives as well as some stuff from the Ship’s existing archives. And our Research Engineers are now working with the Ship on coming up with Ship/Earth technology hybrids. We may see some real benefits from this up here before the folks back home do.”

“Very interesting; I’d like to see a full report from R&D, as soon as possible,” Bloom replied. “Doctor Cole, is our hospital ready?”

“The main hospital is up and running and my staff is in place,” Cole said, “and we have emergency triage centers set up throughout the populated sectors of the Ship, with roving emergency response teams on patrol routes where we don’t have coverage.”

“Ship’s security?” Bloom asked.

“We’ve mapped out patrol routes throughout the Ship,” Commander Nadia Castaneda, the Security Chief said. “We have enough officers to start, but I’m going to want to recruit about a thousand more from the civilian population as soon as possible.”

“You’ll have to talk to Governor Santino about seeing if the Education department can handle a small police academy. Education’s a civilian concern and therefore under his jurisdiction,” Bloom said. “Otherwise we’ll have to train them as part of the militia. Other security issues?”

“We have operators ready to train with the Ship on its defensive systems,” Castaneda replied, “The brig facilities are up to par though I hope we never need them and we have a forensics squad ready to run.”

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“Again, let’s hope we never need them,” Bloom concurred. “I think that about covers most of our immediate concerns. There isn’t much to be done as far as the Alien Studies go. Nothing pressing in any of the other departments?”

Everyone else shook their heads.

“Good,” Bloom said, “then I think that about wraps up this meeting. Just one note for the military personnel: I know that some of you have been reporting to duty without the uniform jacket on or with the jacket unbuttoned. That isn’t a problem aboard Ship, but for the ceremonies this morning you are expected to be in full uniform as we mercifully haven’t had a dress uniform issued. Duty jackets, buttoned to the top, will be expected. That’s it, folks. We’ll see you all topside for the last time, in about an hour.”

The sun was setting by the time the last of the passengers had boarded the Ship. The blue bands of strange energy were glowing in the evening sky, the Shipsong loud in the ears of everyone remaining on the surface as the bustle and noise of loading nearly a quarter of a million people into the gargantuan vessel died down. People had begun gathering along the new perimeter set up by the World Ship Summit nearly two days before. Everyone wanted to see the spectacle of the Ship’s launch. Fort Arapaho, which had been home to the Ship Survey Expedition, was no longer needed. As such, the base was decommissioned. Sequestered within the Ship it was a ceremony that Colonel Bloom and Major Benedict were sorry to miss. As the flag was lowered and removed from Fort Arapaho, the moon was halfway through the night sky. The Shipsong echoed powerfully and eerily throughout the area. Systems and sensors would record the coming day’s events for the sake of science, history and the public interest. They stood now, silent mechanical sentinels solemnly waiting for the Ship’s departure the following morning. Aboard Concord 3, the space station’s new crew set every single Earth-facing monitoring device they had to watch the Ship.

In the vacant Fort Arapaho, The Shipsong was stronger now, echoing off of deserted walls and empty buildings, picked up by microphones and monitors scattered throughout the compound and the surrounding desert. As the first rays of the sun poked over the horizon, coloring the cold desert night, stirring awake those eager observers who had fallen asleep a remarkable thing happened. Something totally unexpected, something that immediately stirred everyone assembled. As dawn broke, the Shipsong stopped.

After coming in search of intelligent life, after being damaged and buried during the Cataclysm, after lying dormant beneath the Earth for aeons, the Ship had been discovered, the Ship had unearthed itself and communicated with intelligent life, fulfilling its ages-old directives. And now at long last, the Ship again had crew and passengers, and it was at long last completing its mission, and beginning the journey home.

FINALE

SHIPRISE

Allison McQuire woke to the rich scent of coffee brewing. It took her a long moment to remember that she was deep within the Ship. Her quarters on Habitat were still not unpacked; her bed was there but little else. Artificial sunlight streamed welcomingly through the round windows. The walls were a bare creamy yellow, the floor black, almost like polished marble. Every room was backlit through the ceiling as in the rest of the Ship. Allison rolled sluggishly out of bed and padded her way into the kitchen, furnished with the latest available appliances, to fix herself a cup of coffee. She'd set the coffee maker the night before; it had been one of the first things she'd unpacked besides a change of clothes for today. Outside the beautiful greenspace of Habitat stretched out: hybrid trees casting cool shade, the generated sky a rich and beautiful blue. The air was fresh down here; fresher than she'd ever known on Earth.

Allison recalled the trip to the Ship yesterday afternoon. Following the agonizingly dull induction ceremonies with their speeches, prayers, musical tributes and—Goddess help her—interpretive dance numbers, the passengers had been sequestered into groups. Then it was on to the embarkation zone according to the number assigned to each group. Allison had been in Group Nine so she had had to wait nearly five hours before

embarkation. And then Embarkation itself was another completely surreal experience.

They were herded outdoors from their rest area, where a fleet of large hundred and fifty-passenger busses sat waiting. The busses were all aimed down the Ramp, towards the Pyramid network. As each bus was loaded it drove off while the next one in line began taking on passengers. Finally when Allison was aboard and seated, waiting for the rest of the passengers to embark what she was about to do settled in on her. As the bus pulled away from the terminal her last view of the Earth was one of the desert vista to either side of the Ramp. The Ship was beginning to overtake the scene, and she found herself staring into the mute face of a young Black man who was like her sitting alone and in the throes of realization of what was to come. He looked as she did nervous, eager, and afraid. They held each other's gaze a long moment, silently sharing each other's worries of what was to come. Then they broke contact, looking back out the windows. The gold and blue of the Ship was visible now, beyond the leading edge of the Ramp. They were nearly there. Everyone rode in silence, listening to the Shipsong loud even through the walls of the bus as they made their way to the network of Pyramids that just below the top of the Ship's dome. The bus turned taking a secondary route to the embarkation point they'd been assigned. Someone at the front of the bus wearing the gold-and-black uniform of the Ship's crew was giving them instructions; where to go when they arrived at their embarkation point, what signs to follow, and if they got lost how to interact with the Ship and find their way to the registration areas. The passengers had all been walked through this already but it was nerve wracking about to be doing it for real. Allison thought of the party the night before, and of the night before that, her last with Laura. She'd have memories of her dearest friend for a lifetime but their last hours together had been bittersweet and achingly brief.

"Laura..." Allison whispered, pressing her hand against the cool glass of the bus window, feeling the vibration of the Shipsong against her hand.

And then they were at the Ship; the bus stopped and the passengers were getting up.

"Oh, God," Allison murmured, "Here we go."

Sipping her coffee the following morning, Allison stood out on the small terrace of her lodgings looking out at the vast tracts of parkland before her.

The Ship's shops were located on the decks surrounding the Habitat as were the industries and agro-centers that supplied them. A decision had been made somewhere up the line to only allow cloned meat on board the Ship. None of the livestock aboard would be raised for anything worse than milk or eggs. Everything would be given free range either in isolated sections of the Habitat sphere or in separate preserves set up along the surrounding decks. The Ship was a veritable ark with samples of every environment, including oceanic life, having been created within. There were Laurentian forests, tropical rain forests, deserts, the arctic and even a deck that was a perfect microcosm of the African Savannah. The Ship was a miracle, a wonder, and a frightening, fascinating place. Allison had cried herself to sleep last night for fear of what was to come; but for better or worse she was now home. There was a sudden, strange chime reminiscent of the Shipsong. Then a voice boomed over some hidden PA system throughout the Habitat. Allison recognized it almost immediately: Laura's mother:

"Your attention please, your attention please. This is Colonel Margaret Bloom, Commander of the Ship. We are now commencing countdown for Shiprise. All passengers please report to your designated emergency shelters until flight is underway. Please consult one of your house panels if you do not recall where your designated shelter is located. We are at T-minus sixty minutes and counting. All passengers should be at their shelters within the next fifteen minutes."

Shiprise. In one hour. Allison swallowed hard and filled herself a thermos of coffee.

Walter Quincy Robertson had been a reporter with INN for almost ten years now. Any other Grid-based news network would have long since promoted Robertson to anchor or co-anchor but INN with its virtual news anchors, electronic amalgams that simulated the real thing with perfect precision had no need of a human anchor. Though they still had need of Human news reporters. When INN had perfected the technology used originally by Ananova.com to bring its virtual news service to life the Union of Broadcast Employees had been quick to require that all other networks and news outlets have at least five live human on-air personalities. INN escaped the ruling, but it left those human reporters who chose to work for INN as pariahs to the rest of the industry. Despite the respectability of INN as a news-reporting outfit its reporters were seen as betraying human anchors everywhere and so were shunned by their peers. It made INN reporters a bit

of a close-knit society. But only because there was no future reporting the news to INN; if you were lucky you'd get a job in one of the INN offices writing script for the electronic ghosts who anchored INN's several hundred news broadcasts. Robertson intended to bend the trend. He had been assigned to cover the launch of the Ship, and he was going to use this as an opportunity to get a job at another network and hopefully land an anchor chair.

"Walt, we're going live in sixty seconds," Laurel, his producer called.

"Great," Robertson said.

He slipped his microphone under his collar. "What's our opening feed?"

"We have a wide shot of the Ship, zoomed in on from one of the low-orbit satellites. It'll show up on your monitor."

Robertson looked to the monitor positioned directly under the camera facing him. He was already formulating his opening.

"Thirty seconds," Laurel cautioned.

"After the wide shot?"

"We cut to you on screen left with the Ship on screen right."

"Excellent. Let's dance."

"Ten seconds. Nine...eight...seven...six...five..." the last four seconds his producer counted down on the fingers of one hand so that Robertson could see.

"Seventy million years ago," Robertson began as the wide shot of the Ship appeared onscreen; the abandoned Village and Fort Arapaho encircled it to the southeast, the desert and mountains surrounding it everywhere else, "the Ship landed here in what would become known as the Southwestern Protectorate. It came in search of intelligent life; its crew looking for others of their kind out among the distant stars of lonely space." The image onscreen dissolved, showing him on the left of the screen with the Ship, kilometres distant but nonetheless dominant on the horizon, behind him. His producer gave him the thumbs up. After ten years she wanted to get the hell out of INN as well.

"Although the Ship's original crew is now long dead, the Ship has survived to at long last fulfill their mission and realize their dream. Humanity has found the Ship, and today humanity will join the Ship in space as it makes the long journey home."

The camera closed in on Robertson.

"Hello," he said, "I'm Walter Quincy Robertson, and I am coming to you live from the fringes of the World Ship Preserve. Today I will be covering the launch of the Ship for the Interactive News Network."

THE UNEARTHING

Robertson didn't allow it to touch his eyes, but the reaction of his producer told him what he already knew: he had made this broadcast his own. It didn't belong to INN; it belonged to him. His heart surged. Whatever network he went to Laurel would have to be part of the deal. Whether she worked on the same show as he did or just got another production job at the same network didn't matter. They were leaving INN just as surely as the Ship was leaving Earth. It was time to fall back on the script and fill in the time for the viewers with the usual background and trivia.

"The Ship arrived here towards the middle of the Cretaceous period during a time when the Earth was lush with a wide variety of life. It is commonly believed that the Ship was attracted to our world because of the amount of life teeming across the globe at the time. The Ship was trapped here during the Cataclysm, when a large asteroid hit the Earth, wiping out almost all life on the planet's surface.

"When the Ship was discovered last year, an archaeological dig led by the late Professor Mark Echohawk helped to unearth it and reveal it to the world. Since its discovery the world has been witness to many tumultuous events, culminating with actual first contact with the Ship's control entity."

On the screen before him Laurel had begun showing still images from the archaeological dig, the unearthed Ship, and famous images from the events that had led up to where they stood today.

"Several months ago the Ship announced that it wanted to take what it called a macrocosm, a representative sample of Humanity with it back to its Homeworld so that mankind could join a League of worlds among the stars. Since then preparations have been underway to accomplish this including the now-famous Ship's Lottery and the logistical nightmare and tremendous expense of loading the Ship with the world's cultural and historical archives and the millions of tons of cargo that will accompany the human citizens of the Ship's Habitat on their journey. An overview of the Ship's cargo manifest includes the industrial machinery to produce the luxuries we've grown attached to and the equipment to generate the basic necessities of human life including food, medicine and clothing. In exchange for this the Ship has given us access to technologies unprecedented in Human history. The resulting revenue from these technologies is expected to far exceed the multitrillion dollar expense of outfitting the Ship with the macrocosm of life on Earth that it will now take with it as it leaves."

The image on camera switched to another live shot: this one the vantage from the top of the Zuni Mountain range. Nothing new was happening so his

producer gave him the signal to continue with the babble.

“Aboard Ship there will be schools, a university, houses of worship for the several religions represented by the Ship’s passengers and crew, a theatre complex for motion pictures and live acts, sports arenas and recreational facilities, a hospital, and even a shopping plaza. The citizens of the Ship will occupy themselves there much the same way they did while here on Earth: vocational professionals will go to work in the hospitals, schools, agriculture centers, and other institutions; people will work in the commercial and industrial zones, their children will be in school, and other than some very obvious differences, life on Habitat inside the Ship will proceed much as it has here on Earth.”

His producer signalled him again: a hand sign indicating they were going to overlay an audio feed on all live broadcast channels. Robertson nodded. He was the only reporter from INN live at the site. He wasn’t worried about losing his moment.

“I’ve just been informed, ladies and gentlemen, that we are switching the live feed over to the INN Grid channel monitoring activities at Mission Control. We’ll be going live in just a few seconds so please stay linked to this Grid Spar. I’ll be on this Grid Spar all day reporting on the Ship’s launch as it happens. This is Walter Quincy Robertson, for the Interactive News Network.”

“Ship Command, this is Mission Control. Do you copy, over?”

“Mission Control, Ship Command; Colonel Bloom here. We read you loud and clear.”

“What is final status, Ship Command?”

Bloom looked around her Command Deck. The deck was lit overhead from the sky above New Mexico. The imaging system was online and showing the brilliant blue sky of morning. Castaneda, her operations chief, signalled her with a thumbs-up.

“All systems are go here, Mission Control,” Bloom said.

“Roger that, Ship,” came the reply. “You are go on final countdown, at clock set of T-minus thirty minutes and counting.”

“Confirmed, Mission Control,” Bloom said.

She turned to Major Benedict, who was sitting at his station, on the deck below her.

“Major Benedict, would you do the honours?”

“Operations, begin final countdown,” Benedict called. “Clock set T-

minus thirty minutes...mark.”

“The clock is running, Mission Control,” Bloom signalled. “T-Minus thirty minutes, and counting.”

“The Ship confirms Countdown Go,” Tanaka said. “T-Minus fourteen minutes from Ramp destruction on my mark...mark!”

“Do you confirm that, Control?” Bloom asked. “If you have anyone on that Ramp tell them to evacuate now.”

“Roger that, Ship. We’re sweeping the Ramp for stragglers now.”

“The Ship is energizing main engines for launch,” Tanaka informed Bloom.

“Null buoyancy field is coming online,” another operator called from their station. “Cycle at two percent and rising.”

“Major Castaneda, what is the Habitat status?” Bloom asked.

“Sunny skies, ambient temperature of twenty-three degrees Centigrade, South-westerly wind five kilometres per hour and forty-three percent humidity,” Castaneda replied. “An absolutely wonderful day.”

“Maintain safety alert warning,” Bloom said. “Until we’re actually airborne, I want the passengers to stay on the emergency decks.”

“Colonel Bloom is referring here to the emergency decks inside the Habitat Sphere, itself,” Robertson said as the link switched back to him. “The Habitat Sphere is designed to be used as a giant lifeboat should anything happen to the Ship. The people on Habitat would evacuate underground to the inner decks of the sphere where they would be protected in an emergency. The emergency decks contain a vast storehouse of food, and a suspended animation system should it be necessary to put the passengers into hibernation until the lifeboat can autopilot to a secure location. Presently the passengers are on a standby level from which they can gain access to crash beds that will protect them if something goes wrong during launch. Colonel Bloom, I am informed, has ordered this as a precaution only, out of concern for the people in her charge.”

Professor Michael Andrews looked out of the observation deck windows. The Ship was the dominant feature on the horizon, this gallery having been built and positioned so that the assembled dignitaries could watch the launch. There was an eerie blue-gold halo around the Ship this morning as the bands of energy on its outer hull glowed more brilliantly than ever, reflecting their light from the polished golden surfaces of the Ship. There were a few other

former members of the Ship Survey Expedition with him; people he'd worked with but who hadn't been senior staff. They, like Andrews, had been offered tickets aboard the Ship but had turned them down. They, like Andrews had friends and loved ones aboard. Andrews hoped the launch went well; he had said his goodbyes to Sonia but he would be on vigil until the Ship left the sky for the stars. Keeping the tears from his eyes would have been impossible, and so he didn't even try.

Bloom crossed her hands in front of her face, leaning her chin on them. The terminal screens around her showed dozens of pieces of information covering every function necessary to the Ship's flight and the care and support of the people housed within. Everything was in optimal ranges but still, these moments before launch were critical. Counting down the minutes with regular bulletins from the eighty-plus bridge crew in the pit below was agonizing. Part of Bloom's mind screamed that nothing this big had ever been intended to fly; another part of her wanted to trust the Ship implicitly, while a third argued that no machine could be trusted to function perfectly without the assistance of a Human operator. She watched the two countdowns proceed. In another few minutes the Ramp would be gone, disintegrated by the Ship; fifteen minutes after that the Ship would be airborne. Air traffic around the world was grounded so that the Ship could fly once around the globe before launching into space. If the Ship left its cradle without incident Bloom promised herself that she wouldn't worry about the rest of the pre-space flight.

"Mission Control, we will be at T-minus five minutes to Ramp release on my mark," Bloom said. "And...mark!"

"Roger that Ship. Five minutes to Ramp destruct."

Bloom sat back in her chair, watching the countdown proceed. She watched the power level indicators for several systems climb higher and higher as the Ship built up the charges it required to fire those systems. Most of those power levels were reading in the millions of gigawatts, the sum total of the energy spikes more than enough to power a medium-sized nation for decades. The Ship was building tremendous forces as it prepared to lift its incalculable mass up from the cradle in which it had nestled these last eighty million years. And still Bloom felt not the slightest shiver in the deck plates beneath her feet. She'd never been on a ship that didn't shimmy at least a little as it got ready to launch. There was always the shudder of power coming from something. But not the Ship. Not in the least. This vessel had a consciousness

all its own; it was at least partly biological and far in advance of anything that Humanity had ever come up with. Even flying the Bug out of the Ship and back to Groom Lake Bloom had discovered just how different the Bug had been from anything she had ever flown before. The Bug was so responsive it was nearly anticipatory; the imaging system far superior in clarity and definition to the one they had built at the Facility. Everything pointed to a technology millions of years ahead of their own. This Command Deck had been *grown* by the Ship to accommodate its new Human operators. Bloom wondered how the Ship's Command Deck had been configured when the Eoulf had walked these halls.

The Ship made an announcement in its resonating, crystalline bass:
"RAMP DESTRUCTION IN FIFTY SECONDS."

Bloom turned her chair so that she was facing the half-egg of her own private imager.

"Display," Bloom commanded.

"We're only moments away now from the destruction of the Ramp," Walter Quincy Robertson reported, "and we are going now to an aerial shot of the Ship, taken from the Concord 3 Station in orbit over North America."

The image onscreen changed, showing the Ship in quarter profile from above and the ramp a narrow band extending from the Pyramid to the shores of the New Mexican desert beyond. The camera continued to zoom in, focusing to an exquisitely sharp picture of the ramp and the Ship around it. The blue bands of energy that skittered across the Ship's hull were glowing more and more brilliantly.

"It is interesting to note," Robertson continued, "that Concord 3 was Colonel Margaret Bloom's most recent posting prior to being assigned to the Ship Survey Expedition where she replaced—wait a minute..."

An arc of energy shot up from the Ship jumping over the ramp.

"It looks like the Ramp is about to go..."

And suddenly there it was: a wall of blue energy to the left of the Ramp, ten meters high. It began creeping towards the Ramp, and then shot across almost too fast to be seen. As it crossed the distance to the other side of the ramp it extinguished and the Ramp was no more. An implosive roar thundered across the desert as air collapsed in upon the gap left by the disintegrated ramp. The earth trembled slightly although not nearly as violently as it had when the Ship had unearthed itself.

"My GOD!" Robertson exclaimed. "That was incredible! Ladies and

gentlemen, the Ramp has been disintegrated and the noise you heard at home was the sound of air dropping into the vacuum created by its absence. There was a minor tremor after the Ramp was disintegrated, but now things seem back to normal. The Ship is free and we are now less than fifteen minutes from launch.”

From where he was Robertson could hear the thunderous roar of the cheers of the assembled masses.

“And that noise—I don’t know if you can hear it at home,” Robertson continued, “that noise is the sound of an estimated five hundred thousand people cheering, ladies and gentlemen. This is truly an historic occasion. The world will never see anything like this, again. What better time throughout our history, throughout our *civilization* to be alive?”

“The Ramp is gone,” Tanaka reported. “The Ship is now clear and awaiting final powerup to launch.”

“Null buoyancy field charged to fifty percent.”

“Exterior seismology reports a mild tremor emanating from the launch field,” another officer reported. “Point two five Richters and rising.”

“Mission Control, be advised we are monitoring a low level tremor beginning,” Bloom called. “Point two five Richters, and rising.”

“Confirm tremor point two five Richters and rising. As expected, Ship,” was the reply. “We are also monitoring the quake. Still well within tolerable range.”

“Roger that.” Bloom ended the communication, rose from her chair and walked over to her railing.

She looked down upon the deck below her.

“Anyone feel anything at all?” she asked.

The Command Deck, and presumably the whole Ship was as still and placid as the eye of a hurricane. An apt analogy in Bloom’s opinion, because no matter what happened after the Ship launched she was sure there would be a storm.

The Ship rose slowly at first, its null buoyancy field helping it overcome most of the inertia associated with its mass. As it rose the Ship began shifting the air about it. Currents sunk down into the valley of the canyon created by the Ship’s eighty-million-year-old nest. Others rushed up its majestic length or across its span. The Ship’s ascent began to be noticeable: a mountain rising from the grave. As the edge of the disk lifted free of the canyon a massive

shadow blossomed from beneath it, bathing first the Village and then the whole World Ship Preserve in premature dusk. A throbbing, pulsing hum more felt than heard began to roil across the desert, echoing for kilometres. The ground below was bathed in darkness; a surreal night time sky ringed with the daylight fighting at its edges. All beneath the Ship were silent as through the thrumming, throbbing false night, a thousand points of blue and white light suddenly scattered stars into the blackened heavens. The Ship's running lights blossomed across its lower half. The lower hull was covered in overlapping spheroids; half and three-quarter orbs pockmarking the perfect half-sphere arch of the Ship's lower hull. They ranged in size from only a few meters to a massive blister half-sphere ten kilometres across, busily absorbing those smaller spheres surrounding it. The Ship rose higher into the sky, casting its shadow wide over the land. At last it slowed to a halt, a deep valley of shadow below it even as the sun continued to reflect off of its golden upper surface.

"Status report," Bloom called out. "All stations."

"Habitat secure," Tanaka announced. "Passengers returning to the surface. Propulsion systems are good to go."

"Navigational systems online," Benedict replied. "Air traffic is clear, and we have reached our pre-spatial cruising altitude of four thousand, seven hundred and ten meters." Making eye contact with Bloom, the dark-eyed Black man smiled gleefully.

"We now own the sky," he said.

"Lay in the pre-orbital flight path," Bloom commanded. "Ship to Mission Control: we have reached our cruising altitude, and are plotting our course, over."

"Roger that, Ship," Mission Control said. "We confirm you at four-point-seven-one-zero K and holding. You are cleared to proceed with Shipflight, over."

"Course plotted and laid in, Colonel," one of the deckhands confirmed.

"Take us on."

The Ship began to move eastwards.

The World Ship Summit had decreed that the Ship should tour the globe once before launching forever into orbit. Its flight path would take it over the skylines of all the World Council capitals as well as most of the major cities of each nation. Finally almost two full days after, it would leave the Earth's

atmosphere for orbit and then the stars.

“We are underway,” Tanaka reported.

“Display.”

The walls of the Command deck rippled and dissolved. Suddenly it was as if they were atop the Pyramid looking out across at the world around them. Not even the natural curve of the Command Deck’s dome distorted the image. Bloom stood up, walking to the railing in front of her chair. Benedict climbed up the short ramp between his station and hers.

“This is fantastic,” Bloom said, approvingly.

“They have the same view of the sky from Habitat’s equator,” Benedict advised.

As the Ship sailed across the world massive crowds gathered along its flightpath. As it crossed its shadow over the people below, a preternatural silence would fall and people would stare in awe, humbled, frightened, enthralled by the incredible sight before them. Particularly lucky were those cities that saw the Ship visit at night, for the running lights from the Ship bathed their cities in its strange glow, highlighted against the dark. And there were celebrations: massive parties that ran day and night, exulting the Ship, its passengers, and crew. Nothing like it had been seen since the Millennial Celebrations back in AD-2000

History would record the world united in celebration during the hours that the Ship traveled the globe, gracing its cities and people with the presence of its wondrous flight. Finally the Ship’s circuit of the world’s capitals ended where it had began, over the crater in Laguna. It hovered over Ship’s Crater, which was already in the throes of massive and rapid geologic transformation in the absence of the weight of the Ship in its bed. The Ship hung there for an entire hour before suddenly it rang out with a final two-note burst of Shipsong that echoed throughout the Preserve and surrounding territories. It was mournful, plaintive, an almost feral farewell. And then the Ship rose ever upwards into the sky, its shape and shadow shrinking away as it took to the Heavens. With it the Ship took the hopes and the dreams of the passengers in its belly and the hopes and dreams of Mankind as it went. Humanity had finally truly taken to the stars. And on Earth as in the Ship the future appeared as a promise, for the first time in ages.