



Through Darkness
and Stars

Steve Karmazenuk

THROUGH DARKNESS AND STARS

STEVE KARMAZENUK

An ancient Ship completing a millions-year old mission has taken Human passengers and crew on an historic voyage to the heart of an ancient cosmic dynasty.

But despite their extensive training no one aboard the Shipflight is prepared for what they find as they search for the Great Races of the lost League of Worlds.

When catastrophe forces Shipflight onward, unable to return to Earth, they set out to discover what happened to those who passed through the cosmos before them.

What awaits them beyond the world that Mankind has always called home is a growing madness aboard the Ship and a lost enemy, stalking them as they travel through darkness and stars...

THROUGH DARKNESS AND STARS

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Based on characters and events from “The Unearthing”, by Steve Karmazenuk

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Electronic edition

All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons living or dead is either purely coincidental and unintentional, or the result of an inexplicable shift in quantum reality.

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As always, for Angel for always knowing.

For Tom, Christine and Kevin for having provided faith,
input, feedback, motivation, insight, and underappreciated
but occasionally-needed good, swift kicks in the ass.

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STEVE KARMAZENUK'S OMNIVERSE

The Unearthing;
Through Darkness and Stars;

And

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When a tale is told it often takes on a life of its own: Tale becomes epic, epic becomes legend, legend turns into myth and over time myth evolves into the cornerstone for a new generation of religions.

But every tale, every epic, legend, myth and religion has at its core the Truth. The Truth is the wellspring from which all else follows. Thus, here follows the Truth as it happened.

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PRELUDE

WHAT CAME BEFORE

For tens of millions of years the Ship lay hidden beneath the earth of what became known as the desert of New Mexico. But for an accident it may well have remained there until the end of history.

But it was discovered and that revelation shook humankind to its foundations. As the people of Earth reeled from the shock of the Ship's Unearthing, their governments sought to discover the Ship's secrets and their religious leaders struggled to reconcile the ancient Ship with the dogmas of their Faiths.

Eventually it was realized that the Ship was fully-functional and run by an artificial consciousness that gave its own answers to humanity's pressing questions about its

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existence and their own. But this did not happen before worldwide catastrophe struck in the form of global-scale terror and bloodshed at the hands of the United Trinity Observants: an apocalyptic cult led by the deranged Gabriel Ashe.

In spite of, or perhaps through a renewed sense of determination because of the attacks, exploration and examination of the Ship continued, leading to direct dialogue between the Ship's Control Entity and representatives of Mankind: The Ship made a surprising and irresistible offer: It would exchange cultural, historical and technological information with the citizens of Earth. The Ship also offered to take a representative sample of humankind and its cultures, religions and creations back to the Homeworld of an ancient, multi-generational League of Worlds.

On Earth the sharing of Ship technologies began and the world's religions announced they were reconciled under the newfound knowledge that God was revealed to each, according to their cultures and faiths. They proclaimed that all religions were equal in merit, truth, validity and in the possession of God's word. But rather than breed harmony this created discord among religious fundamentalists. Violence began erupting even as the Ship left Earth.

The Ship first explored Humankind's parent star system. Commanded by Colonel Margaret Bloom, the Ship's crew began to learn how to pilot the Ship's various support

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vehicles and run its many systems. Although the Ship could pilot itself, it was optimal to have an actual crew at the helm. As the Ship and its crew explored the planets of the Sol system, so too did the passengers and crew explore the Ship. Thirty-two kilometres across, the Ship stored archives and laboratories, records and treasures from its ancient travels across the universe.

The understanding gained both from within the Ship and without was beneficial to all aboard and all those back on Earth. But only so much time could be spent orbiting one star. After a year of exploration of mankind's cradle, the time had come for the Ship and its passengers and crew to begin their great voyage into the cosmos and beyond.

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ONE

SILENCE FROM THE STARS

The sun was shining through the large bay window in Colonel Margaret Bloom's office. The sunlight came not from any real star but from the titanic imaging system that surrounded the sphere that was the Ship's Habitat. Bloom's offices, like many offices, restaurants and recreation areas, overlooked Habitat from an approximate distance of thirteen hundred meters. Other than a few family photographs and a piece of fuselage from an F-579 Silver Dragon orbital fighter, Bloom's offices were devoid of anything not strictly functional. she turned away from her desk to look out the window and down at the gently rotating miniature world below.

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It was a spectacular sight. Habitat was a little more than five kilometres in diameter, a perfect sphere with its own gravity and atmosphere regulated by lush, verdant preserves surrounding the homes that ringed the equator of the globe. It filled the horizon, reminding her of Earth when seen from orbit. Except at this distance Bloom could discern people on Habitat's surface. With a good pair of binoculars she'd have been able to read over their shoulders. And although she'd been looking at the view from her office at least once a day for more than a year and a half, Bloom was still nowhere near used to it.

She turned back to her desk and sipped gratefully from the coffee to her left. She glanced at the reports displayed across the three different console screens on her desk. On her left were the latest report summaries from Earth, including Shipflight mission data, news and current events, the latest additions to the Ship's cultural archives and correspondence for the crew and passengers.

Everything was automatically routed by the Ship Control Entity. Handling the flow of data from Earth was inconsequential to the vast, alien intelligence that governed the Ship. It was capable of solving the equations necessary faster-than-light travel and time warp in a matter of minutes. Conversely, the greatest Human mind would need hundreds of thousands of years to work out even the basics.

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The screen to Bloom's right displayed a menu of daily and weekly reports marked for her attention. Almost every aspect of the day-to-day running of the Ship was represented on this screen. It would take up most of her day to read through all of it; she was thankful that her Executive Officer, Major Jack Benedict was there to bear the brunt of it. She would only read what he flagged, and he'd have those requiring her attention to her by the time she finished dealing with the information on the screen directly in front of her. She liked to start her duty shift reading a little news from home. As long as they were in contact with Earth they were able to receive all the Gridcasts. Her morning vice, consumed with her coffee as her parents and grandparents might have consumed a sweet breakfast, Bloom linked to the Interactive News Network every morning.

The news was almost all bad these days; in that regard, the news hadn't changed much over the centuries. This was Earth eighteen months after Shiprise: Religious violence in the Middle East; secular violence in Eastern Europe; incessant warfare in South America, economic crisis and political scandal in the West and expansionist sabre-rattling in Asia from one of any number of interchangeable tin-pot dictators. And though the content hadn't changed the news seemed somehow worse. Much of the ongoing religious violence had erupted following Pope Simon-Peter's Encyclical at the conclusion of the Fourth Vatican Council's deliberations on the Ship. The Pope had declared all religions to be equal in the

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eyes of God, and each Man and Woman called to God according to the tenets of that particular faith. It had been more than enough to set off the Great Holy War that followed.

Not since the collapse of Capitalism at the end of War Three had the world faced such an economic crisis. The cost of the World Ship Summit, the Ship Survey Expedition and later Shipflight were measured in the trillions. The anticipated benefits from the Ship technologies that had been released had yet to materialize. The World Council was fracturing as the Holy War kindled dark nationalist, ethnic and social feelings long gone dry. Governments were crippled, collapsed. Violence escalated as it always did amidst the chaos.

But worst of all was the growing distance between them and their Homeworld. It seemed the farther from Earth, the worse the news became. They had all left people they loved behind. For many the loss was unbearable. They opted to return home in droves. Even with all the reserve passengers on standby lists, The Ship's passenger and crew complement of two hundred thousand had shrunk by nearly twenty-five percent.

Now the Ship was approaching Heliopause, the boundary of the solar system. Here the solar winds' forces ebbed as they were overcome by and absorbed into the vast Interstellar Sea; the medium of gas, particles, and radiation that pervaded the cosmos between the stars. Beyond was the Great

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Unknown and the passengers and crew aboard the Ship were about to become the first Humans to ever see the marvels of the legendary League of Worlds. And yet the sense of adventure that seemed to have dominated the first few months of Shipflight was diminished. Earth had long since become invisible to the naked eye. The other planets were all bright stars and the only objects visible here. Ahead and all around Space loomed large and black, cold and unknown. The news from home made them feel powerless, confused, alone.

As they had toured the solar system out from Mercury, learning to command and work the Ship in-flight, learning to fly the myriad support vehicles, daily life aboard the Ship was a generally carefree affair. But now on the verge of truly going into deep space, the life-on-a-vacation-cruise atmosphere was dissolving. Between the uncertain fate of all those in turmoil back on Earth and the unknown path ahead of them, Bloom could understand the shift. Her own daughter was among those left behind on Earth; with all the madness that had overtaken the globe, Bloom felt more very far from home indeed.



Major Jack Benedict oversaw much of the Ship's day-to-day operations. This morning as he completed his daily office duties before heading to the Command Deck, Benedict was focused on the problem of the number of passengers the Ship had lost in the last couple of months.

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People had been leaving the Ship—requesting to return to Earth—for most of the last year. As it became apparent that the Ship really was leaving the Sol system and beginning a journey that had the potential of taking anywhere from decades to lifetimes, more and more people were being frightened off the Ship by the prospect. Fortunately the worldwide lottery that had drawn the names of the Ship’s passenger manifest included a healthy list of alternates.

Despite this and despite the provisioning done by the World Ship Summit to ensure that key posts both in the Ship’s military crew and civilian rosters were filled, this latest group of returnees would leave the Ship understaffed in several vital areas. To that end Benedict was drafting a text linx to send back to Shipflight Control, in Geneva:

The final transport convoy back to Earth will bring with it another eleven hundred souls. Among them we will be losing fourteen security officers; ten registered nurses; twenty-three agricultural process technicians, a cardiac surgeon, two genetic surgeons and six teachers—four collegiate, two secondary school.

His words were relayed by a faster-than-light communications system that spanned the twelve light-hour distance between the luminous golden disk of the Ship and the small, blue world from which its crew had come. The Hyperlink Communications System was a marvel: though the

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mechanics of its function were understood, the physics of it remained more than a mystery. Real-time live conversation was possible, even when the distance between people was measured in light-years. The only reason Benedict was sending text instead of speaking live with someone, was because it was the middle of the night back at Shipflight Control, with only the most essential, and therefore skeletal, staff on duty.

ETA for the convoy is approximately six days once they reach cruising speed, including acceleration and deceleration times to and from Near-Light Velocity, and time dilation relative to Earth. Right now, our agricultural systems are critically understaffed. We have people pulling triple shifts making sure the food supply is constant. We need new AG engineers before we leave.

These latest returnees necessitate pushing back the extrasolar launch until replacements from Earth arrive back at the Ship. Colonel Bloom and Governor Santino have both made it clear to me that the medical personal and service people we've lost are to be the priority. We'll start having serious problems if we don't have the AG process techs; we can make due without the others if necessary, but food supply cloning is essential given the indefinite length of time we will be on mission.

Factoring in lag-time to find the necessary personnel from within the Lottery pool, travel and time dilation,

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new scheduled extrasolar launch window would begin August the seventh, four AM Greenwich Mean Time, on Earth.

We'll be waiting for your reply; my next duty shift will be graveyard, so we will be able to speak face-to-face over hyperlink then.

All my best to you and yours, Helmut.

Major Jack Benedict.



Lieutenant Mulumba Kalenga was the Ship's communications chief. Originally from South Africa, he had been ranked among the best radio astronomy and satellite control engineers in the African Consortium's Armed Forces. Like all of the senior staff Kalenga had been hand-picked for this mission by Colonel Bloom.

Nothing in his experience could have prepared him for his duties as the Ship's communications officer. For months before Shiprise he had worked in Geneva with David Van Der Draas, who had overseen the construction of Earth's own hyperlink beacon antenna. Even helping to assemble Earth's beacon hadn't taught him all the nuances of the hyperlink communications array that was the backbone of the Ship's external communications systems. He was qualified as an expert engineer for the array, but neither he, nor Van Der Draas on Earth were any closer to understanding how—or why—the hyperlink worked. This served to make Kalenga's duties

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just intimidating enough for his days to be spent walking a razor's edge between anxiety and crisis.

In the last year researchers both aboard the thirty-two kilometre wide behemoth and back home on Earth had come to understand only a fraction of the technology that allowed the hyperlink to work: hyperlink signals sacrificed longevity for distance. Whereas radio signals could essentially travel to the very ends of the universe, fading into the cosmic background radiation only in the presence of stronger signals, hyperlink signals decayed rapidly over relatively short cosmic distances. Unamplified hyperlink transmissions began to decay after travelling roughly fifty thousand light years, breaking down completely at a travelled distance of seventy-five thousand light years. But while radio transmissions were limited to travelling at the speed of light, hyperlink signals were hundreds of thousands of times faster. With relay transmitter beacons scattered at regular intervals, conversations across deep space could occur in real-time.

For that reason the League of Worlds, an affiliation of thousands of different forms of intelligent life spread across the local galactic cluster, had literally seeded the stars with billions of hyperlink beacons. The hyperlink beacon network was already millions of years old by the time the Ship had begun the mission that had taken it to Earth, so long ago. The network served the multi-generational League of Worlds perpetually for immemorial aeons.

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It was this knowledge that made the complete silence in the cosmos all the more disturbing to Lieutenant Kalenga and the radio operators and radio astronomers that staffed his department. Long before reaching the edge of Earth's parent solar system they should have detected hyperlink traffic. The Ship's beacon had been brought online almost a year ago. Earth's beacon had been online for almost that long before. Personnel both aboard the Ship and on Earth had been listening for signal traffic the entire time. The only detectable hyperlink traffic had either come from the Ship or from the Earth.

Kalenga sat at his station in Hyperlink Beacon Operations, jokingly referred to by its unfortunate acronym, HBO. The only mission the HBO staff had had since the beacon had come online was to establish a link with the Hyperlink Network. They were unsuccessful. Hyperlink systems could scan and make use of tens of thousands of frequencies at once, better enabling communications. Kalenga and his team had repeatedly searched across every conceivable frequency and bandwidth. The experience of long shifts with eyes closed and headsets on, listening late into the night for anything that could potentially be a signal made him think of his university days, when he would volunteer to work on SETI.

Only silence answered them.

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In the beginning this hadn't been of any real concern; they had time, and they hadn't expected to hit it right on the first go. As they launched from Earth their mission had taken them through the solar system, visiting each planet as they went. The Ship could fly from planet to planet in a matter of hours or days. They spent months exploring the inner planets before heading on past the asteroid belt to the gas giants of the outer solar system. That much farther out from all the satellite noise and solar radiation, Kalenga had hoped they would find a trace of the network, and still nothing.

Eighteen months after leaving Earth, they were at last about to travel into deep space, and still they had heard no signal, no beacon pulse, nothing from the League's Hyperlink Network. The Ship would need to update navigational its information, inform the League of the fate of its previous crew and begin the journey home with the delegation from Earth, which would in time become the newest world to join the League. All of this was put in jeopardy if they couldn't make contact. It was incumbent on Kalenga to make sure they succeeded.

Kalenga discussed the problem with his staff and with the Ship Control Entity. He had prepared his report and was now heading to Command Level, below the Habitat and deep within the heart of the Ship. No one enjoys being the bearer of bad news and Mulumba Kalenga was no exception. He was not concerned with the Colonel's reaction to the situation.

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However, he did not like being unable to provide them with a constructive solution.

“There are only three possibilities,” Kalenga said as he wrapped up his briefing, “Either hyperlink broadcasting has been superseded by a new means of transmission as undetectable to hyperlink systems as hyperlink transmission is to radio; the second possibility is that the local section of the hyperlink network has failed, and we are outside of signal range from the rest of the network.”

“What’s the third possibility?” Bloom asked, her eyes fixed on the lieutenant.

Kalenga swallowed.

“The third possibility,” he answered, “Is that the entire network has failed.”

The silence was heavy as the Colonel and Major Benedict pondered the news.

“The Ship was buried on Earth close to seventy million years ago,” Benedict said, “Despite the fact that the League of Worlds is—or was—millions of years old and marked the rise and fall of countless civilizations, isn’t it possible that they’re now extinct?”

Bloom considered it.

“I honestly doubt it. Think about it: Generation after generation of explorers and ambassadors travelling across millions of galaxies with billions of stars in each, hundreds of millions of which could support life? No; I don’t buy that the

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League of Worlds has gone extinct. Evolved, maybe. Migrated? Sure. But I can't believe that it's gone, altogether." Benedict made a grim face and said, "Colonel we have to at least acknowledge the possibility."

Bloom nodded reluctantly, turning her focus back to Kalenga.

"Lieutenant, how would you suggest we proceed?" she asked.

"I think we should travel to the last known coordinates of the hyperlink beacon nearest to Earth. From there we should be able to either make contact with the hyperlink network or ascertain why the network has gone silent."

"I'll relay your report and recommendations to the World Ship Summit," Bloom said, "Personally I'm inclined to agree with your assessment, Mister Kalenga. If the Summit agrees, that's exactly what we'll do. You'll be in charge of the investigation, Mulumba. Prepare a list of what and who you'll need and submit it to Provisioning and Personnel. You've got carte blanche, Lieutenant; whatever you need."

"Thank you Colonel,"

"That's all, Lieutenant," Benedict said, "Good hunting."

Kalenga delivered a sharp salute and left Bloom's Command-Deck briefing room. The door rose shut from its recess in the floor as he left.

"Fuck Exo, this is turning into one hell of a shit storm," Benedict nodded.

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“The whole purpose of this mission is to make contact with the League of Worlds and now we find out they’ve logged off.”

“Trillions have already been spent for the mission to have gotten us this far,” Bloom said, “We’re supposed to take Mankind into the unknown, but things are getting more and more fucking unknown as we go.”

“Do you think the Summit will want us to abort?” Benedict asked.

Bloom shook her head, walking around the conference table to stand beside her executive officer.

“Not unless there was a significant and demonstrable risk to the safety and lives of the passengers and crew,” she said, “And that really isn’t the case.”

“But you’re not comfortable,” Benedict prompted.

“I’d feel a hell of a lot better about this if someone was on the other end of the linx,” Bloom said, slapping her thigh in an unconscious gesture of frustration, “We’ll contact the World Ship Summit and advise them of the situation. Unless they order us back, we go ahead as planned.”

Bloom walked to the door of the conference room, which dropped fluidly down into the floor as she approached.

“We’ll discuss this with the senior staff once I’ve spoken with Geneva,” she said, “See you on the Command Deck.”



Nearly every room, every hall, on every level of the Ship was done in the same alien design: golden walls covered

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with a myriad of textures and patters, bisected by shimmering bands of glowing, flowing blue energy. The floors and ceilings were an obsidian black, light diffusing through the ceiling from orbs that counted the distance evenly down the corridors and through the rooms. Outside of Habitat and the Ship's commercial district, it was exceedingly easy to get lost.

For the first few days aboard the Ship, these halls and rooms seemed intimidating and confusing for their alien uniformity and size. Allison McQuire had dreaded the possibility of becoming lost in the endless maze of hundreds of branching hallways across thousands of different levels. She'd gotten turned around on more than one occasion and even the marker plaques at each intersection and beside each door had been of little help during her early days as a passenger aboard the Ship.

Allison could now make her way through the Ship's public access decks with ease, even able to wend her way through the agricultural, industrial, archival and scientific sections without problem or impediment. This acquired skill was thanks in large part to her job: she was employed as an archives assistant with the Alien Studies Division and this required her to travel daily between sections and levels of the Ship, both on foot and by the elaborate transitway system that gave access to the Ship's more far-flung centres.

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It was a good job; something close to what she'd studied for in university and more importantly it was something to do. Boredom brought on by idleness was one of the worst things the Ship's passengers had to contend with. The leisure of being on an interstellar voyage had soon given way to the ennui of having nothing to do. Because of this, most of the Passengers had chosen to start working. Despite the ever-unfolding, often dazzling and always humbling wonders of the solar system they witnessed daily, people needed to keep busy. So they worked as part of the Ship's staff, either in the schools the hospital, or other public facilities. Or else they worked in one of the many research and archive departments, helping study and catalogue the alien technology, specimens and artefacts warehoused within the Ship. By far however, most people worked in the Ship's private sector: in shops, stores, clubs, bars, restaurants and arenas. Because the Ship's Passengers' basic necessities were provided for, people who worked did so for credit points which could be applied towards acquiring optional or "luxury" goods and services. But even these were created by the Ship itself; the work-for-goods system had been set up as the closest approximation of a functional economy that was possible, given the Ship produced almost anything any of them could want or need.

Allison reached her destination in an unused section of the Ship outside Habitat. The Alien Studies team had been working to turn part of the space into a museum for most of the

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last year, to showcase the treasures from alien worlds that had been housed within the Ship's vast archives. They'd expected to have had the museum up and running long before the Ship left the solar system, but the schedule had been pushed back. Even with thirty-five assistants, a half dozen professors of anthropology and archaeology and several former museum curators the project was a slow-moving mammoth. The Ship had visited so many worlds before reaching Earth that it would be impossible for the already-sprawling museum complex to even show one tenth of everything that had been collected.

Allison worked long hours and never knew from one day to the next what her job would require of her. There was just so much to do and half the time when someone had decided what pieces they wanted to exhibit and sent her into the archives to retrieve them, she would return to find the exhibitor decided to display something else. But Allison didn't mind. It was here, working on the museum project that she'd met Juan Carlos Rejas.

Juan Carlos was a theologian, attached to the Alien Religious Studies division of the museum project. There was much that Allison didn't know about Juan Carlos; though he was outgoing and friendly, he rarely spoke about what he did prior to Shiprise:

"I prefer to think of my life on Earth as a past life," he told Allison once, while they were working together. She'd pressed him for details about his life back home, sharing her

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own tale of having inherited her ticket aboard Shipflight from James Johnson, one of the original members of the Ship Survey Expedition. But Juan Carlos hadn't chosen to be as forthcoming.

"I would prefer to look ahead," he said, "I am a product of my past, Allison, but I am not my past."

He hadn't been offended, but it had been obvious to Allison that it wasn't a subject he was willing to discuss. She decided to leave it at that; Allison was liked Juan Carlos Rejas, and she didn't want to alienate him by being too obtrusive.

"Allison!" Juan Carlos said warmly as she came into their section of the soon-to-be-museum, "*Como est-a?*"

"*Muy bien,*" she said, "How are you?"

Juan and a couple of other early-risers were looking at one of several relics they'd found in the Ship's vast archives. Many of the thirty-two kilometre-wide Ship's storage areas were devoted to warehousing an extensive anthropological collection from every inhabited world that the Ship had visited. There were fluid and tissue samples from every form of life discovered; wherever the Ship's original crew had encountered civilization they had also collected artifacts, including works of art, technology, clothing and any other objects of significance to the society.

Juan and the others were studying one such artifact, in particular: it was a plain piece of stone with an effigy of a

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robed figure carved on one side, with raised symbols of alien text carved on the other.

“Take a look at this piece,” he said, motioning her over, “It’s from one of the oldest sections of the Ship’s archives.”

Juan Carlos held up the object, figure to his people.

“The Ship’s record indicates this was an object of veneration from a martyr cult, in many ways similar to Christianity,” he said, “Using Shiplanguage as a bridge, Doctor Sonia Aiziz has begun a partial translation of the text on the reverse side.”

He turned the object around, though the script on its reverse side was beyond their understanding.

“Fortunately when it was added to the Ship’s archives, they included a summary file in Shiplanguage,” Juan said, “With that we were able to learn that the key differences in the tradition of this alien Martyr religion versus Christianity are that the messiah figure is female, and her sacrifice wasn’t in dying but in *ascending* to Godhood.”

“What does that mean?” Allison asked.

Juan shrugged.

“It would appear that the Martyr they worshipped was forced into it, into becoming Divine.”

Allison frowned.

“That sounds like they sacrificed her.”

Juan Carlos nodded.

“It does indeed, and that may very well have been the reality. The race who celebrated this religion died out hundreds of millions of years ago; their language was already

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considered dead when the League of Worlds housed these icons aboard the Ship. I'm interested in finding out if there are other martyr-worship religions catalogued in the Archives, and comparing them to one another, and of course to Christianity. I've had the Ship's computer make a list of likely candidates, and I'd like you all to begin retrieving some of their texts and icons."

Juan Carlos picked up his tablet and entered a sequence on its touch-screen.

"I've just sent you your respective lists," he said, "So we can begin right away. I'm coordinating with the rest of the team to make sure our other projects don't suffer in the meantime. Let's get to work!"

As the impromptu meeting broke up, Allison lingered, wanting a private moment with Juan Carlos.



Governor Paul Santino, head of the Ship's Civilian Authority stood at the window behind his desk, looking down at the green sphere of the Habitat. Like Colonel Bloom, Santino had generous offices within the bulkheads surrounding Habitat. Unlike Bloom's Spartan furnishings, Santino's offices were pushily appointed, nearly opulent by the standards aboard the Ship. They were decorated with artwork from Laguna, given to Santino by the Band Council as a farewell present for all the years he had served as their Chief before signing on as Governor of the Ship's Civilian Authority. In the place of honour in his office—the wall to the right of his desk—hung a large framed print of the dig-site where the Ship had first been

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discovered; when all but the first three meters of the pyramid on the summit of its dome were still buried beneath the New Mexican desert. A myriad of couches, chairs, a small bar and a library filled out the rest of the space. His office seemed more like a large private study than the headquarters of the Civilian Authority.

It was, he believed, indicative of the difference between the civilian and military mindsets. Santino felt that the military was about strategy, calculation, control...he still remembered his run-in with Colonel Isaac Jude before the Ship unearthed itself. Jude had been ready and under orders to kill every last man, woman and child who knew about the Ship. Had it not unearthed itself, had news of its existence not been leaked over the World Grid, Jude very likely would have succeeded.

Paul Santino had a long history of conflict with the military. He'd been a key figure in the World Aboriginal Rights Uprising. Following War Three, the world had been in shambles: cities across the globe had been devastated; there were global food shortages; severe climate change displaced millions, adding to millions more refugees from areas savaged by the conflict. In response to global catastrophe, the nations of the world came together to form the World Council, the international governing body that grew out of the ruins of the old United Nations.

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But as the World Council drafted new international laws and spearheaded global reconstruction and resettlement, the endemic and long-standing grievances of the world's Native communities were ignored, and their grievances were often exacerbated by the World Council's refugee resettlement and relocation programmes. This led to the near-civil war during which Natives in North and South America, Africa, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, the Asian-Oceanic Archipelago and elsewhere around the world clamoured to have their voices heard, to have their rights respected, to determine their own destiny.

The people of the world were still recovering from War Three; the peace was still fragile and it wasn't long before protest marches and demonstrations turned into clashes and conflict. Paul Santino, a young, angry veteran of the last, bloodiest years of the war, embittered by the indifference of the world he had fought to save towards the plight of his people had been among the most militant, visible, and most violent leaders of the movement. Looking back with all the benefits of hindsight, he saw where he had erred, where he could have done so many things differently. But in the end he also believed that the violence had served a purpose, hastening the conflict's end as it forced the World Council to address the grievances of the World Aboriginal Rights Uprising.

Now as the Ship moved steadily on towards Heliopause and final preparations for the jump into time began, Santino

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was concerned about the mission, about how power and authority would be handled once the Ship was too far away from Earth for the World Council to intercede. For the last year Colonel Margaret Bloom had proven to be a capable commanding officer and had largely left the Ship Civilian Authority alone. However, there had been several disputes between the Military and the Civilian Authority in that time; some of them had required the arbitration of the World Ship Summit. Once beyond the solar system, Colonel Bloom would have final authority over all. The idea of living under a military ruler in deep space was not one that Santino found particularly appealing.

A series of chimes sounded loudly from Santino's console. He turned away from his window. A Ship-wide announcement had been transmitted and was ready for playback. Santino sat down and keyed up the message. As if thinking of her had invoked her, the playback was from Colonel Margaret Bloom:

Colonel Margaret Bloom

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. We are now four days away from reaching Heliopause, the point at which the solar system ends and deep space begins. Currently Shipflight Control is preparing final provisioning to be sent to us before we make history once again, by becoming the first Human beings to travel into time warp.

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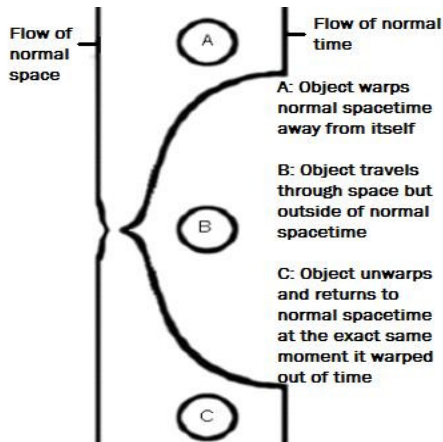
Many of you expressed concern about time warp travel. Detailed information about the process is available to viewed or read, by following the link at the bottom of your screen.

Santino followed the link. Bloom's image was replaced on-screen with the image of Doctor N'bunga, late of the Ship Survey Expedition and the head of the Physics Department of Alien Studies. The Kenyan physicist launched jovially into an explanation of what was to come:

Matthew N'bunga

Time warp travel is certainly not as dramatic as it has been portrayed in movies and Gridcasts. There's no explosive rifts opening into hyperspace; the Ship won't blast off in a streak of light; the stars won't blur into a luminous tunnel around us. All that will happen is the Ship will exchange one spacetime state for another.

An image appeared onscreen and N'bunga's narration continued:



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Matthew N'bangá

When travelling in time warp, the Ship removes itself from what we understand to be the “normal” flow of spacetime. It exists inside of its own environment where time flows at a different rate from what we consider “normal” space. This means travel between two points appears to happen instantly to someone observing from either end.

While in time warp the Ship will reach speeds exponentially faster than the speed of light. However, because of the vast distances involved in deep space travel, even with time warp and the Ship's top speed, hundreds and even thousands of years would elapse relative to the Ship before we ever reached our destination.

In order to keep its passengers and crew alive during this long voyage through time warp, the Ship will place us into an advanced state of hibernation known as stasis. The stasis field will essentially freeze us in time, so that we will not actually experience the Ship's voyage through time warp. For us, as for an observer outside of time warp, the trip will seem instantaneous. We will enter stasis just after the Ship enters time warp and we will emerge from stasis, just after it returns from time warp.

Santino followed the link back to Bloom's announcement.

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Colonel Margaret Bloom

Our first jump will bring us some forty-six thousand light years from Earth, to the M2 Globular Cluster, in Constellation Aquarius. There the Ship will make contact with the nearest hyperlink beacon from the League of Worlds, downloading current navigational data before we proceed on the next leg of our journey to the League Homeworld.

Santino ended the playback, shutting down his console. He didn't know much about how the hyperlink beacons worked, but he knew enough to recognize that Bloom and N'bunga were omitting something. What Santino didn't understand, what he wanted to know, was why hadn't the hyperlink beacon been reached already, and what wasn't Bloom telling them?



They reached Heliopause a little more than two days later, ahead of schedule. But before the Ship could even prepare for time warp, they had to wait until the relief ships returned from Earth. The mission took advantage of this delay to study in detail this farthest reach of the solar system. Here the solar winds, the constant flow of charged particles ejected by the sun, met the interstellar medium; the hydrogen and helium gasses that extend throughout the cosmos. It was a turbulent area of space: a massive standing shockwave marked the border where particles expelled from the sun collided with particles travelling into the solar system; the sun's electromagnetic field captured and superheated hydrogen into

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violent plasma currents, and radiation fields whorled to form a chaotic, natural barrier between the solar system and the galaxy at large. Although in more than a century of spaceflight Mankind had sent several space probes to explore the Heliopause event, beginning with Voyager I's historic (and unremarked) breach of the boundary, Shipflight was the first time that Humans were able to directly observe the phenomenon. Any future manned extrasolar missions would benefit from the knowledge gained by their observations here.

Three days after they began their examination of the solar system's boundary, the provisioning convoy arrived from Earth. At Bloom's behest, Benedict made a final Shipwide call to the populace, advising them that this was their final chance to return to Earth. Surprisingly, there were no last-chance returnees; the countdown to extrasolar launch was on.

At last it was time. The Ship, its passengers and crew were about to leave the solar system; Humankind was venturing into deep space. Though since the Unearthing there had been countless moments of living history, this grand departure could not go unmarked on Earth, or aboard the Ship. The day of departure, Bloom made her usual run through the parks of Habitat, showered and dressed. She was dreading the grand departure ceremony planned by the World Ship Summit back on Earth; it promised to make the gala spectacle that preceded Shiprise a year and a half before. Benedict had dryly informed her that the part of the religious service dedicated to

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the Ship's Christian passengers and crew had been adapted from the Funeral Rites. Though she saw the irony, the thought unsettled her.

Speeches and prayers were offered by national, international and religious leaders; there were tributes in song by world famous artists and other banalities that Bloom chose to tune out. Four long hours later, the show was over and Bloom was free to return to the Command Deck.

A remote probe was launched, broadcasting back to Earth what would be the last images of the Ship in the solar system. The probe took its position almost a hundred kilometres away from the Ship and focused in on the gargantuan craft. The Ship shimmered in the dark; huge trenches glowing luminous blue across its mountainous black and gold relief. The dome of the Ship, arching gradually up from the disk like outer rim of its hull, was crowned by a ring of pyramids, a lone pyramid at its summit. The underside of the Ship was blistered with overlapping half and quarter spheroids. The lower half of the Ship's hull was almost entirely black, barely visible against the endless sky of deep space.

“All passengers are in their quarters on Habitat, or in emergency standby areas on the surrounding decks,” Captain Alina Tanaka, the Ship's chief engineer announced.

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The domed ceiling of the Command deck was a single, massive display screen. When not in use, the ceiling of the Command Deck was a plain metallic grey. When active, the display could cover the entire dome, or only a portion of the screen. Multiple images could be shown on different points of the display. It reminded Bloom very much of a planetarium theatre, on a much larger scale.

Bloom sat at her command station at the back of the deck, looking down at the crew pit below. Between her and the dozens of officers below was Major Benedict's station. A ramp joined her station to his station and his to the crew pit. Benedict was standing at the railing guarding his station, relaying orders as necessary to make ready for the jump to time warp. The viewer showed the panorama of space all around them, Quaor, the tenth and most recently classified planet in the solar system was a distant mote of grey, larger in appearance than the speck of light that was the remote sun.

The Ship soon made the announcement that everyone had been waiting to hear. Its deep bass, crystalline sing-song voice thundered across the Command Deck:

“PRIMARY STASIS FIELD ENGAGED. ALL INHABITED DECKS OTHER THAN COMMAND DECK NOW IN STASIS. ALL PASSENGERS AND CREW ACCOUNTED FOR. HABITAT IN FULL STASIS. TIME WARP WILL BE ACHIEVED IN FIFTEEN SECONDS.”

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“All stations make ready,” Benedict called, taking his seat, “Captain Tanaka, count down.”

From her engineering command station, Alina Tanaka called out:

“Time warp in seven seconds; six; five; four; three; two; one!”

Bloom reflexively gripped the arms of her chair. She’d been on the Mars run a couple of times. The shuttles to Mars employed a controlled nuclear reaction to accelerate. When the drive kicked in, crew aboard the shuttles would go from zero to six gees in less than two seconds. Bloom didn’t know what to expect from the transition to time warp, but she braced herself in anticipation of the worst.

“Time warp engaged,” Tanaka called.

There had been no discernible event other than the lighting on the Command Deck, which had changed to a pale, cool blue; the colour had previously been selected to signify when the Ship was flying in time warp.

“You mean that’s it?” Bloom asked, “I—somehow I was expecting something...” she trailed off.

“Something a little more eventful?” Benedict suggested.

Bloom smirked.

“Roger that Exo,” She said.

She turned to the crew pit.

“Helm officer, set a course for the last known coordinates of the nearest hyperlink beacon from Earth.”

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“Course is laid in Colonel,” Captain Decker replied from the helm, “The Ship is now preparing to accelerate to twenty-five C.”

Twenty-five times the speed of light, Bloom mused; she knew the numbers; she understood on paper what the velocity represented, but she still could not resolve in her mind an understanding of how travel at that speed was even possible.

“ATTENTION,” The Ship’s crystalline voice rumbled. “ACCELERATION TO CRUISING SPEED HAS BEGUN. COMMAND AND OPERATIONS STASIS FIELDS ENGAGING IN SIXTY SECONDS.”

“All hands to duty stations and stand by,” Bloom called.

This was it. The moment that Bloom had been dreading since she’d first heard the terms “time warp” and “stasis field”. Despite her assurances to the passengers and crew that everything would be fine, Bloom herself was more than a little worried about entrusting her life to the Ship. It went against her nature to give herself over so utterly to a machine, no matter how sophisticated. In all her years as a pilot she’d seen far too often the price people paid when they put more faith in the machine’s skills than their own.

“Ship,” Bloom said, “What is our estimated travelling time to our destination?”

“RELATIVE TO THE SHIP, APPROXIMATELY TWO THOUSAND YEARS. RELATIVE TO POINT OF ORIGIN, DESTINATION AND ALL PASSENGERS AND CREW IN STASIS, NIL.”

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“Just a quick stroll through the park, then?” Bloom muttered.

“THIRTY SECONDS TO STASIS FIELD ACTIVATION,” The Ship said.

Two thousand years in a machine’s safekeeping. Little or no time would have passed on Earth, or for the Human passengers and crew aboard the Ship. Nobody would notice anything at all and they’d only know it was over when the Ship told them. If something went wrong, they’d simply never know. If everything went well, Bloom’s next conscious thought wouldn’t come for two millennia.

“STASIS FIELD ACTIVATION IN FIVE SECONDS. FOUR. THREE. TWO. ONE.”

Bloom held her breath...

The passengers and crew were suspended outside of spacetime. The Ship began its acceleration to hyperlight velocity. Its deflector screens were engaged as it climbed to one quarter of its actual maximum cruising speed of one hundred times the speed of light. At such speeds a single stray atom colliding with the Ship would be catastrophic. The deflector screens would keep the Ship and its precious cargo safe from harm. The alloys of the Ship’s hull were designed likewise to absorb and redistribute energy throughout its form, to further reduce the risks of collision. The Ship travelled onward, through the silence of space.

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Twice on its twenty century journey, the Ship had to slow and halt in order to allow for routine maintenance and course correction. It hung alone in space, singing its Shipsong to itself, the inhabited decks frozen in time. In those sections where the Ship needed to be maintained, drones were deployed to tend to the necessary repairs. The small, grey humanoid creatures were extensions of the Ship and had no consciousness of their own. The Ship had never made known the presence of these drones, for it knew the alarm their existence would cause: Their small, grey bodies and opaque black eyes were the very likeness of every so-called alien to grace the collective soul of Human memory. It was the face remembered by every long-thought mad alien abductee in Human history and for good reason: Although it had been buried beneath the desert for millions of years, not all of the Ship's support vehicles were. And the Ship had been carefully studying the Human Race for a very long time.

TWO

EXPLORATIONS, DISCOVERIES

“STASIS FIELD ACTIVATION IN FIVE SECONDS. FOUR. THREE. TWO. ONE.”

Bloom held her breath...And nothing happened.

Well, almost nothing, she reflected: The pale blue lighting was gone, returned to normal and the image on the viewer showed a massive panorama of hazy, brilliant orbs scattered in strands across space.

“STASIS FIELD DEACTIVATED. DESTINATION ACHIEVED.”

“Okay,” Bloom said, “Let’s get a status check please, Captain Tanaka. Lieutenant Kalenga: locate Earth on the hyperlink network, advise them of our arrival and verify time offset, if any.”

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“Sensor; Con,” Benedict said, “Begin sweeps for the hyperlink beacon.”

“SENSOR SWEEPS WERE COMPLETED BEFORE SYSTEMS AND OPERATIONS STASIS FIELDS WERE DEACTIVATED,” The Ship interjected. “THE HYPERLINK BEACON WAS NOT LOCATED.”

“Colonel, status report,” Tanaka said, “All systems are optimal and all passengers, cargo and livestock accounted for and in stasis.”

“Deactivate stasis fields,” Bloom said, “Broadcast an update of our location and that we are now seeking out the hyperlink beacon.”

“Earth contacted,” Lieutenant Kalenga said, “Time offset minus six minutes. Relative to Earth, we got here before we left.”

“Ship,” Benedict called, staring up at the ceiling, “Where is the nearest working hyperlink beacon?”

“SOL SYSTEM,” the Ship replied, “THE HYPERLINK BEACON INSTALLED IN GENEVA, SWITZERLAND.”

“Are there any other hyperlink beacon signals detectible to you from this location?” Bloom asked.

“NO,”

“From this location, how many beacons should normally be detectible?” Bloom asked.

She stood and stepped to the railing that contoured her command station. Below her in the crew pit many eyes gazed

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back expectantly. Major Benedict stood, also facing the Colonel.

“STIPULATION ACCORDING TO PREVIOUS DATA,” The Ship Control Entity replied, “FROM THIS LOCATION FORTY-TWO BEACONS SHOULD BE BROADCASTING DETECTIBLE SIGNALS.”

“And why wouldn’t you be able to detect those signals now?” Benedict asked.

“THERE ARE ONLY FOUR LIKELY POSSIBILITIES AT THIS TIME: ONE, THE LOCAL NETWORK IS OFF-LINE. TWO, A NEW TECHNOLOGY HAS REPLACED THE HYPERLINK NETWORK. THREE, THE NETWORK WAS ABANDONED. FOUR, THE NETWORK WAS DESTROYED.”

Bloom was silent, digesting this.

“Lieutenant Kalenga,” Bloom said, “Inform Earth of the situation. Exo, gather all senior staff, including Alien Studies in the briefing room in ten minutes.”



Allison stepped out onto the small balcony of her residence. The day was warm with a cool breeze that smelled of water coming off Lake Echohawk at the South Pole of Habitat. It was a perfect day, like any countless days she’d ever spent on Earth. But looking up at the sky Allison needed no other reminder that this wasn’t Earth: behind the blue veil of artificial daytime created by the imaging orb that surrounded Habitat were the eerie, nebulous formations of the M2 Globular Cluster.

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Habitat was a five kilometre wide sphere suspended in the heart of the Ship, home to the two hundred thousand passengers and crew. They lived in a wide band of buildings that ringed the Habitat's equator. Its northern and southern hemispheres were predominantly parkland, transplanted from Earth prior to Shiprise. Trees, plants, animals, birds and insects were all used to make this environment as Earth-like as possible. But the illusion was shattered by looking up into the strange and alien colours glowing in overhead.

It was beautiful and unsettling all at once. Allison looked across the building complex visible to her from her balcony. So many other people were doing as she was: standing out on their terraces, looking up at the projected sky over Habitat. So were many people in the parks and on the walkways below. They were now on the other side of the galaxy, inside a dense cluster of ancient stars and gasses; Allison felt isolated from her homeworld, staring up at the strange sky. This expanse of space had never been seen from so close by anyone in Human history. It had been strange as they toured the solar system prior to going into time warp. But images of Mars, Jupiter, Saturn and the other planets were familiar, at least; the particulate fog and thousands of bright, nearby stars in the sky was the very definition of alien.

Allison had always found it curious that in stories and movies about space travel, people in those tales, even those

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travelling for the first time into deep space, always seemed so casual, so blasé about the unbelievable wonders around them. They could encounter new alien life, discover never before seen wonders and do so with a glib remark and cool detachment. Allison had always wondered how it would be possible for anyone to behave that way. She remembered when the Ship was in orbit around Jupiter: she had spent hours just staring at Jupiter's Great Red spot; a storm more than three times the size of Earth that had been raging for hundreds upon hundreds of years. This nebula was exponentially larger. According to the stats sent out across the Shipwide Grid, the M2 Globular Cluster was over one hundred and twenty five light years wide. Earth's entire solar system would be lost here as surely and easily as a speck of dust would be lost in a desert. The turbulent undulations of the nebula were hypnotic. It was hard not to look. Nothing she had ever seen before could possibly compare.

Allison's linx chimed inside her apartment, for now breaking the spell the sight in the sky had cast over her. She went back into the kitchen and moved the console from the wall to the kitchen table.

"*Buenos tardes*, Allison," Juan Carlos said, when his smiling face appeared onscreen. She'd finally worked up the nerve to ask him out while the Ship had waited at Heliopause for the last of the relief ships to return from Earth. They'd gone for supper twice since then, but nothing more serious had happened yet. After her relationship with James she was

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hesitant to get too involved with anyone else. But simply put, she wanted a lover, someone to sleep with; someone to fuck.

“Juan! How are you?”

“I’m fine,” he said, “Have you been outside to see the sky?”

Allison nodded.

“Isn’t it amazing?” she asked, “I can’t find words to describe it.”

Juan Carlos smiled.

“*“The heavens declare the glory of God,”*” Juan Carlos recited, “*“The skies proclaim the work of His hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard.”*”

“Wow,” Allison said, “That wasn’t Shakespeare you were quoting; who said it?”

“King David,” Juan Carlos said, “It’s from *Psalm Nineteen*. Allison, I was actually calling to find out if you had plans tonight.”

“Not really; why? Are you asking me out?” she teased.

“Absolutely; I actually have eight o’clock reservations at the Skyview: a little table for two on the terrace.”

“How’d you manage that?” Allison asked, thrilled, “It’s impossible to book a reservation on the Skyview’s terrace!”

Juan smiled.

“I did a favour for someone,” he said, “And so they got me the reservations in return.”

“So, I guess I’ll see you around seven thirty?”

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“Perfect,”

“Well, I’ll let you go then. I’ve got to get ready.”



Bloom waited in the Command Deck’s briefing room, standing by the main display panel. On it was a readout of the efforts to locate the hyperlink beacon in the Cluster, as well as diagrams representing the signal range of the Ship’s hyperlink beacon, as well as Earth’s. Hyperlink Systems in Geneva was now participating in the attempt to detect other hyperlink signals, somewhere within their combined radius. At the moment, it didn’t look hopeful.

From the moment Bloom had been assigned to lead the Ship Survey Expedition more than two years before, she had coveted the Ship. Command of the Expedition put her in line for command of the Shipflight Project and she’d wanted that, as well. There had never been anything in her long military career that she’d wanted more. But right now she was troubled by the complete silence in space. Had they come all this way for nothing? It was too soon to judge for sure, she knew. But she dreaded the thought that they might be forced to abandon this mission and return to Earth. Then what? Would the World Ship Summit scrap the Shipflight Project altogether, or give the Project a new mission? A new commander?

A rolling thud behind her signalled the door into the briefing room dropping into the floor. Bloom turned to face the senior staff as they filed in.

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“Hello everyone,” Bloom said, sitting down at the head of the conference table, “As you are all no doubt aware, we have arrived in Constellation Aquarius and we’re near the center of the M2 Globular Cluster.”

“Officially,” Benedict continued, “We are here to make contact with a hyperlink beacon from the League of Worlds in order to download the necessary navigational data to proceed to the League Homeworld.”

“In point of fact,” Bloom said, “We should have been able to contact the M2 Cluster beacon while we were still in Sol system. For that matter, the hyperlink beacon back on Earth should have been able to. Mister Kalenga, could you bring us up to speed?”

“Working in conjunction with Earth in order to widen our search area,” Kalenga said, stepping over to the main display, “We have been searching for active hyperlink signals. From our current position we should be receiving from over forty different beacons. Using Earth to further relay signals, the spherical range should allow us to pick up transmissions from almost sixty beacons. We aren’t receiving any hyperlink signals of any kind, other than the chatter between us and Earth.”

Kalenga hit a key next to the display panel and the image changed, showing a computer illustration of the Ship surrounded by ever-widening concentric spheres.

“The Ship’s sweeps and our own cannot locate any trace of the hyperlink relay beacon that’s supposed to be in the

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Cluster,” he continued, “We’re hoping that if we can locate the beacon we’ll be able to determine what happened.”

“Do you have any idea what might have caused the beacons to stop transmitting?” Captain Tanaka asked.

“That’s what we don’t know,” Kalenga said, “There could be any number of reasons that would explain the failure of a single beacon. There aren’t many reasons that would explain almost sixty of them failing simultaneously.”

“But we don’t know if they did fail simultaneously,” Doctor N’banga interjected, “They could have failed one at a time over a course of hundreds, thousands, or even millions of years. And are we even sure that the beacons failed? Perhaps the Ship can’t detect anything because its own hardware has failed or because hyperlink has been outmoded. Hyperlink communication strikes me as revolutionary, but inefficient. How many beacons would the League have needed to ensure full coverage of the League of Worlds? It spanned or still spans more than a dozen galaxies in the Local Galactic Cluster, doesn’t it? They’d need billions of beacons, perhaps even trillions of them, factoring in extragalactic distances.”

“We can rule out hardware failure on our end,” Kalenga said, “We’re communicating successfully with Earth. We can’t rule out obsolescence of hyperlink technology.”

“As things stand now,” Bloom said, “We can’t contact the League. Nor can we locate the hyperlink beacon that’s supposed to be here. We need to determine why that is, before we can decide how best to proceed.”

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“But how do we expect to do that?” Tanaka asked, “We don’t know what happened to the beacon, or for that matter, when or why.”

“There are actually one or two ways that we could do just that,” N’banga said. “The first method involves mapping out the drift patterns and gravitational fields in the Cluster, generating a model to see how they may have changed over time. If we assume the beacon was damaged or destroyed it will have drifted somewhere within the Cluster. We have its last known position and we know, with some accuracy, when the Ship last had contact with it.”

“Yeah,” Tanaka said, “About seventy million years ago.”

N’banga nodded and leaned back in his chair.

“Absolutely,” he said, “This means that when we apply a reasonable upper limit to the object’s velocity based on what the Ship can tell us about its mass and composition and examine the gravitational field of this cluster, we will know with certainty where we should look for the object.”

“That’ll still be a huge search area Doctor,” Tanaka said, “Spread out spherically across billions of kilometres.”

“Using the Ship’s sensors to seek out objects of the same size, mass, composition and relative velocity,” Commander Nadia Castaneda, the Ship’s tactical and security officer said, “We should be able to narrow that search.”

“Captain?” Benedict asked of Tanaka.

The engineer paused, considering.

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“Knowing those variables would certainly make our job easier,” she said, “But then the problem becomes reaching the objects that the Ship identifies.”

“I think I have the solution to that,” Bloom said, “Hornet Squadron has completed flight training on the Bugs. We’re ready for an initial wormhole flight; now’s as good a time as any to shake them down. Doctor N’banga, come up with your specs and get them to Captain Tanaka.”

N’banga nodded.

“Of course,” he said.

“Now it’s very important that we’re all clear,” Bloom said, “Nothing said regarding the beacon is to be repeated outside this room. I’m still trying to figure out the best way to release this information to the passengers and the rest of the crew.”



Allison sipped her wine and looked out over the terrace onto the night time sphere of Habitat. The sky reflected upon them was a dark grey, shot through with bands of luminescence and odd colour created by the thousands of stars packed together in the Cluster’s hundred and seventy-five light-year span. The bands of light meant that Habitat seemed a great, dark shadow against the surrounding night. Specks of light traced pathways and lanes across the upper hemisphere of Habitat, the lights clustering to a wide band at the equator. The forests and parks and buildings under the dusky glow were hypnotic, surreal, especially when balanced against the dusky alien sky of the Cluster.

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The Skyview was one of many restaurants that offered a commanding view of Habitat. It was by far the largest though, spread out on five levels. Without question, it was also the most opulent. Rich, dark wood paneling covered the walls, ornate tiles the floors. The entire place was lit by candles; the split-level floors, wide terraces overlooking Habitat and the simple, unobtrusive décor created an unparalleled and tranquil atmosphere.

Juan Carlos was coming back from the washroom. Allison watched him approach. He looked really good tonight; he'd dressed up a little, he was wearing cologne and he moved with what Allison could only think of as Latin grace. He sat down across the table from her.

"It's incredible, isn't it?" he asked, glancing away from her to look at the scene beyond the terrace.

Their suppers and desserts were finished and cleared. Now, they sat together slowly killing an after-dinner bottle of delicious wine.

"I just can't get used to it," Allison said, "It's so beautiful and scary all at the same time."

"That sounds like the perfect metaphor for life," Juan Carlos said, "Everything is beautiful and scary, no?"

Allison considered his philosophical outburst. It was so typically him; one of the things that had attracted Allison to Juan Carlos Rejas was his deeply spiritual nature. At times he

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seemed naïve; at other moments Allison was struck by his wisdom; wisdom that could only come from experience.

“You know, you’re right,” she said, “In fact, not so long ago I tried to teach someone I loved the same thing.”

Allison went somewhere else for a moment; thinking back...had it really been almost two years since the last time she’d spoken with James? She shook her head, trying to let go of the memories she’d just dredged up. She took a swallow of her wine to help wash unpleasant thoughts about the past away.

“I think we’re on a great adventure,” Allison said, “Do you know what I mean?”

“I do,” Juan Carlos answered, “And I expect we’ll see many more beautiful and frightening things before it’s all over.”

“Are you talking about the Ship or about life?” Allison teased.

Juan pondered this, taking a swallow of his own wine.

“I think that I’m talking about both,” he said.

Allison smiled.

“Juan would you like to come back to my place for some coffee?” she asked.



A new wrinkle had developed in the mystery of the hyperlink network: Ten hours ago, communications with Earth had failed. Up until that point there had been a continuous flow of chatter between Earth and the Ship; status reports, mission briefings, telemetric data, communications streams...then Geneva reported unspecified technical problems

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with one of the modules controlling their beacon array...and then they stopped broadcasting.

Lieutenant Kalenga keyed in the comm sequence to connect him with Major Benedict's office. A second later, Benedict's face appeared on the screen before him.

"Good morning Lieutenant,"

"Good morning sir," Kalenga replied.

In truth however, Kalenga had been through better mornings. The night before he'd left the communications hub well after midnight. It had been a tremendously long shift during which he and his exceptionally dedicated staff tried in vain to locate any kind of signal from Earth, while also still searching the cosmos for signs of the League of Worlds. Kalenga had slept less than three hours when he'd been summoned back to the communications hub to receive the news he was now delivering to his commander.

"Major, we've received a broadcast from Earth,"

"Thank God," Benedict said, "Did they tell you what happened?"

"It isn't a live transmission sir," Kalenga said, "It's a delayed transmission."

On the screen before him, Benedict frowned.

"Delayed?" the Major asked.

"Their message was sent eight hours ago; it's taken the Ship's hyperlink beacon this long to receive it. They haven't been able to determine the source of their problem, but

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apparently they can no longer synchronize their hyperlink beacon to our own.”

“Confirm receipt of the message with Geneva, relay the recording to me and then see what you and your team can do to resynch the beacons and re-establish true-time communications with Earth.”

“Yes sir,”

Benedict terminated the linx and queued up the recording on his console, ready to play. He sighed heavily and rubbed his eyes. What more was going to go wrong? The mission had been going smoothly for over a year now. There had been a few flies in the ointment; occasional situations, but nothing like the problems they’d been experiencing with the hyperlink. Benedict switched on the recording. Helmut Konrad, the liaison between the World Ship Summit and Shipflight Command appeared on Benedict’s screen:

Helmut Konrad

Shore to Ship, Shore to Ship: we are unsure if you will receive this message or not; our best guess, based on current understanding of how the hyperlink communications system works, is that if you receive this message, it will be between ten to twelve hours after we have sent it. According to David Van Der Draas, head of Geneva Hyperlink Beacon Operations, there is a synchronization problem; we can no longer get our hyperlink transmissions to align to the correct phase shift.

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Onscreen Konrad gave a dismissive waive of his hand and shook his head.

Helmut Konrad

I don't know what any of this means. Other than to say we cannot talk in true-time. Because of the extreme lag, we have compressed several different files into this broadcast. Among them are specific orders for the search and recovery mission you are about to undertake, orders and authorizations for the command staff and the technical readouts from our hyperlink beacon. Hopefully you will be able to come up with some sort of fix that we can use to re-establish true-time broadcasts. We are standing by for your return broadcast, which will hopefully come through within twenty-four hours of sending this message to you.

Benedict sighed and took a cursory look at the long file list that accompanied the broadcast. The situation required him to notify the Colonel. But Benedict was mulling whether or not to contact her now, or after she returned from her upcoming sortie. This was one of those times that Benedict thought more of Margaret Bloom, his friend than he did Colonel Bloom, his commanding officer. He knew that Bloom was still a fighter jock at heart and that she'd had too few opportunities to get behind the stick since Shiprise. The problem with the hyperlink transmissions between Earth and the Ship wouldn't change in the time it would take Bloom to complete her mission. However, procedure was clear: she should be notified immediately. It was his duty to keep the Colonel abreast of

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any situation that could pose a possible risk to the mission. Benedict mulled the dilemma over for a moment longer, and then decided that Bloom could wait to hear this news; in all the years he'd known and served under Colonel Margaret Bloom, he'd never known her to care much for procedure.



“Good morning Colonel,”

Bloom returned the deck officer's salute and stepped into the launch bay. Six Hornet-class Bugs were being prepped for launch; flight operations personnel going through pre-launch checks before lowering the Hornets into the launch rail beds from which they would be deployed. There were dozens of similar launch bays spaced evenly along the outer hull of the Ship. Each bay was only part of a larger network of launch and landing systems that could potentially deploy thousands of ships, support vehicles, probes and drones at any given time. Each hangar complex alone was larger than the CVN-300 *Croft*-class aircraft carriers that had been the backbone of the US Navy's air support units since the close of War Three.

The rail beds could accelerate the Bugs to close to the speed of light as they deployed them from the Ship. A full deployment would be an impressive sight to behold. It wasn't something Bloom expected she'd ever get to see, though; there were less than two hundred pilots in the Ship's current crew and only Hornet Squadron was fully trained and flight-ready on the Bugs.

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Bloom had changed into the one-piece black and dark yellow flight suit that had become the uniform for all the Ship's pilots. The flight suit was military-cut, with zippered legs and sleeves that tapered tightly to fit into boots and gloves. The regular Ship's uniform consisted of a black tunic worn under a dark yellow jacket and cargo pants. Uniforms' insignia, piping and stitching were done in royal blue. The colours mirrored the Ship's own colour scheme of black and gold and blue-glowing trenches of energy.

Already, a sort of inter-forces rivalry had developed between the pilots and the regular service. Bloom had seen this sort of thing play out before between the Army and the Navy; between the Navy and the Air Force, between the Marines and everyone else. Terms like Bug-humpers, Bee-Keepers and Black-Flies were being used to describe the pilots. Likewise, the fliers had their own terms for the rest of the crew: Stewardesses, Gold-backs and Yellow-Bellies. It was the type of inter-forces' rivalry bullshit known and accepted throughout military history; Bloom therefore likewise accepted it, as she did many of the stupid traditions she disapproved of as part of military life.

Bloom crossed the flight deck into a small office suite overlooking the hangar bay. As she entered, the five other pilots of her flight group stood at attention.

"At ease," Bloom said, "Take your seats."

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A desk was set up at the front of the room, facing several chairs. A large display screen was set into the wall behind the desk.

“Okay,” Bloom said, looking at the four men and one woman seated before her, “As you know, this mission is rated ‘secret’ with all information restricted to need-to-know, only. Those orders stand, because it’s in the best interest of crew and passenger morale and safety. But I’m not just your Commanding Officer; I’m also squad leader. And I know goddamn well that if you can’t trust the people flying formation with you, you have no fucking place behind the stick.”

Bloom took a small handheld off the desk and keyed in a sequence of commands. The display lit up behind her, showing a tactical overlay map of different points within the M2 Globular Cluster.

“The Need to know is that this is a search-and-recovery mission with a secondary objective of executing wormhole flight,” she said, “The specifics are that we have to travel to the far side of this section of the Cluster to retrieve a benign alien object and return with it to the Ship.”

She shut off the display and parked herself on the edge of the desk.

“Straight up no bullshit, here’s what’s going on: The object we are looking for is the M2 Globular Cluster hyperlink relay. We should have been able to contact it before we left home. We can’t raise any hyperlink traffic other than from Earth and we need to recover the Cluster’s relay to see if we

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can figure out why. I trust you guys to keep this info to yourselves. I don't have to tell you that I will personally flay the skin off your fucking backs if this gets out.”

Bloom keyed another sequence on the handheld and new images appeared on the screen: they showed a dark, blurry object against a brighter red background. Another image appeared. The red object was now obviously a star.

“The search portion of the mission is already done,” Bloom said, “We’ve scanned the Cluster and we believe that we have located the relay. It appears to have drifted through the cluster until it became caught in the gravity well of this star, a red giant. Given the target’s current velocity, been slowly falling towards the star for the better part of twenty thousand years. These pictures make it appear closer than it is; forced perspective because of the size of the star relative to the size of the relay. It’s actually farther from the star than Earth’s orbit is from the sun. The relay isn’t in one piece, but we already know that the Bugs are outfitted with a grappling field device that will allow us to tow it back, so not only will this be our first wormhole flight, it’ll also be the first time we get to use the grapplers in an actual mission setting. Does anybody have any questions? Now is the time if you do.”



Just below the ring of golden pyramids that crowned the summit of the Ship’s golden dome, six ports irised open. Against the relief of the gargantuan whole of the Ship, these launch ports were hardly visible. But from these ports shot away the six bugs of Hornet Squadron. They accelerated away

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from the Ship, the vessel quickly vanishing behind them until it was just one more bright point of light in the Cluster.

The cockpit of a Hornet-class Bug was a large sphere nestled amidships. The cockpit filled with a transparent gel that encased and supported the pilot. Atmosphere was channeled through the medium directly to the pilot, as it formed a bubble around their heads. The gelatinous support fluid also supplied them with nanomachine-constructed controls and operations systems, and the walls of the sphere were a continuous image generator, creating a perfect reflection of everything outside and around the Bug. Bloom studied the haze of the Cluster around her flight group. It was brilliantly lit, the different particles of the nebula adrift in tides and currents formed by the overlapping gravity fields of the hundreds of thousands of stars. The nebula was just less than two hundred light years wide; small for a stellar nursery, eerily luminous and beautiful, like staring at a forest of candlelight through a thick fog.

“Stand by for wormhole breach,” Bloom said over the comm, forcing herself to focus on the task at hand. She set the jump computer, feeling grave. She was in on one secret no one else in her flight group knew: back before Shiprise, wormhole flight using a Hornet-class bug had already been attempted; the experiment failed catastrophically, costing a good pilot his life.



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Following War Two, two crashed Bugs, both eventually designated Hornet class, were discovered buried in the Alberta Badlands. Those Bugs were taken to the Groom Lake Special Research Facility in Nevada; a top secret avionics and experimental physics research complex, more commonly known as Area 51. There, the two Bugs were studied for decades. After the Unearthing, one of the two Bugs underwent some sort of self-repair protocol, returning—so it was believed—to fully operational status.

Bloom had been assigned to Groom Lake, and at the time she worked with the team of engineers examining the repaired Bug. Eventually enough was learned to brave a test flight. Bloom was supposed to have been the test pilot assigned to fly the Bug. Fate intervened when Francis George Franck murdered her ex-husband in the name of the United Trinity Observants. Bloom was scratched. Captain John Harriman took the flight in her stead. Over the years that Groom Lake had been studying the Bug, they'd only been able to decipher a few of the Shiplanguage runes that made up the commands on the control panel. The only reason Ship Survey Expedition linguist Sonia Aiziz had gotten as far with Shiplanguage as she had was because the Ship itself intervened to help. But Groom Lake had had no such assistance.

With the controls for the Bug only partially translated, the proposition of a test flight was already riskier than usual. During the test-flight, Captain Harriman took the Bug up into

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orbit and then hit the wrong switch on the keypad, triggering the wormhole breaching sequence. From Groom Lake, they'd been able to track the Bug to Uranus. A year and a half later the Ship swept by the distant planet on its way from the solar system. Bloom went out then, on a secret flight to see if she could find sign of Harriman or the Bug. There had been nothing to find.

Now the six Bugs raced through the clouded vacuum of the M2 Globular Cluster, ready to attempt wormhole travel.

"All ships, slave your primary navigation systems into mine," Bloom said, "We'll be making a single wormhole jump. As soon as we reach the other side, master navigation will unlock. Once control of your ship has been returned to you, come to a full stop and stand by for my orders."

The reports came back quickly: the other five ships slaved in. Bloom checked her readouts; the wormhole initiator was fully charged. She'd reached that stomach-fluttering, adrenaline-pumping now-or-never moment.

"Initiating wormhole breach," Bloom said, "Here goes nothing."

The Bugs slowed rapidly, coming under autopilot into tight formation with Bloom's ship. Space ahead of the six Hornet-class ships seemed to be rippling, twisting in upon itself. And then there was a black, shimmering void ahead of the Bugs, as though a swatch had been cut from the whole of the Cluster. It seemed a large, black sphere, imperceptibly

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adrift and undulating as the six vessels were drawn towards it. One by one they reached the black mouth of the wormhole and vanished.



Quantum theorists had long tried to prove the existence of wormholes. It was during tests at the CERN Large Hadron Collider involving the collision of graviton particles and dense photons that researchers discovered the accuracy of the mathematical model that predicted wormholes existed at sizes between 10^{-30} and 10^{-38} centimetres. They were, as predicted, a type of quantum superstring: one in which the membrane of the string curved into a ring and extended between any two points in space and time. However, being infinitesimally small, wormhole travel was dismissed as virtually impossible: the sheer number of quantum strings in a given volume of space was for all intents and purposes nearly infinite. With an incalculable number of potential wormholes and no way to predict where the wormholes extended to, it was virtually impossible to plot a specific wormhole that would lead to a specific destination. And because wormholes travelled not only through space but through time as well, it was just as impossible to predict *when* you would arrive as it was to predict where you would arrive, if you travelled through one.

Mankind may not have had the capacity to resolve the issues related to wormhole travel, but others did. In fact, it had proven easier to breach a wormhole than to plot its trajectory: trapping the near end of a plotted wormhole and then forcing it

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to expand large enough to allow an object to pass through required a great deal of manipulation of quantum-level space; metered levels of negative energy, gravitons and the manipulation of neighbouring quantum strings were required. Plotting destinations along wormholes was a matter of advanced probability calculations based on the number of predicted wormholes available in a certain volume of space and their relation to one another, the distance to the destination and predictable spacetime events between. Although massive computing power and incredible amounts of energy were required to get the job done, eventually wormhole travel became possible.

However, because wormhole travel was a function of probability and not precision, after entering a wormhole and being expelled at the other end a traveller would be only very close to where they expected to be, but not necessarily *exactly* where they expected to be: they might have moved forwards or backwards through time, they might be tens of millions of kilometres from where they intended, or right on top of it. There was also the possibility that they would travel through the wormhole and into a neighbouring quantum reality very similar to their own. Though such an outcome of wormhole travel was improbable, it was possible and even mathematically inevitable.

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Another problem with wormhole travel was that the further one was attempting to go through space and time, the more probability broke down. In other words, the further one needed to go, the less likely they were to get exactly where—and when—they intended to be.

And wormhole travel was violent. The inside of a wormhole was essentially a pocket universe, set upon by the presence and forces of the universe surrounding it. It was also unnatural for the opening of a wormhole to be forcibly stretched super-exponentially larger than its normal size. This created powerful turbulence. Opened wormholes likewise produced massive amounts of X-rays and Gamma rays and the wormhole “tunnel” itself was always trying to collapse back to its natural size. This meant that a ship travelling through a wormhole had to be able to protect its passengers from intense radiation, while surviving incredible levels of pressure attempting to either expel or destroy the intrusion. But the constant desire of the wormhole to collapse back to its original size is also what propelled objects within so quickly across quantum spacetime.

If one could successfully predict a wormhole’s probable trajectory, if one could apply enough energy to capture and open the near end of the wormhole and survive the massive burst of radiation that would be expelled from its opening, and if one could survive the deadly elemental forces inside a

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wormhole environment itself, then wormhole travel was an effective means of travelling through space.

It was all too many ifs for Bloom's comfort, and far too much reliance on far too many unknowable variables. It was all she could do not to scrub the mission, right there. But once the wormhole's near end was breached, it was already too late to turn back.



Once seized by the wormhole, Bloom felt a sudden acceleration and then incredible pressure. The six Bugs of her flight group were being compressed into the dimensions of the wormhole's space and she felt as though she were falling and being crushed and stretched and torn apart all at once. Bloom was being shaken violently and it was no longer possible to breathe. It was as though she were drowning, burning, being electrocuted and crushed all at once. The sensation was unbearable, but Bloom couldn't even scream. She couldn't see, she couldn't hear and she knew that if she stopped feeling the agony, she would also stop Being.

And the Bugs were there, drifting around her in total blackness. They were visible only because her own Bug's imaging system was simulating their detected presence for her to reference. Far ahead was a glowing orb, pulsing so rapidly between colours that it seemed to be liquid silver surrounded by an ever-shifting rainbow corona. Bloom couldn't identify it, and the Bug's computers weren't offering any answers.

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“All wings report,” Bloom called.

No one answered. According to her display, communications were out. Bloom and her flight group continued to move inexorably closer to the strange orb, accelerating faster and faster the closer they got. Bloom tried to manually override the controls, to fire her thrusters or her main drive, but couldn't. Looking at the other five Hornet-class Bugs around her, Bloom realized there was a light source behind them. She pivoted the cockpit so she was facing backwards. Behind the squad was a white-hot orb of light, narrowing and narrowing, collapsing like a deflating balloon: this was the aperture of the wormhole; the event horizon they'd crossed. It wasn't just collapsing; it was also getting further and further away. Bloom pivoted back to face ahead. The silver orb was so much closer now that it had almost filled her entire field of vision and still they surged toward it. They were going to fall into this star and there was nothing she could do to stop it. The Bugs were suddenly through it, accelerating away now into a deeper darkness. And then the turbulence, the violent crashing, the painful agony returned.

A flash of white light exploded like a birthing star, expanding from a negligible point to a large, luminous sphere, whiter than white. Six wasp-like ships emerged from the orb of light. When the last Bug crossed through, the light collapsed back upon itself and the diffuse glow of the M2 Globular Cluster held sway once more.

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“All wings report in,” Bloom rasped, “Hornet squadron, call in.”

“Thank God we got radio back,” came a crackling reply, “Hornet Two here.”

“Hornet Three standing by,”

“Hornet Four; all boards are green.”

“Hornet Five standing by,”

“Hornet Six; what the fuck was that?”

“I guess that was the inside of a wormhole,” Bloom said, dryly. “The good news is that we survived. The bad news is we get to do it again on the way back. Slave system released. Break formation and run the search pattern.”

The six Bugs powered up and sped away in opposite directions. The search for the hyperlink beacon had begun.



Lieutenant Kalenga turned back to the console before him. In the last twenty-four hours, he'd run the simulation again and again. He'd compared the schematics with the Ship's own and he could not understand why the Earth-based hyperlink beacon wasn't working properly. Kalenga switched on the console and began his broadcast back to Earth:

“Ship to shore, Ship to shore,” he said, “This is Lieutenant Mulumba Kalenga, transmitting to recipient David Van Der Draas, Shipflight Mission Centre. David; we are expecting your return message from our previous transmission in another four hours. I am sending this message in advance of it, to update you on our progress or lack thereof, to date.

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“David, we have checked our frequency and wavelength output versus your own; we’ve checked your diagnostics and schematics against our own; checked all the hyperlink emitters and subsystems. We can’t find any incongruities. Your beacon should be working as well as ours. There is no reason for there to be any synchronization issues whatsoever. The mechanics seem to be sound. I’ve decided to request a series of deep space scans, working on the assumption that there may be some kind of stellar event, possibly a local phenomenon that is causing the asynchronous hyperlink transmissions. Whether the problem is a result of mechanical or environmental issues, we’ll get to the bottom of it before much longer.”



Major Jack Benedict sat at his station on the Command Deck, facing his console bank. His headset was tuned to the Flight Traffic Control channel and his three console screens were tied into the same. The left screen showed the sensor approach map; the right screen the docking port, as seen from monitoring systems along the hull. The third was a live feed from the Ship’s master viewing and sensor systems of the six approaching Bugs and their cargo: the broken remains of the M2 Globular Cluster’s hyperlink beacon.

“Harpy to flight traffic control,” Colonel Bloom’s voice sounded in Benedict’s earpiece, “Requesting final approach clearance for docking manoeuvres.”

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“Acknowledged Hornet Squadron,” replied the flight traffic control officer, “Docking approach coordinates as follows:”

Benedict listened as the X, Y and Z-axis coordinates were read off and Bloom’s flight group were given their approach path and speed.

“The bee hive is open and waiting. Welcome back, Hornet Squadron.”

“Good to be back,” Bloom acknowledged.

Though a little more than twenty-four hours had passed relative to the Ship, the chronometers aboard the Bugs showed that they had been in flight for about nine. From the reports transmitted back from the search grid, the wormhole jump had been nightmarish.

Benedict watched as the Bugs slowed, coming in over the horizon of the Ship’s disk, climbing in altitude as they followed the curvature of the Ship’s dome before reaching the docking bay. They slowed again as internal tractors seized the Bugs, guiding them into their hangar. As for the debris from the hyperlink beacon, it was put to rest on the deck and the landing bay doors sealed.

“Captain Tanaka,” Benedict called, rising from his station, “Would you join me in the landing bay?”

Tanaka rose from her post at the engineering station in the work pit and ascended to the main gantry where Benedict waited by the lift.



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Bloom was not only still in her flight suit, but still in the bulky, bright orange atmosphere pressure suit when Benedict and Tanaka joined her in the hangar. Bloom's air reserve tank, helmet and gloves were discarded against the wall of the hangar bay. She distractedly returned the salutes delivered by Benedict and Tanaka while focusing her attention on the hazmat team going over the beacon debris.

"How much of the object was your flight group able to recover?" Tanaka asked.

"According to the sensors," Bloom replied, "We secured about eighty-eight per cent of the hyperlink beacon's mass."

"What happened to the rest?" Benedict mused.

"Your guess is as good as mine, Exo."

"I've been speaking with Doctor N'bunga," Tanaka said, "Based on where the object was found and what the telemetry indicated its velocity was when you found it he believes the beacon was destroyed around sixty million years ago."

"That means it was destroyed around the same time the death star asteroid struck the Earth," Benedict said.

"I doubt there's a connection Exo," Bloom said, "We're talking about two separate events that were still likely separated by hundreds of thousands—if not millions—of years, and what, fifty thousand light years?"

Benedict shook his head.

"Begging the Colonel's pardon, but I've never believed much in coincidence," He said.

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Just then the headset in Benedict's ear chimed.

"Benedict here; go ahead," He said.

"Lieutenant Kalenga here Major," the Comm Chief replied. "Sir, we've just gotten another broadcast from Earth."

"And?"

"Geneva reports that the problems with the hyperlink beacon are now system-wide. Their beacon is undergoing a cascading failure. Within forty-eight hours, we'll have lost all contact with Earth."

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In one form or her, directly or indirectly, all of the Universe's creations exist interdependent of and interrelated to one another. Across its vast, elaborate expanse, everything contained in the universe affects and is affected by everything else. Though the product of such interconnection may not be noticed on a local level they are undeniable when observed at cosmic scale.

THREE
MEANWHILE, BACK ON EARTH

The Alberta Badlands, Alberta, Canada, 1946.

The small convoy consisted of two Jeeps, followed by a military car, a troop transport and at the tail of the procession, another two jeeps. They parked haphazardly at the top of a small ridge. The land around was rocky, barren, only the most scraggly and determined scrub growing here. The ridge was composed of flat grooved stone sloping down into an irregular valley. The convoy pulled up to the ridge and Canadian Forces soldiers left the Jeeps to take up perimeter guard, before the passengers in the armoured military car were allowed out: A man in his middle years, dressed in a sharply tailored brown suit squinted in the clear sunshine and begun walking towards the ridge. He was accompanied by an older man in an

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American Naval officers' dress uniform, and a younger, bespectacled man.

"If this is some Kraut technology left over from the war," the American officer said, "You people owe us first crack at it."

The first man chuckled.

"Mister Chairman," he said, "I assure you this isn't German."

The day was chilly enough for them to be able to see their breath in the air as they started to make their careful way down a path to the valley below.

"Then what the hell is it? Soviet?" Admiral Leahy, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff demanded.

"Would that it were," the youngest of the three said in a cultured Scottish accent, "The situation would be much simpler."

Leahy made a disgruntled sound.

"Why the hell can't you goddamn Brits just say what you mean?"

"See for yourself, mister Chairman," Malcolm John MacDonald, British High Commissioner to Canada said, pointing to the archaeological dig site ahead.

Admiral Leahy staggered to a halt.

"Dear God in Heaven," he gasped.

"You understand now," Douglas Abbott, the Canadian Minister of National Defence said, "Why we asked you to come here in secret."

"What are they?"

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“We don’t know,” the Minister said, “We just don’t know.”

In the valley below, workers were excavating what appeared to be two large, metallic insects.

“Our best guess is that they’ve been buried since the end of the Cretaceous,” the Ambassador said, “The nearer one was damaged; our people managed to get a look inside. We’re not sure what they were, but they were mechanical.”

“Mechanical?” the Chairman repeated.

“We think they might have been some sort of aircraft,” the Minister said, “And...well, Admiral, there’s no other way to put it: We don’t believe they are from this world.”

Leahy turned his gaze away from the wrecked Bugs to the Canadian Defence Minister.

“If I weren’t seeing it with my own eyes, I wouldn’t believe a goddamn word of it.”

“We’re forming a Committee,” the Ambassador said, “To deal with the consequences of this...discovery. Both the Minister and I are in agreement that the United States must be represented on the Committee.”

“The Committee will operate independently of our respective governments,” Minister Abbott said, “In absolute secrecy.”

“Of course,” Leahy rasped absently, “Of course,” he stared back out at the dig site.



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Geneva, Switzerland, the current era.

In the fifty-odd years since War Three, a tenuous peace had held. The World Council had successfully managed international affairs since its inception. There had been tests of its authority, its resolve: The Australian Conflict, during which the Allied World Army was deployed for the first time, against a rogue nation; then came the South American Embargo, enacted when continent-wide civil war broke out.

The world had remained united under the banner of the Council throughout these tumultuous times. The world had remained united, it seemed, until the Ship was discovered. The conflicts began shortly thereafter: first with The Night of Blood, when the United Trinity Observants' and their synchronized worldwide attacks. Then, after the conclusion of the Fourth Vatican Council with Pope Simon Peter's Papal Edict, which declared all religions to be true and valid and that all were paths to God. The Decree was meant to unite the world's faithful. Instead, lines were drawn and religious divisions shattered the world's faiths and faithful. Hard-line Roman Catholics broke away from the Roman Church; violence soon followed. The Vatican was struck by a mass car-bombing; Christian attacked Christian, and from there it spread. War broke out between India and Pakistan when fundamentalist Hindus attacked the Mosque of Data Durbar in Lahore. A nuclear device was detonated in Jerusalem, and a weaponized strain of the Krezent Virus had been released in

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Uganda, forcing a mass quarantine of Eastern and Central Africa. Ireland erupted in sectarian warfare, as did France, Spain and Portugal.

The violence wasn't merely confined to the Middle East, Europe and Africa. In the United States churches, mosques and synagogues were fire-bombed, and the ultra-right wing government of the State of Utah issued a unilateral declaration of separation from the rest of the country. South America was still in chaos, more than two years after the assassination of warlord General Diaz.

The current hostilities were like nothing the world had ever faced before. Though the World Council had an organized standing army, their enemies were neither organized nor united, though they were legion. Terrorist attacks, guerrilla campaigns, invasions, insurgencies and infighting were the tactics, with no definable front lines or easily recognizable villains. Masked leaders using ever-changing aliases were as commonplace in the crisis as despots and dictators. The situation was out of control.

And so it was that the World Council had convened an emergency session in Geneva. It was a desperate attempt to find some means of stopping the tide of madness, or at least stemming the flow. World leaders and the chiefs of defence and intelligence from the member nations gathered in the World Capitol.

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The World Capitol Compound was the city-within-the-city that housed the World Council: dozens of buildings, spread out over ten square kilometres: Administration Buildings, the Council Embassies, plazas and parks. The World Capitol Compound even had its own airport. It was a sad statement of the times that the Compound was no longer open to the public. Until it was sealed, the World Capitol had been one of the most important attractions in Europe. Now, it was a citadel, a closed fortress accessible only to members of the World Council or its support services.

The Committee almost never all met together, in person. It had long ago been decided that it was too dangerous for all sitting members of the organization to gather together at any given time. But times had changed. Because of the World Council emergency session, most of the Committee's members were already in Geneva to begin with: The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the United States, the Canadian Solicitor General and Defence Minister, the Minister's British counterpart, the head of MI-6 and the White House Chief of Staff. The British Ambassador to Canada, the Curator of the Smithsonian and the Canadian Minister of Natural Resources made their separate ways to Geneva in secret. Within the walls of the World Capitol Compound, they were likely more safe than they would be separately, in their own countries.

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And so they were gathered together now, in a private conference room deep underground, in part of a bunker complex designed to protect anyone within from even direct nuclear bombardment. There were windows in the room, though they looked out onto nothing more than pale-blue painted walls; they were designed to create a more natural, aboveground feel to the room, with coloured, ambient lighting behind their curtains. Likewise, despite being made of reinforced concrete, the walls were paneled in woods and plasters, with flooring, paint and decor designed to make it seem as normal a conference room as possible. The illusion was almost perfect, but something about the bunker complex just seemed too oppressive, too claustrophobic. The Minister could feel the weight of the tonnes and tonnes of earth and stone and steel above his head, could sense the vague change of atmosphere that meant he was more than half a kilometre below the surface.

The world continued waging war against itself. The Committee had other concerns. It had been eighteen months since the Ship had left earth. Several months earlier, the Night of Blood attacks had shocked the world. The purpose of these orchestrated acts of terror had been to disrupt everything everywhere; the cult leader Gabriel Ashe wanted to make a sacrifice of his followers as they slaughtered the faithless, or so the world had been led to believe. Ashe had used the entire thing as a diversion, so he could get to the Ship. Somehow he gained access to its inner levels, long before the Ship Survey

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Expedition had ever been granted access. Colonel Isaac Jude, leader of an elite, secret military force was sent in after him, to find and kill Gabriel Ashe.

Until the Ship left, it had been believed that Ashe and Jude had been killed aboard. After Shiprise, tentative exploration of the massive crater left behind by the Ship began. Hundreds of underground streams no longer impeded by the Ship's presence were slowly flooding the thirty-two kilometre wide canyon. During the hasty exploration, the wreckage of a small craft was found in one of the deepest sections of Ship's Canyon. Two unconscious men were aboard. The area was cordoned off, and the Committee's people moved in.

The only reason the two men weren't killed when the Committee moved in was because they were both immediately identified. Gabriel Ashe and Isaac Jude were put into isolation and then taken to a secure facility for further study. While Isaac Jude soon regained consciousness, Ashe remained in a coma, unconscious, as an alien virus spread through his body. It was a virus that the Committee had encountered only twice before, in its long history: It was known as the Nimbus, and it was a thing to be feared.

"Before we begin," The Chairman said, "I have invited our counterparts from China and Russia to join us. As the threat we are currently facing from Patient Zero is global, I feel their input and assistance can only be beneficial."

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Four more faces appeared on their console screens; three men, one woman. From the Russian Federation, the Commander of the Army Nicholas Roerich, and the head of the Secret Police Valery Dvuzhilny. From the People's Republic of China, Masujro Kiru, the Chairman of the Central Military Commission and the Minister for Science and Technology, Peng Hui Rui. Their offices made up the Bureau of Extraterrestrial Investigation; an organization similar to the Committee, established at the time of the signing of the Warsaw Pact.

“Our colleagues from the Bureau have been briefed on the Patient Zero situation and I'll now be bringing everyone up to speed on the latest developments,” The Chairman said, “When the Ship passed beyond Heliopause and into time warp, the patient woke from...its coma. Our labs in have completed a new set of tests on Patient Zero. The alien retrovirus infecting his system has completely overtaken his body. The chromosomes of every cell in his body are now composed entirely of Alien DNA.”

“So he is no longer Human,” The British Defence Minister said.

“In effect no,” the Chairman answered, “Although his appearance and physiology are identical to any other Human, Patient Zero's body is completely devoid of the Human Genome. He has nothing but Alien DNA present in his body and his bloodstream is rife with the Nimbus virus.”

“Essentially then this man is ready to infect others with this virus,” Masujro Kiru said.

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“What progress has been made in determining how he was infected?” The Curator asked.

“None,” The Chairman said, “However, I’m confident that the source of the infection was indeed the Ship.”

“But all the people who have returned from the Ship,” Nicholas Roerich said, “They are, none of them, infected with the Nimbus virus. None of the returnees *we* have examined have this virus, at any rate.”

“We’re keeping close watch on all of them,” the Chairman said, “But so far only Patient Zero has been infected.”

“Dangerous words, Mister Chairman,” British Defence said, “‘So far’; very dangerous words, indeed.”

“I don’t understand why we don’t just kill him and be done with it,” MI-6 said.

He was the newest member of the Committee, appointed just prior to Shiprise, when the former head of the British Intelligence Agency died from a cancer no one knew he’d had. The Prime Minister who’d appointed him was one increasingly concerned with the bottom line. Where MI-6’s predecessor had been a veteran of the Intelligence business, the new MI-6 was a bureaucrat and bean-counter; an administrator. He had little understanding of strategy and left as much of that as he could up to his subordinates while he searched for ways to cut costs of the spy agency.

“Unfortunately we can’t afford to,” The White House Chief of Staff answered, “Patient Zero might not be the only person infected and we need access to the active virus if we are

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to have any hope of combating it, should it spread or should it be discovered in other people.”

“This might be an isolated infection,” Peng Hui Rui suggested, “China’s own work with the alien retrovirus discovered in the Nineteen Sixties showed that it was highly infectious, and impossible to immunize against. By the time the People’s Army was able to contain the virus, more than nine thousand people were quarantined, killed and incinerated. You would be wise to do with your sample what we did with ours and destroy it.”

“This might be an isolated infection,” the Chairman answered, “Or, it might be an invasion.”

“An invasion?” MI-6 blurted, incredulous, “How the bloody hell is an alien virus an invasion?”

“It is biological warfare at its most sophisticated,” the Minister said, “Instead of using military might to attack and decimate an enemy population, just introduce a fast-acting and highly contagious pathogen that will turn them into you.”

“But if the virus came from the Ship, why did it go to the trouble of testing Humanity, communicating with us and then taking two hundred thousand of us off into space?” MI-6 asked, petulantly, “Why not have just released the virus a million years ago or whenever it arrived here, and infect everything back then?”

“The virus could have come with the Ship,” the British Minister explained indulgently, as she would have to a small child, “Without necessarily having come *from* the Ship. The problem is, we just don’t know. And until we do we can’t take

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any chances. We have to concern ourselves with how to treat this virus and learn how to immunize against it.”

“Or use it,” The Chief of Staff said, “Think of what kind of weapon it would make.”

“I think we should be more concerned with what this retrovirus might do to *us*, than what we might do with it,” Kiru said.

“I agree with our colleague from the People’s Republic,” The Minister said, “However there is are two other matters relating to Patient Zero that greatly disturb me.”

“Namely?” the Chairman asked.

“First, why is it that Patient Zero, Gabriel Ashe, and the explorers who initially found him were infected with the virus,” The Minister asked, “And yet, eighteen months later, there is absolutely no trace of that virus in Colonel Jude’s body?”

“The answer to that question, Minister,” the Chairman said, “Is the reason that, a year and a half later, Colonel Jude and Gabriel Ashe are still alive. What is your second concern?”

“Why did Gabriel Ashe only wake from his coma when the Ship left the solar system for good?”



David Van Der Draas rubbed his eyes and stepped from his office and into the World Space Agency’s Shipflight Mission Control room. Time was running out. In less than a day they would no longer be able to communicate with the Ship. Van Der Draas stared silently across the room, mutely

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commanding through the force of his pale blue eyes the attention of the engineers and mission specialists who were gathered around a bank of consoles. They looked up, their attention riveted on the heavily-wrinkled face of their Mission Commander. Van Der Draas could count on the fingers of one hand the number of hours he'd slept over the last several days. They'd all been grappling desperately throughout that time, trying to reverse the communications breakdown or at least slow it down. All to no avail. The failure of their hyperlink beacon was now inevitable. The breakdown had started so innocuously. A lag developed between sending and receiving transmissions to and from the Ship. Normally such an occurrence was the result of improperly synchronized hyperlink transmissions and Van Der Draas's first thought was it was being caused by the fact that the Ship had emerged from time warp almost a full six minutes before it departed. That had been the strangest text message Van Der Draas had ever read:

THIS IS THE SHIP. DESTINATION HAS BEEN ATTAINED. ALL PASSENGERS AND CREW HAVE ARRIVED SAFELY WITHIN THE M2 GLOBULAR CLUSTER. TIME OFFSET FROM EARTH BEACON: -00:05:47:17:23. DO NOT CONTACT DEPARTING SHIP WITH THIS INFORMATION. REPEAT: DO NOT CONTACT DEPARTING SHIP WITH THIS INFORMATION. WILL MAKE CONTACT AGAIN IN FIVE MINUTES, FORTY-EIGHT SECONDS; IMMEDIATELY AFTER DEPARTING SHIP HAS ENTERED TIME WARP.

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It had taken Van Der Draas the better part of those six minutes to come to grasp the message and that it wasn't some radio astronomer's idea of a clever joke. But the message was neither a hoax, nor the source of the problem. The synchronization problem persisted and worsened.

Hyperlink transmissions still weren't entirely understood. They, like so much the Ship had revealed, seemed to run contradictory to everything that was understood by physical and quantum physical theory. First the signals were sent faster than light. While the Standard Model of the universe said this was impossible, the Ship had already disproved the Standard Model. But even applying what the Ship had already confirmed about string theory, quantum states and M-theory, Faster Than Light travel could only be done by enlarging a wormhole or constantly reducing an object's mass relative to its size; both required near-infinite amounts of power.

The Ship used a toroidal black hole as its power source. The wormhole-generating Bugs used vacuum energy to generate their power and the hyperlink beacon used a stable, sustained fusion reaction to produce energy. The hyperlink signal was achieved by sending multiple and redundant encoded waves through lower dimensional spacetime, where the curvature of space made distances "shorter". The lower dimensions were tightly coiled together and almost infinitely

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miniscule. However, the energy required to “tunnel” into those dimensions and then “punch” back out again limited the hyperlink signal’s effective range. If the hyperlink beacons weren’t aligned to send and receive signals from the same dimensional state or if the beacons weren’t operating on the same waveform, wavelength or wave phase cycle, then hyperlink transmissions wouldn’t be in synch. The more out of synch the hyperlink beacons were, the less likely they were to properly capture a signal. A lag would develop between transmission and reception as fewer and fewer signal waves were captured, worsening until it was impossible for either beacon to capture a signal transmitted from the other. A standard hyperlink transmission was broadcast through several different lower dimensional states, using multiple waveforms, wavelengths and wave phases in order to minimize the risk of synchronization issues. And if synch issues developed, as they had between Geneva and the Ship, normally it wouldn’t be more complicated to resolve than checking the Ship’s transmission coordinates against Geneva’s. On the surface it appeared that their transmission targets were the same, but they still couldn’t synch up with the Ship.

Which left Van Der Draas to conclude that the fault must be mechanical; either the hyperlink emitters or the targeting and receiving systems had to be faulty. So Van Der Draas and his team took the beacon offline to dismantle study, repair and reassemble different components over the last several days. Van Der Draas was now supremely confident

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that he could single-handedly assemble the beacon from its components in the dark if need be. But they still weren't any closer to understanding why they weren't able to synchronize their hyperlink beacon with the Ship's. When he'd asked, in frustration, what they hadn't tried, the list was extremely short.

Some of the best radio astronomers in the world were part of Van Der Draas' staff. He'd had them spend an entire day cycling through as many coordinates as they could in an attempt to raise the Ship, to no avail. They'd repaired components, replaced components and completely realigned the entire system and failed miserably to achieve anything.

"Damen und heren, Ladies and gentlemen," Van Der Draas said, addressing them in German, the common language of the World Space Agency, "I wish to thank you for all you have done these last several days. However the time has come to admit that our best efforts have not succeeded. This has happened not because of any negligence or deficit on our part, but because some aspects of the Ship's alien technology are still too far beyond the realm of Human understanding."

As sad as he felt, Van Der Draas felt more relieved. Shipflight may well have to be aborted, though not through any fault of Shipflight Control. And the decision to abort would not be his. Van Der Draas was disappointed that their efforts had proven fruitless, but he was so exhausted that all he could think of was going home to sleep in his own bed tonight. He would see his wife and children. Though he'd only been away from them a few days, the time he'd been awake made it seem much longer.

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“We will keep the beacon operating as long as it will,” he said, “Current estimates are the synchronization between Geneva and the Ship will fail sometime in the next seventy-two hours. Then everything will be out of our hands. I’m going now to make my report to the World Ship Summit. When we have their instructions, we will move forward.”



The Minister was back in his suite in the World Council Compound, his wife asleep in the other room. Their children were grown now; his daughter a neurologist in Montreal, his son and their family now Passengers aboard the Ship. The Minister reclined on the sofa, a hot cup of coffee by his side. He cradled a console tablet on his lap, and watched the screen. He was watching a video stream, sent to him along secure channels, from the Committee. As it began playing, stark white lettering on a black screen appeared:

COMMITTEE SECRET
CLASSIFICATION ZZ99G

INTERVIEW WITH NIMBUS INFECTEE PATIENT ZERO

Onscreen, the creature that had been Gabriel Ashe stood dressed in hospital scrubs, in the center of a bare, white room. There was a hospital gurney in one corner, a toilet and a metal sink bolted into the wall on the other, both little more than a meter from the gurney. The room had no windows and only a single door. It was essentially a prison cell. There were cameras mounted in every corner, as well as in the center of

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each wall. Text that preceded the video stream indicated that Gabriel Ashe had been standing like that, staring into one of the ostensibly hidden cameras, for more than two hours.. From a recessed sound system hidden in the walls, an interrogator's voice could be heard. Ashe—or what had been Gabriel Ashe, the Minister reminded himself—answered easily:

Q: What are you?

A: I am what has become of Gabriel Ashe.

Q: What does that mean?

A: I believe you know exactly what that means; but to elaborate I'll put it as best as I can: I am the Nimbus as it has manifested within the host organism, Gabriel Ashe.

Q: You're no longer Gabriel Ashe.

A: Gabriel Ashe is still very much who I am, but I now am more than just him. I am the sum of a greater whole. You know this already; if not you, than those whom you work for. You've encountered the Nimbus twice before; your people have spoken with those infused with the Nimbus twice before, before these people were destroyed.

Q: How is it that you know about those incidents?

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A: There is a concept in African traditions, called *Ubuntu*. The definition of *Ubuntu* is simple: interconnectedness. The belief is that every living thing in the world is conjoined in some way with everything else. *Ubuntu* isn't merely some esoteric philosophical concept; it is a truism. Right now in your body, in the bodies of everyone you know, everyone they know, in the walls of this building, the streets above and the buildings around this one are atoms, trillions of atoms, that once belonged to other beings: Alexander the Great; Genghis Kahn; ordinary men and women, dead now for centuries, millennia. The components of their bodies are now components of your body and the bodies of others. And as many countless trillions of atoms as there are in a single human body, as many countless decillions of atoms that make up this planet, this solar system, the whole of the cosmos itself, their number is nevertheless finite. Eventually, all these atoms intermingle or have already previously intermingled, exchanging themselves with other atoms, sharing a connectivity on the quantum scale and creating one great, elaborate skein. That is *Ubuntu*; that is interconnectedness. Everything that is, everything that was and everything that ever can or will ever be is conjoined with everything else.

Q: You didn't answer the question.

A: In order to understand the answer, I first had to familiarize you with the concept of *Ubuntu*. Your question was how could I possibly know what happened the last two times your people

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encountered the Nimbus, if each time you previously did so, the Nimbus was destroyed. The answer is simple: the Nimbus exists throughout the universe. It is, we are, perhaps the single largest organism in the cosmos, though we are not a single body, but an aggregate of bodies interconnected. We share information across a cosmic-scale...network, if you will; call it telepathy if it helps you to understand better. Anything known by one part of the Nimbus is known, almost instantly by all. We are the very embodiment of the concept of *Ubuntu*.

Q: How is that possible?

A: The Nimbus is one of the oldest forms of life in the universe. It first arose long before the physical laws of this cosmos became as essentially constant as they currently are. During that time, the Nimbus underwent certain...changes...that allowed it to exist simultaneously in different dimensions and different quantum states. As the Nimbus propagated, it passed on these abilities to every form of life it infused.

Q: And how did you come to infect Gabriel Ashe?

Gabriel Ashe sneered at the question. It seemed to the Minister as he watched the video that Ashe—or whatever Ashe had become—did not take to being considered an infection.

A: There are samples of the Nimbus virus stored aboard the Ship, and by necessity, also aboard a

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number of its support vehicles. Gabriel Ashe came to the Nimbus, and the Nimbus infused him, infused me, and we became one, part of the greater whole.

Q: If the sample of the virus was aboard the Ship, how did Ashe get to it?

A: When I was merely Gabriel Ashe, I was...afflicted...with a certain form of mental illness; one that allows for Humans to be far more susceptible to telepathy. As Gabriel Ashe, I heard what I thought were the voices of God and His Angels. These voices were in fact from the Nimbus, from an alien life form that sensed the presence of the Nimbus on the Earth and was attempting to use its considerable mental ability to release that sample of the Nimbus and infuse your world. Because telepathy is thought projection, it does not require a common language. However, the problem with transmitting thoughts between two completely different minds is that those thoughts are often open to misinterpretation. As such, Gabriel Ashe assimilated these telepathic projections through mental filters of religious dogma. I wasn't the first that the Nimbus tried to contact; some of the greatest religious leaders in history were in fact doing nothing more than misinterpreting the Nimbus' telepathy. I was, however, the first that this being was able to direct to and then into the Ship.

A: How did the virus get off the Ship the other times we encountered it?

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Q: I answered that question already. By necessity, certain support vehicles from the Ship also contained samples of the virus. When the Cataclysm struck, when the asteroid wiped out most life on this planet at the end of the Cretaceous, burying the Ship and destroying most of the support vehicles in its atmosphere, some of the support vehicles and the drones that piloted them escaped. Others were elsewhere in the Solar system when the Cataclysm occurred. These support craft continued to observe this world, under the Ship's direction. The drones that piloted these support craft were, like the Ship itself, partially biological. Containment of the Nimbus on these ships failed. Protocol for the drones was to destroy the support vehicles, if containment failed. On two occasions, they failed to complete protocol. The first was during the Roswell, New Mexico crash in 1947. The drones that were found, and subsequently the first soldiers who arrived on-scene, were infused by the Nimbus. It was only luck and the presence of mind of officers who quarantined them that prevented a full outbreak of the Nimbus virus. The second was in 1967. A thousand years earlier a Scarab-class Bug crashed into and was buried beneath a hillside in mainland China, where it remained until miners from a now-nonexistent nearby village unearthed it. By the time the Chinese government was able to contain and quarantine the infusion, we were nearly ten thousand strong. We came so close, then.

Q: How did you get off the Ship?

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A: I had been infused with the Nimbus and was about to make the return ascent to the surface, when the assassin you sent to kill Gabriel Ashe found me. I fled deeper into the Ship and he followed. I made it to an escape vehicle. The assassin followed me in before it deployed. Unfortunately, the escape vehicle was on the underside of the Ship; when it launched, we were sent into deeply packed earth and clay. Once the escape vehicle left the Ship it put us into a stasis field, where we remained until after the Ship left. The damaged stasis field kept us more or less inert until we were discovered by your people.

Q: Why did you remain unconscious until now?

A: I wanted to be sure the Ship was gone, before I awoke.

Q: Why?

The thing on the video smiled. The Minister shivered looking at that smile, at its smug, secretive glee.

A: I have my reasons.

Q: Why hasn't Colonel Jude been infected with the Nimbus?

A: The secret to his immunity is not something I'm going to divulge.

Q: Why shouldn't we just destroy you now?

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A: You probably should. But now that I'm awake, the rest of the Nimbus is aware of the situation on Earth. We are coming; make no mistake about that. And destroying me, destroying this body won't change that. I'm part of the Nimbus, now; *Ubuntu*. Soon, all of you will be part of the Nimbus, as well.

The Minister shut off the video and closed the console. Whatever Gabriel Ashe had become, the manic cult leader was no more. Whatever he was now, he was a far greater threat than he had ever been as the head of the United Trinity Observants.



Helmut Konrad entered the East wing of Building A, of the World Space Agency Headquarters in Geneva. Building A-East was the operations center for all WSA communications with spacefaring vehicles, satellites, manned missions to the outer planets, and, of course, Shipflight. Section 35 of A East was devoted to hyperlink beacon facility, and it was to this room that Konrad headed. Inside the facility was a broadcast transmission booth, along with the operations systems and controls, listening posts and various other stations. Konrad stepped into the booth and closed the door. Outside at the broadcast control panel, David Van Der Draas made an affirmative gesture to Konrad, who sighed, and then, reading from a prepared text, began to record the last message that Earth would be able to send to the Ship:

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“Shore to Ship, Shore to Ship; this is Helmut Konrad, transmitting to Command Staff of the Shipflight, addressing Colonel Margaret Bloom, directly,” Konrad, the liaison between the World Ship Summit and Shipflight took a sip of water and continued. “This will be our last transmission to you, as we are now about to lose beacon synchronization completely. Our attempts to reverse the problem have failed. The Geneva Beacon is expected to fail in approximately eighteen hours. As the lag between transmission and reception is now fourteen hours, there will be no time for you to send a reply. Therefore the World Ship Summit has prepared a complete set of instructions, orders and authorizations, which are being sent in a compressed datastream with this transmission. Shipflight Control feels that the decision whether or not to proceed forward with the mission rests with you, Colonel Bloom. You are the best judge of the situation. The World Council agrees that your duties and obligation to the safety of your charges makes your opinion paramount. You know the risks you face. You alone bear the burden of making the decision.

“If you go forward, we have final messages from home, both personal and general, for the passengers and crew. Your authority will supersede that of Governor Paul Santino and the Civilian Authority. You will, however, be expected to consult with them on important issues. We have specific dispatches to Santino and the other members of the Civilian Authority, as well as dispatches to the respective leaders of the religious councils, from their parent faiths. And we have every faith in

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you, Colonel. You are the right person for this mission. Have a safe journey, whether it is forward or back. This is Helmut Konrad, signing out.”

FOUR

DARKER DISCOVERIES

Colonel Margaret Bloom switched off the display and swivelled her chair away from her command station to face her first officer.

“Well there you have it Exo,” she said, “Geneva’s passed the buck on to me.”

Major Benedict stood to her left. He’d watched the hyperlink transmission—the last they would receive from Earth—with Bloom. Below them, the Command Deck work pit was alive with activity, none of which concerned Bloom or Benedict at the moment.

“I can understand why Colonel,” Benedict said, “The project’s cost trillions of dollars. That money came directly from the charter nations of the World Council. It would be political disaster for them to scrub the mission, now.”

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“It would be a disaster for them if the mission was scrubbed *at all*,” Bloom said, “But I’d make a convenient scapegoat if it was my decision. Likewise if I allow the mission to proceed and things go down the shitter, by going forward at *my* discretion I can again be blamed for botching the mission.”

“At least you know where you stand in the grand scheme of things,” her Executive Officer suggested, wryly. Bloom sighed and pushed herself from her chair. Benedict followed as she made her way up to the gantry at the back of the Command Deck, to the door that led to the main lift bank.

“Yeah I do,” Bloom said, “Frankly, I felt better *not* knowing. What have we learned from the beacon?”

“That Kalenga and Tanaka don’t get along,” Benedict said, “They’ve been at each others’ throats since it came aboard.”

“What are they butting heads over?” Bloom asked as they reached the lift bank. She pressed the call button.

“Everything,” Benedict replied, “What they’re looking for; where to start; who’s in charge of the operation.”

A lift arrived and they stepped aboard.

“Well that one’s simple. Tanaka’s the senior officer and the Chief Engineer. The job’s hers. Make that clear to the Lieutenant. I don’t care if he’s the head of HBO. His expertise with hyperlink systems makes him an asset at Tanaka’s disposal, nothing more.”



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Captain Alina Tanaka stood looking at the debris meticulously spread out on the floor of the hangar. The largest pieces were the multi-faceted spherical segments of the beacon's outer casing. The inner workings of the device were in utter ruin. Tanaka and Kalenga had mapped the individual pieces, feeding the information into the Ship's computer. Using the technical schematics of an actual hyperlink beacon they were trying to assemble a virtual model based on the scrap they had here. One thing already seemed obvious to Tanaka: the beacon hadn't been destroyed by some accidental near-space collision. The damage was all wrong for meteoric impact. And although it appeared the beacon had exploded, the signs so far didn't point to an internal failing. Tanaka bent over a pile of the device's inner workings. It was amazing. There were wires, optical tubing, relays and circuit boards—though these weren't laid out in a way even remotely similar to Human-made equivalents. But the principles of engineering were the same or similar enough, though they were modeled differently.

“Help me with this piece please,” Tanaka asked of one of her work crew.

They turned over a large segment of the casing to look at its space-weathered surface. Three fist-sized holes had been burned into the beacon. Captain Tanaka had seen beam-weapon damage before and she recognized it here: The swelling around the punctures where the metal had melted, swollen and cooled; the smooth texture inside the hole and the perfectly round hole, itself. Though they had yet to completely

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assemble their virtual model of the M2 Globular Cluster beacon, Tanaka now knew beyond a doubt that the beacon had been deliberately destroyed.



Governor Paul Santino made his way down the gold and black hallway towards the door into Colonel Bloom's offices. He had no idea what lay behind her summons—for she had left little room for doubt in his mind that he *was* being summoned. Bloom had lixed him at his office where he had been preparing for a council meeting, and asked him to meet with her as soon as possible. Santino wondered if Bloom wanted to lay down the law regarding the orders they'd gotten from the World Ship Summit. He suspected this was the case; Bloom had made it clear she wouldn't discuss the matter over the linx and insisted it was important. And so he was left with little choice but to go to her. Surprisingly, when he arrived in the military wing of the Ship's office level, the door into Bloom's office was open. She stood at the window, staring out at the Habitat below. She turned around as Santino crossed the threshold.

"Please sit down Governor," she said, crossing to shake his hand and "Would you like some coffee? The first crop from our plantation is in; it's really good."

"Please," Santino said.

Bloom fixed him a cup of coffee, asking how he took it. She returned to her desk, passing the cup over to him.

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“So Colonel, what is this about?” Santino asked, wanting to just get to the point. Bloom took a swallow of coffee before replying.

“As you know from the dispatches, we’ve lost communication with Earth. The World Council has seen fit to give me full authority out here and it is to be my decision as to whether or not the mission goes forward or if we abort and return to Earth.”

“And you want my input?” Santino asked.

“I want to know how you think our passengers would react,” Bloom said, “How they would react if we went forward; how they would react if we turned back.”

“There are Ship-wide information services that can give you those answers Colonel. Some of the polls are even up-to-the-minute, and the discussion forums are loaded down with people’s opinions.”

“I’m not much of a politician, Governor,” Bloom replied, “I can’t stand discussion forums, I don’t follow opinion polls and it’s not poll results I’m after. I need to know how the people are going to deal with returning home or going forward. Especially since going forward could turn out to be a lot more...unknown...than we think.”

“How so?” Santino queried.

Bloom leaned back in her chair.

“Governor, what I’m about to tell you is privileged information. I’d go so far to say as it is classified. So I need your assurance that this information will remain confidential.”

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Santino nodded his assent. Bloom tapped a plate on her desk, and the door rose shut.

“As you know,” Bloom said, “The League of Worlds spans much of the local galactic cluster. And communication across the galaxies is done using a network of hyperlink relay beacons. So by now, we should be able to communicate with the League.”

“Which hasn’t happened, otherwise we’d have heard about it by now.”

“Right,” Bloom said, “In fact, my engineers just retrieved the remains of the hyperlink beacon that relayed transmissions for this sector.”

“And?”

Bloom shrugged. She didn’t want to tell Santino too much; she was only willing to trust him so far.

“My chief engineer is finishing her report,” she said, “So I don’t have news on that front.”

“Is it possible that what’s affecting Earth’s beacon might be doing the same thing to the network?”

“It’s a possibility, though not one supported by the immediate facts,” Bloom replied, “But as far as we know, there is nothing in this galaxy, perhaps even in the local group, that is still broadcasting. The League may not be there, any longer; the truth is, we don’t know. So now you understand why I need input on how you think our passengers will react if we proceed with the mission. We’ll be in total blackout; no communication with Earth and for the foreseeable future, no communication with the League.”

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“Sooner or later we *will* make contact, won’t we?” Santino asked.

“I would expect so,”

“Then I don’t think there should be any problems. We have schools, hospitals, jobs, entertainment...there’s more than enough to keep the passengers occupied. And if we have to go back to Earth, I imagine that there would be a lot of disappointed people, but many more happy reunions.”

“Thank you Governor,” Bloom said, rising, “Your advice will be beneficial to my deliberations.”

Santino smiled and also stood. They shook hands and Bloom walked Santino to the door.

“I’m glad to have been of assistance,” Santino said, as he left.

Walking back from Bloom’s office, however, Santino couldn’t help reflecting on what Bloom *hadn’t* told him. For instance, she hadn’t said what had wrecked the M2 beacon, or what the “immediate facts” about the loss of communication with Earth were. Nor did she say why the League might not be in the Local Group, anymore. As Santino reached the transitway station that would take him back to his own offices, he realized that the Colonel hadn’t told him much of anything, at all.



Allison sat curled in the ledge of her bedroom window, staring out over the parkland of Habitat as morning dawned. For what seemed the millionth time in the last three days, she

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replayed the argument in her head. She still didn't understand what she'd done wrong; how things had gone so awry. All she knew was that Juan left angrily and wouldn't return her linxes.

She woke up the morning after their date to the smell of fresh coffee brewing. The sense of smell is an intimate of memory, and Allison couldn't smell coffee brewing without remembering a certain morning when she'd been six: It was winter. They'd moved to Calgary, Alberta from Oregon so her father, an engineer, could work a contract for his company. It had been Allison's first Prairie winter and an exceptionally cold one at that.

It was dark when she woke up, but she heard someone moving around. She'd carefully tucked her little feet inside slipper socks and put a robe on over her pyjamas. She went downstairs, following the smell of coffee. She remembered her father was the only other person up; her mom was still asleep in bed and her sister, two years younger, was too. She'd padded into the kitchen, where her father was making breakfast for himself before heading off to work. When he saw his little girl, his eyes lit up and he sat her down in the breakfast nook by the big bay window, overlooking their snowed-over back yard. There was frost on the window and her father was playing an old Beth Orton album on the media console. He made breakfast and sat with her as the yard slowly turned from the dark, musky blue of pre-dawn, to the gold of sunrise. Her father drank his coffee while Allison had a big, frothy mug of

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hot chocolate. He put her favourite movie on in the living room for her and left for work. Allison sat contentedly sipping her hot chocolate, watching the animated musical, knowing she had shared something with her father that no one else ever would.

Ever since that childhood day, if Allison McQuire was asleep she would wake up whenever coffee was brewing. And her first semi-waking moments of consciousness were always a recall of that perfect morning. So when the smell of coffee woke her up that morning, Allison's first waking thoughts were of that long-ago winter morning. And then as she came awake, she recalled the night before with Juan Carlos.

After the restaurant, Allison had invited Juan Carlos back to her apartment for coffee. But between the Skyview and Habitat, events transpired—much of them by her design—that meant they weren't going to have coffee any time that evening. As they took the Transitway from the Commercial District back to the Habitat, Allison steered the conversation down more intimate, more sensual paths, as she narrowed the physical space between them by snuggling with Juan Carlos, running a hand through his hair and touching his thigh. Soon enough the words between them died off and they were kissing.

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The aching warmth between Allison's thighs had reminded her how long it had been since she'd last slept with someone. She didn't allow herself to think about the fact that that person had been James. She was far too preoccupied with Juan. Juan had an instinct and a zealous skill. He seemed to know exactly how to take her, how to touch her as they made out on the tram; he knew exactly when to back off as well, so that it left her aching, quaking for more.

The sex was great; not just because of how long it had been, but because neither of them had qualms about telling the other what they liked, what they didn't like or what they wanted. And Goddess, did the boy know what he was doing; there was no awkwardness, no hesitation from Juan Carlos. Her head swimming with the thrill of first time sex with a new person, Allison eagerly matched Juan's ardour. They made love until they were both exhausted. The sky outside was beginning to lighten when Allison finally drifted off.

And it was only three hours later when the scent of brewing coffee roused her from sleep. As memories of the night before came back to her, Allison smiled, images and remembered sensations replaying behind her closed eyes. She rolled over onto her belly and pushed her left hand between her legs. She could hear Juan Carlos in the kitchen. She wanted to stay there, lazy and tired and wait for him to come back to her, but the scent of the coffee was making her hungry and the desire for sustenance was more pressing than the desire for sex.

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Besides; Allison knew that there'd be more of that after breakfast, anyway. She got up, pulling on her faithful, tattered old robe and tying her hair back in a ponytail. Juan Carlos was in the kitchen, having a cup of black coffee and a cigarette. He stared out the window, watching the sky above Habitat. It was the same pale pastel blue as Earth's sky, but the imaging systems above Habitat shot that sky through with the flecks of luminous colour and bands of brilliance of the Cluster around them.

"Good morning," Allison said after stealing one of Juan Carlos' cigarettes.

He turned around, offering her a warm smile.

"Did I make too much noise?" he asked.

Allison smiled, shaking her head.

"I woke up when I smelled the coffee," she said.

Juan embraced her from behind as Allison fixed herself a cup of the steaming black brew.

"What would you like to do today?" Juan asked.

Allison sat on the edge of the table, propping one leg up, letting her robe drift open so he could see her. She knew that as close as he was to her right now he'd be able to smell her; the scent of sex always clung to her afterwards, seeming to come out of her pores. Sometimes even after a shower, spicy sweet musk would hang about her like perfume.

"I thought maybe we could stay in," she suggested.

Juan Carlos smiled as he approached her, sliding his hand around her bare waist.

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“We have all the time in the world to make love,” he said, kissing her as she wrapped her legs around him, “Why don’t we spend the day together out there, with all the other couples celebrating life?”

Allison smiled, laughing a little. She let Juan Carlos kiss her again.

“Juan,” she said between kisses, “Juan...I think you might have the wrong idea...”

“About what?” he asked, sliding a hand down her side, slipping it around her back to the cleft where her tailbone met her buttocks.

“About us,” Allison said with a sigh, “Juan...I don’t know what you want or what you think I want, but I’m not looking for a relationship; not a serious one. I don’t want anything serious; I’m just not ready for that, yet.”

Juan Carlos was still and then he turned, pulling away.

“I see,”

“Juan, what’s wrong?”

“I thought I meant more to you than that,” he said.

“Juan I’m sorry,” Allison said, “I don’t want your feelings to be hurt--”

“My feelings?” Juan Carlos asked, “But obviously my feelings don’t matter, do they? Obviously what I feel...what I thought I felt about you...obviously, you don’t feel the same way.”

“Juan, please,”

“No,” Juan said, “I’ve been in this place too many times already. I thought you were different, but you’re exactly like

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all of them; you're exactly like all the women I've known. I'm tired of it, Allison. I'm not just to fuck."

"I didn't say you *were!*"

"No; you said you don't want to have anything serious. You want to fuck me when it's convenient and forget about me the rest of the time."

"Juan, no!"

"I'm tired of this! I've been here before. I tried to get away from this, but I guess you can't escape who you are! I'm sorry. I really am. Goodbye!"

He stormed from her apartment, not turning back when she called after him, not answering any of the linxes she sent him. He wasn't at work in the Museum and he wasn't at home—or at least not answering—when she called on him there.

Allison sat curled in the ledge of her bedroom window. Had she really mistreated Juan Carlos that badly? Had she used him for sex? Was he blowing everything out of proportion? If she'd have known more about him, if he'd have told her more about his past...She didn't want anything as complicated as a relationship and she might have backed off from him if he'd have been more forthcoming. The emotional baggage, the anxiety, the uncertainty, the restraints and demands were all too much. Allison was frustrated by Juan dumping all this on her. But at the same time, she still wanted someone to be with, someone to be around. Had Juan overreacted or had she misjudged him? Had she misjudged

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herself? Allison lit another cigarette and wondered how she'd screwed up her life so much.



The birds were just beginning to stir. A robin was warbling somewhere, the sound echoing through the park as Bloom started her morning run. The sounds that she concentrated on were the stamp of her feet in the packed gravel path and her breathing, both following a metronomic rhythm that came from years of disciplined routine: *pad-pad-pad-pad-wush...pad-pad-pad-pad-wush...* the air was cool and the sky lightening and with it life seemed to be returning to the Habitat.

Since taking command of the Ship Margaret Bloom had been gradually lengthening her run. She did this for two reasons: first, because the sphere of the Habitat was so small that there was a slight downgrade under foot. This meant that one was always walking—or running—downhill. Bloom felt that a longer run therefore made up for the easier terrain. The second reason that she'd been extending her run was that she needed time to be awake and alone. She was unreachable on these runs, barring an emergency. And the unique complexities of her command were so taxing in nature that Bloom needed some freedom from the burdens of that duty; more so now that the burden was weighing even more heavily on her.

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She was not the only one on the park's trails at this hour. There were other runners, cyclists, roller bladers and even a couple of wheelchair-bound athletes. She recognized many of them by sight, some by name. Most were civilians; others on the paths were members of her crew. Bloom wasn't one to wonder who she was sharing the trails with, or what sort of lives they led. She drew no comfort from the closeness of others, nor did she feel any overwhelming need for companionship. Bloom's relationships tended to be brief and physical. Mark Echohawk had been the only long-term relationship she'd ever had, and that relationship had only improved with divorce. Laura, their daughter, was the only other person that Bloom felt any real deep and abiding love for. But Laura was light-years away, back on Earth. And Mark had been dead for more than two years.

Bloom completed her run where she'd started: outside her front door. She hadn't run all the way around Habitat, but followed an elaborate circuit along the many trails in the massive park around the southern pole. When Bloom finished, she was sore and winded. Her joints and muscles in pain, her legs shaky, her lungs full of cold fire. Inside her flat she found the burdens of command already waiting for her: three linx messages—all flagged important—flashing on her console, demanding attention.

“Fuck it,” Bloom said to the empty air, as she stripped off her sweat-drenched running gear on her way to the bathroom. The messages could wait until she'd showered and had a

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proper cup of coffee. If the coffee didn't happen until she got to her desk, the messages would follow her to Office Level. There was a waterproof console built into Bloom's shower stall, but she was damned if she was going to use it. She'd no more linx someone from the shower than she would while taking a shit. The hot spray of the shower was both curative and cleansing; the shower's jets relaxing her muscles as the endorphins released in her brain during her run continued to flood her system. This was the best part of the run as far as Bloom was concerned: the sense of relief, release, accomplishment, exhaustion peace that came at its end. She'd been gone nearly an hour and she still had another hour before the actual start of her duty shift. When she left the shower, there were seven messages waiting for her attention. Bloom shook her head, reminding herself that a Commanding Officer was always on duty, regardless of whether or not she was on-shift.



An hour later Bloom was in her office. So were Major Benedict, Captain Tanaka and Lieutenant Kalenga.

"Good morning everyone," Bloom said when the Engineering Chief and Communications Chief joined her and Benedict, "I understand your report is ready?"

"Yes Colonel," Tanaka said.

She handed optic slips to Bloom and Benedict, who slotted them into the console packs they wore on their belts. Kalenga went to Bloom's wall display and queued up the report.

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“In summary,” Tanaka said, “The conclusion of our investigation is that the M2 beacon was deliberately destroyed by some sort of beam weapon.”

“Can you say who destroyed it?” Benedict asked.

Tanaka shook her head.

“Unfortunately no,” she replied, “Three different shots were fired in close proximity to one another. The first two destroyed the hyperlink targeting system and the beacon’s active memory storage. The third shot, the kill shot, hit the beacon’s power core. The resulting explosion and subsequent years of exposure to spatial radiation eroded any records that might have survived the attack.”

“Damn,” Bloom said, “So what *do* we know?”

Tanaka turned to the Lieutenant, who nodded and called up animated diagrams of the hyperlink beacon on the display.

“The hyperlink beacon was targeted by someone with intimate knowledge of its systems,” Kalenga said, “Whoever it was they fully intended not just to destroy the beacon, but the destruction of any evidence of who they were, as well.”

“Then this wasn’t just demolition,” Benedict said, “This wasn’t about junking obsolete equipment; it was an intentional attack against a line of communication.”

Bloom switched off her console and leaned back in her chair, her arms crossed.

“What do we know besides that the hyperlink beacon was deliberately blown to shit?” she asked.

Tanaka shrugged.

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“We know that it was destroyed millions of years ago,” she replied, “And that the perpetrators knew exactly where to hit the beacon to achieve their goals. It’s all academic, really and nothing very useful to our current situation.”

“We still have no way of knowing why we can’t contact the League,” Kalenga said, “We can’t rule out that this part of the Galactic Cluster could simply have been abandoned and the beacons destroyed because of it; it’s possible the beacon was junked so that no one else would use it, after they were gone. It might even have been more efficient to destroy it instead of retrieving it.”

“Can we rule out that our inability to communicate with Earth is connected to the destruction of the M2 Globular Cluster’s beacon?” Benedict asked.

“Not conclusively,” Tanaka said, “But I don’t see that it’s likely the two are related.”

“To sum up,” Bloom said, “We’re no closer to figuring out what happened or what’s happening; fine. Thank you both for your efforts. That’ll be all.”

Bloom locked the door to her office when Tanaka and Kalenga left. Benedict took a seat directly across from her.

“What are your thoughts, Exo?” she asked.

“I’m beginning to wonder if what we’re seeing here isn’t going to be what we see everywhere.”

“It’s a little soon to assume the whole network’s been destroyed, no?”

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“Colonel, regardless of the long history of the League of Worlds, they could have been destroyed. The League could have died off or been wiped out millions of years ago and we’d have almost no way of knowing about it, today.”

Bloom fixed herself a cup of coffee and sat down on the ledge of the window overlooking Habitat.

“What if the League adopted a new technology?” she asked, “One that made hyperlink broadcasts obsolete? Kalenga’s right; it might have been more efficient to destroy the old network than recuperate the material.”

“In which case we still have no means of contacting them,” Benedict replied, “Because the Ship is using a potentially obsolete technology; the most current navigational data available to us is millions of years out of date. We don’t even know if we’re heading in the right direction.”

“So we make course corrections as needed,” Bloom shrugged.

“Colonel, we could be heading to the heart of a dead civilization, or into hostile territory.”

“Are you recommending that we return to Earth?”

Benedict paused; it would be too easy to say yes; it would be a short-term solution, one that would not resolve any of the issues pertaining to the Ship, to the fact that the people of Earth now had the means to travel extragalactic distances, but had nowhere to go.

“I would suggest that we don’t go forward until we have more information, Colonel.”

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“All right Exo,” Bloom said, “That being the case, you’re in charge of getting that information. Find out what the realpolitik at the time the Ship last had contact with the League was. Find out who the players were; the major worlds not part of the League and who would have benefited most from the hyperlink beacon network being taken out and who would have profited from the League’s downfall.”

Benedict nodded.

“I’ll make it my top priority.”

“Good,” Bloom said, “The bad news is that I’m giving you forty-eight hours to deliver the report.”

“That’s not much time,”

Bloom made an effacing gesture.

“We’re in the middle of a cloud of dust and noble gas,” she said, “We’re not going home and we’re not going forward. There’s nothing out here, nothing happening...You got anything better to do?”

Benedict grimaced.

“Well Colonel, I thought I might work on my tan.”

Bloom smiled.

“Funny. Now get the fuck outta here before I find something else for you to do, Exo.”

Benedict tossed her a salute and left.



“Hi Allison; what’s up?” Peter Paulson asked, as Allison came into his office. Peter was head of the Alien Studies Department and was the anthropologist who’d worked with Mark Echohawk and the original Ship Survey Expedition.

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Echohawk had been Peter's mentor and friend. He'd known Laura, the Prof's daughter back on Earth. Allison had been her friend, and James Johnson had been Peter's. They were both, therefore old acquaintances, which gave them the reassuring comfort of familiar faces. Allison smiled and sat down.

She said, "I was wondering if you'd heard from Juan Carlos." As head of Alien Studies, the Museum Project was one of Peter's "babies". He knew and worked alongside almost everyone involved with the project.

"Actually no," he said, "Juan Carlos hasn't reported for work since the day before yesterday. Sonia in Linguistics was looking for him, too."

Peter glanced at his linx message folders on the console before him. There was the message from Aiziz:

Re: Alien Messianic Artifact.

"Juan Carlos never struck me as the type to flake out," Peter said, "Especially considering he was waiting on that translation from Sonia. Do you know if something's wrong?" Allison's face was grave, concerned.

"Nothing I wanna really talk about," she said.

Peter nodded, not fully understanding and knowing more than he suspected he wanted to, all at once.

"All right; well, if I hear from Juan is there anything you want me to tell him?"

"Umm, no; I think I should deal with this one, myself."

"Let me know if you need to talk."

Allison got up, heading to leave.

"Thanks Peter," she said, "I'll check in with you later."

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Allison had been gone from Peter's office less than ten minutes when his doorchimes sounded a second time.

"Come in," he said, closing a work file on his console. It was turning into one of those days, already. He could tell that he wouldn't clear the day's work.

The door into his office dropped gently into the floor and Major Jack Benedict stepped in.

"Major," Peter said warmly, "It's been a while."

Peter stood and shook hands with Benedict, before both men sat down.

"Hello Peter." Benedict said, "Unfortunately, yes, it's been too long."

"We should grab a beer or something," Peter said, "Catch up. But I don't get the impression you're here to go to lunch and shoot some pool, though."

"Unfortunately no," Benedict replied, "I'm here because I have a research project and I'm going to need your help."

Peter spread his hands.

"That's what I live for," he said, resigned to another day's backlog, "The whole of Alien Studies is at your disposal."

"I won't need the whole department," Benedict said, "What I *will* need though, is essentially a lesson on civics and history."

"Well *my* curiosity's piqued," Peter said, "Tell me more."

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“I’m not at total liberty to discuss the reasons for the request,” Benedict explained, “But essentially, I need to better understand what the League of Worlds was like when the Ship was last in contact with it; political, economic, military...the whole gamut.”

“That’s not too hard,” Peter said, “But you’ll have to abandon a couple of preconceived notions.”

“Such as?”

“Economics for one. Although some worlds in the League bartered for goods and services with one form of money or another, the League itself had none. It was a free exchange; any value given to anything was personal, entirely subjective.”

“How the hell was the League able to function like that?”

“Quite well,” Peter said, “The Ship, for example is a League Ship; one of many. Engineered, grown and built for the League by the Eoulf. Given the resources that were needed to build the Ship, conventional economics would never have allowed for one to be constructed, let alone a *fleet*.”

“So what motivated the people of the League to do anything if they weren’t compensated for their labours?”

“Universal motivation has always been self interest. And in the case of the Races who made up the League of Worlds at the time, it was one of *enlightened* self-interest. Economics is a cultural phenomenon, Major; one that is part of the backbone for most Human civilizations, but not *all* of them.”

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“I’m having a hard time wrapping my head around the notion that an advanced society could function without economics.”

“It’s a concept that is quite literally alien,” Peter agreed, “I won’t boggle your mind further by telling you about the lack of politics in government among most of the League worlds.”

“Please, don’t. What about the rest of it; can you help?”

“My own knowledge of the League of Worlds is somewhat limited, but I can help with most of the research. I know who the major Races were; what the pressing issues were. One problem is going to be the question of what enemy or enemies the League had at the time. I keep finding references to one or more enemies, but I can’t seem to find specifics.”

“The Ship itself can’t give you the information?” Benedict asked.

Peter leaned on his desk.

“The Ship is still intent on making us learn for ourselves,” he said, “Simply spitting out the information on demand goes against its nature.”

“FGIY,” Benedict said, “Fucking Google It Yourself.” Peter laughed.

“Exactly,”

“But if there were forces hostile to the League that would be something tactically important; we’d *need* that information straight away,” Benedict said.

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“Every reference I found about opponents says that they were defeated,” Peter said, “So maybe the Ship doesn’t believe they are a threat.”

“I’m going to be bringing that one up with the Colonel,” Benedict said, “But will what I’m looking for be difficult to access?”

Peter shrugged.

“It’ll just be a matter of searching the archives,” He said. “Come back in...let’s see...an hour and a half; that’ll give me time to wrap up some business and then we’ll start our search.”



Commander Nadia Castaneda had been personally chosen by Colonel Margaret Bloom to lead the Ship’s Security and Tactical systems. Bloom had been most impressed by Castaneda’s service jacket. At forty-three, Castaneda was a twenty-year veteran of the British Royal Navy. Unlike most officers, her rank had not come from graduating the Royal Academy, but from meritorious service.

Castaneda’s career began aboard the *HMS Spencer* as a lowly deckhand. During the Australian Conflict the *Spencer* had been torpedoed. Castaneda had single-handedly saved thirteen of her fellow crew and helped lead the evacuation of the lower decks of the once-mighty gunship.

Following the *Spencer*’s sinking, Castaneda had been promoted and assigned to the *Reliant*, one of the Royal Navy’s

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massive CVN-385 modified *Croft*-class aircraft carriers. It was quite literally a floating city, though its applications were entirely military. Aboard the *Reliant*, Third Lieutenant Castaneda again served with distinction in combat. This time she took over as tactical officer in the midst of battle, sinking the *Lassiter* and the *Kelley*, two Australian gunships.

Until the Unearthing, Castaneda spent the rest of her career serving aboard the *Reliant*, first as Tactical Assistant, then Tactical Officer and finally as First Officer. She'd been honoured to have been nominated as Security and Tactical Officer aboard *Shipflight*, although she would have preferred the job as Executive Officer. When Colonel Bloom had selected her for the mission, Castaneda could scarcely believe it.

Almost two years after first putting on the gold and black *Ship's* uniform, Castaneda nearly wished that the Colonel had chosen someone else. Castaneda had thought—truly she had—that she understood what it meant to be the *Ship's* head of security and tactics. However, the reality of the job was far different than her expectations. Castaneda felt more often like a town sheriff than a military officer. In truth, her duties consisted mainly of policing the *Ship's* civilian population. In the last year she'd found herself breaking up bar fights, arresting the intoxicated, responding to domestic abuse calls and investigating thefts, contraband sales, criminal organizations and sadly, cases of abuse, molestation and rape.

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The worst of the offenders had been deported back to Earth. At least they had been until the Ship left the solar system. Now, the criminals would have to be warehoused and hopefully rehabilitated in the Ship's prison, which was not set up in any realistic sense for long-term rehabilitation or incarceration.

It wasn't an ideal situation for someone used to what she deemed "real" security and tactical work. And today it was all going to get much worse. Castaneda was having her morning tea, looking over the reports from the night before. The universal tedium of paperwork was the only thing that was part of her day-to-day that Castaneda felt *had* lived up to her expectations. Castaneda's mood was sullen at the start of her duty shift; her linx chimed, calling her attention away from the reports and forms.

"Castaneda," she said, "Go ahead."

"Commander, this is Lieutenant Reilly."

The young security officer's voice sounded tense.

"What is it?"

"I'm on Habitat, Commander; section Seventeen-Alpha. You'd better get down here, Commander. There's been a murder."

The tram ride from Office Level to Habitat had never seemed so long. Castaneda commandeered a tram car, programming it for a direct route to Habitat. As the transparent

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car shot through the endless tunnels, Castaneda leaned against the doors, waiting to emerge. Once at Pole Station Castaneda programmed a zip-car for Seventeen Alpha and sat impatiently as the car sped down the track. En route, Castaneda linked Reilly, to let him know she was nearly there.

Each section of the Habitat's residential area was made up of an equivalent of three city blocks by three city blocks. The number of buildings per section varied, depending on the neighbourhood requirements. Section Seventeen Alpha was a small-household area, made up mainly of young singles or couples, or elderly couples. As the Ship's Security Chief Castaneda already knew the general makeup of each neighbourhood and could break it down by age, marital status, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation and a dozen other demographics that people didn't like to think about the "Law" knowing. Habitat Seventeen Alpha was a quiet neighbourhood in Castaneda's estimation. There hadn't been any trouble here at all.

Until now.

Her officers were clustered around a particular building: a four storey walk-up, twelve apartments in total. The building was already cordoned off and an ambulance was already parked on the zip-car track, two other transports nearby. A crowd was already collecting, rubberneckers all straining to catch a glimpse of what was going on. Castaneda

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had hoped to keep a lid on things long enough to inform the Colonel, but that didn't seem likely now.

Discretion was a hard thing when the security officers were all in uniform. Tailored in the gold and black of the Ship's standard-duty uniform, the security uniforms were integrated with light-weight armour padding on the chest and back, shoulders, forearms, thighs, knees and shins. The boots were visibly heavier as well. Though most of the officers chose to leave their protective helmets fastened to their utility belts, the presence of a sidearm slung on one hip made them an ominous sight. A cluster of six officers behind wide red tape with the words

CRIME SCENE PERIMETER: AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY!

emblazoned in yellow letters across it was as far from inconspicuous as one could get. Castaneda toggled her linx.

“Secure channel call to Colonel Bloom,” She said into the device.

Seconds later, Bloom was answering the call.

“Colonel,” Castaneda said, “I'm On Habitat, section Seventeen-Alpha. Someone's been murdered, Colonel. I'm only just now arriving on-scene. I'll contact you again as soon as I have more information.”

Castaneda was led upstairs to the third floor by Lieutenant Reilly. Forensics had already cordoned off the bedroom of the apartment. Castaneda glanced around as she

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was taken to the crime scene. This was definitely a young woman's apartment; the mementos and clutter of objects implied a European, probably Continental, to Castaneda's eye.

"Have we identified the victim yet?" she asked.

Detective Lieutenant Hall, Castaneda's forensics chief greeted her.

"Wilhelmina Eiders," Hall said.

He was one of the few Civilian officers on Castaneda's staff. A veteran criminologist from Massachusetts, he had thusfar only been called on for a couple of cases. Hall spent most of his time writing. But he was all business now, as he handed Castaneda the obligatory gloves, hairnet and boot covers before admitting her into the cordoned-off bedroom. Inside, three other forensic experts were at work and Castaneda was drawn to their activity first. One was using a laser mapper and camera to create the three dimensional model that would be used in the investigation. The second was cataloguing potential evidence, while the third forensics expert—whom Castaneda immediately recognized as Doctor Simone Cole—was examining the body. The body itself was a horror. Only the matted blonde hair, cut short in a woman's style and the swell of breasts allowed for the cursory recognition that this had been a woman. Her face and neck were swollen to the point that the skin looked ready to split; from head to toe her skin was completely and utterly bruised, a riot of reds, blues and purples. Only the tissue beneath her nails seemed to have escaped the grotesque brutality.

"Oh God," Castaneda murmured.

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Historically, women have been the constant victim of abuse and brutality. Seeing the devastation wrought against this woman, Castaneda unconsciously recognized that this could very well have happened to her. The savagery of the attack brought nightmare images forth to Castaneda.

“Doctor Cole?” Hall asked.

Cole rose and turned to face Castaneda and the Detective.

“Bruising to over ninety-six percent of the body,” she said grimly, “And given the extent of her injuries versus the condition of her flat, it’s safe to assume she wasn’t murdered here. Most probably, she knew her killer.”

“What makes you say that?” Castaneda asked.

“The extent of her injuries,” Cole answered, “The methodology. This was done by someone with a grudge; an obsession. This was a thorough, meticulous beating. I wouldn’t be surprised if it continued post-mortem. The killer wanted to prolong this woman’s suffering; there don’t seem to be any surface abrasions or lesions to the skin. No signs of struggle, either; no defensive wounds on the arms that I can see. I’ll need to perform an autopsy to know more.”

“Who discovered the body?” Castaneda asked Hall.

Hall referred to his handheld console before answering.

“Her friend; a Miss Susan Malone.”

“Where is she now?”

“She was taken to the hospital in shock.”

“I can understand why,” Castaneda said, looking at Eiders’ body, “Do we know the circumstances behind the discovery?”

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“The victim and her friend went clubbing two nights ago,” Hall said, “Eiders picked up some guy at the bar. That was the last time she was seen alive.”

“Right,” Castaneda said. “Find out which bar and start there. I’ll have an officer get a description of the man from Miss Malone and link it to you.”

“We already have the name of the bar,” Hall said, “The *Cosmic Party*.”

Castaneda slipped on her headset, lowering the optic boom over her eyes as she looked down at Wilhelmina Eiders’ bruised and broken body.

“Looks like the party’s over,” she said.

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In the face of tragedy it is Human nature to look for some meaning and for someone to blame. For if not, the senselessness, the pointlessness of events becomes too much to bear. Unless meaning can be found and blame assigned, individuals are faced with the prospect that the Universe is uncaring and without design, therefore life itself may be bereft of meaning; and that would be the greatest tragedy of all.

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FIVE TIMES OF TROUBLE

“What is being done, Colonel?” Governor Santino demanded as he paced back and forth behind his desk, “Since this got out on the newscasts, the people are coming to the Civilian Authority and they want answers. There’s a killer loose on the Ship! People are frightened!”

“We’ve already doubled the number of patrols, governor,” Colonel Bloom’s voice intoned from the speakers in Santino’s office, “We also have a full-scale investigation ongoing. The advantage is ours; the killer has nowhere to go.”

“Then why hasn’t anything been said to the people other than to confirm that there was a murder?” Santino barked.

He was frustrated, angry. As security and policing were part of the Military’s jurisdiction aboard the Ship, he was frozen out of

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the loop. Santino felt that his role as head of the Civilian Authority and liaison to Bloom's administration meant that he was owed far more information than he was being given.

"Have you ever played poker, Governor?" Bloom asked.

The question took him aback.

"What?"

"Poker; you ever play?"

"Yes...why?"

"Are you familiar with the expression 'playing your cards close to your vest'?" Bloom asked, "It refers to not letting your opponents know what you have."

"Fair enough Colonel," Santino countered, "But I'm not your opponent; so why is it that I had to hear about the murder from the Grid instead of from you or your security chief?"

There was a long silence from Bloom.

"I'm sorry Governor," she said at last, "You're absolutely right. I should have been keeping you apprised."

"So would you care to bring me up to speed now?"

"Right now, there's very little information to share. My security Chief is pursuing leads and the forensics team are examining the crime scene and the body. I'm expecting an initial report on my desk by thirteen hundred hours. Once I've reviewed the report, I'll contact you with a copy. Right now, the murder is my primary concern. Unfortunately, it isn't my *only* concern. I have a Ship to run and operations to oversee. And Governor, the Civilian Authority exists at my discretion. I do not answer to you. Until and unless we restore contact with

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Earth, *I* am the final authority out there. I hope you keep that in mind the next time we speak.”

The linx ended abruptly, cut from Bloom’s end.



When her doorchimes sounded, Bloom was leaning against the window, smoking a cigarette. A plume of smoke rose in a steady stream until it hit an air current which buffeted it, spreading it out in a haze around her office. The scent of tobacco permeated the room. Bloom turned to one of the consoles on her desk. It showed an image as seen from the cam mounted above the door outside. Major Benedict stood outside, waiting to be admitted.

“Enter,” Bloom said.

The door dropped slowly into the floor and Benedict stepped in. It rose shut behind him as he crossed the threshold.

“Begging the Colonel’s pardon,” he said, waiving smoke from his face, “But I thought you quit.”

Bloom sneered.

“Haven’t you heard Exo? Quitters never win.”

Benedict chuckled and sat down across the desk from Bloom. The Colonel sighed and stubbed out her cigarette as she sat down.

“Not that it might make much difference Exo, but what have you got so far on the League?”

“What do you mean, that it might not make much difference?”

“I’m thinking of turning the Ship around Jack,” she said.

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It was rare for Bloom to address Benedict by his first name. Though they had known each other more than twenty years and had a friendship grown out of their days as combat pilots, their ranks and military custom kept a distance of formality between them. But when that wall came down, it was because Bloom crossed the unspoken barrier first.

“I can understand why you might want to do that, Meg. But I honestly don’t think that scrubbing the mission over this is the best option.”

“Can you think of a better one? There’s a killer loose aboard Ship and no way to know if he’ll kill again before we get him.”

“We have a description and an eyewitness. If we return to Earth they’ll quarantine the Ship until the suspect is found and arrested. The World Ship Summit will likely relieve you of command. If there is another Shipflight, it’ll be with an entirely different crew and probably a different passenger manifest. That’s assuming that they don’t evacuate the Ship and tell it thanks but no thanks and send it on its way. They’ll hang you out to dry, Meg and unlike your previous attempts at career suicide, this one *will* do you in.”

“I’ll take it under advisement,” Bloom said curtly.

“That’s all I ask.”

“Moving on,” Bloom said. “Do you have an initial report on the League?”

“Overview information only,” Benedict said, “The League is or was a very loose affiliation of worlds. The extent of a world’s membership in the League depends entirely on

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very complex criteria used to determine the level of an applicant species' evolutionary development. All races benefit from membership, but to varying degrees. Younger Races like ours would receive some technological aide, limited guidance as well as travel privileges, while the more advanced Races would have more extensive access to technological exchange, research and exploration. The more advanced you are, the more privilege you receive. Less advanced Races receive guidance and sponsorship from another race chosen to tutor them, to help them advance and evolve."

"Nobody's ever challenged the system? Tried to get more?"

"I don't have all the details, but it's happened a few times. Nobody who's gone up against the League has succeeded, although there are repeated references to an ancient enemy that the League struggled against."

"I didn't see *that* in any of the brochures," Bloom said, "What *do* we know about this enemy? Could they be the reason we can't raise the hyperlink network?"

"It seems doubtful on the face of things," Benedict said. "The so-called enemy seems to have kept to the fringes of the League; its main goal seems to have been to recruit League worlds into *its* charter."

"A war of attrition," Bloom said, "Like NATO versus the Warsaw Pact; it was a war of ideologies."

"Which may be why the League kept details of the enemy closely guarded," Benedict said, "I haven't found

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references to any real war between the two. If a race joined the other side, the League simply disowned them.”

“Do we at least have a name for this enemy?”

“Yeah we do. They were known as the Nimbus.”



The Ship’s hospital was extensive. It held the most state-of-the-art equipment available for diagnosis and treatment. There were ten thousand beds and more staff than even a hospital of such a size truly needed. In truth the Ship’s hospital was a better facility than most citizens of Earth enjoyed.

Commander Nadia Castaneda was at the hospital now, while Detective Hall went on to the *Cosmic Party* to continue the investigation. Castaneda wanted to be here when Doctor Cole completed the post-mortem on Wilhelmina Eiders. Among the state-of-the-art equipment and facilities in the hospital was an extensive pathology lab. Castaneda was sitting in the theatre overlooking the lab. She wasn’t watching the autopsy per se. In fact, she was more than a little squeamish about that sort of thing. But she felt a morbid curiosity, a grim fascination with the process; more so with this case. Castaneda was shocked that someone would take the time to so brutalize someone else. Wilhelmina’s whole body had been bruised. It must have taken hours; a day, perhaps longer. If the murder itself wasn’t atrocious enough, the suffering that Wilhelmina Eiders must have endured before death’s mercy came was

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sickening. Castaneda was determined to bring the murderer to justice.

Below on the floor of the pathology lab, Doctor Simone Cole was completing her work on the body. Her assistants would close and prepare the body for transfer to a mortuary that had been used less than a dozen times since Shiprise. In each instance until now the funerals had been for the old, the ill. Not anymore. Cole spoke into the intercom between the pathology lab and the theatre above.

“Commander, I’ll meet you in the conference room, now.”

The conference room in the pathology department wasn’t finished with the usual golden walls of the Ship. Here, as in most of the hospital, the walls were a more sanitized looking metallic grey, though the floors and ceiling were still the obsidian black common to the rest of the Ship. The hospital had been developed within the Ship to meet Human needs, as with all the populated areas. In deference to human psychology the hospital’s rooms, corridors and labs were patterned along the colours and schemes that mankind associated with sanitary, sterile environments. It was ironic, because the Ship’s hospital sanitary systems were self-regulating and so efficient that the cleanest Human hospital on Earth was an infectious cesspool of disease, by comparison.

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But psychology was as much a part of Human healing and well-being as protection against infection, and the Ship Control Entity probably understood this better than Humans themselves did.

Castaneda was already sitting at the conference table when Doctor Cole came in. Cole sat down beside her and pulled a handheld console from the pocket of her lab coat.

“Well, I haven’t written up my report yet, obviously, but I’ll let you in on what I’ve found,” Cole said, “First and foremost, our victim wasn’t beaten to death.”

“What? Then how did she die?”

“Her organs and much of her muscle tissue were nearly liquefied.”

“Dear Christ, how?”

“We found a series of injection sites at the base of her neck, on her shoulders, under her breasts, in her abdomen, kidneys and groin.”

“What...what did they inject her with?”

“I’m not sure, yet. I’ve sent tissue and fluids for analysis, but there are any number of dangerous chemicals and enzymes that could cause this sort of thing.”

“Then we should be looking for someone with what? A medical background? Knowledge of chemistry?”

“If you want, I can help you work on the profile,” Cole offered, “I think you’re going to need one.”

“How so?”

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“Most murders are crimes of passion or opportunity, or both. Premeditated murders are by their very nature usually careful and quick. This murder was methodical, pathological. The use of some sort of chemical to kill the victim, in what must have been a torturous process, and the fact that the prime suspect seems to have picked Miss Eiders up in a bar all suggest that this was the work of someone who enjoys the torture and murder of his victims. Likely, this wasn’t the first time he’s killed.”

“You’re talking about a serial killer,” Castaneda rasped.

“I’m afraid so, Commander.”



A concise history of the League of Worlds would have taken centuries, if not millennia to study. And there was a seventy to eighty million year gap between the present and the last time the Ship had had contact with the League. Nonetheless, it was helpful that Major Benedict had access to at least a partial summary of the League’s history as well as information regarding the major occurrences in the last several years that the Ship had been in contact with them. Somewhere, he was sure, would be some indication that would reveal what had happened and why.

Throughout its history millions of alien Races had been part of the League of Worlds. Some died off; others vanished. Some remained with the League throughout most of its history. Of the Races and civilizations of the League that had gone

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extinct, few had done so as a result of war. So what had happened to the League? Why was it silent?

Benedict understood that it was unwise to assume that the League of Worlds had been destroyed. Because of its nature, the League could quite conceivably have migrated to another part of the local galactic cluster or even beyond the local group of galaxies altogether. It made sense that such a civilization could and would move on as the races from one part of a galaxy or group of galaxies dwindled. But he just couldn't shake the feeling that *something* was wrong; terribly wrong. The destruction of the beacon, the silence from the rest of hyperlink network, the loss of communication with Earth...it was all wrong.

Benedict couldn't help a creeping feeling of being trapped. The hundreds of square kilometres of habitable rooms, halls and decks within the thirty-two-point-seven-three-eight kilometre-wide alien Ship suddenly felt claustrophobic. They were all of them small animals in a small fleck of dust in a very large, very unforgiving vacuum, at the mercy of too many unknown and unpredictable variables.

Benedict swivelled in his chair, looking around the Archives; the vaulted ceilings, the golden walls, the countless workstations. Less than half of them were occupied and the place seemed less a museum than a tomb, suddenly. Benedict saved the work on his terminal, transferring a copy of the file

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to his portable console and left the workstation. He wanted to be on Habitat; he wanted to at least have the *illusion* of being safe and sound on solid ground, with a sky and fresh air above and grass and earth below. But Earth, the *real* Earth and its real sun and real sky were all far, too far away. He got up, heading for the tramway, wanting to forget how helpless space travel could make someone. But the feeling followed him into the transparent, crystalline tram pod as it rushed through the transitway network of tunnels like arteries. Benedict closed his eyes as he travelled back towards Habitat. If he could have, at right that minute Benedict would have taken a lifeboat back away from the Ship, back to Earth. As the tram slowed, at last reaching Habitat the moment passed. Benedict was himself again. He straightened his uniform shirt, smoothed his jacket and stepped out into the fresh air.



“So, what have we got?” Castaneda asked Hall, as the Detective sat down in her office.

“Not much,” Hall replied, referring to his notes, “The suspect wasn’t seen on any of the surveillance systems, didn’t pay for anything from a credit linx and there were more than a dozen patrons in the bar matching his description. We’re tracking down names and addresses on most of them, now.”

“Most?”

“We can’t account for all of them,” Hall said, “We’re working on it.”

“Christ,” Castaneda hissed, leaning back in her chair, “We need to find this one fast; But if Doctor Cole’s right, this

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likely wasn't the first time the UnSub has killed. He's likely to kill again and right now we can't do a bloody thing to stop him."

"What I don't get is how a psycho like this got past the candidate's screening before coming aboard."

"If he was evaluated in the afternoon late in the week, if he got a hold of a copy of the examinations manual from the Grid...I mean it was inevitable that someone would fall through the cracks."

"That's one hell of a crack to fall through."



The light in the sky above Habitat was waning and the temperature gradually dropped by a few degrees with the approach of dusk. Already the vespers and orbs of the M2 Globular Cluster were becoming more distinct as the sky hastened along from blue to black. In Colonel Bloom's office, it wasn't quite dark enough to turn on the lights, but not quite light enough to see well without them. Sitting across the desk from her were Major Benedict, Commander Castaneda, Doctor Cole and Detective Hall.

"What have we got, so far?" Bloom asked.

"Criminal investigation continues," Castaneda replied, "Forensics has found nothing at the scene. We're searching for new leads and trying to identify the UnSub."

"Break it down for me by each aspect of the investigation," Bloom asked.

"Detective Hall, we'll start with the criminal," Benedict said.

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“There were several people at the club who match the description of the Unknown Subject,” Hall said, “Nobody remembers seeing the victim, except for her friend and a bartender. Our UnSub blended right into the background. Anything he bought at the club was bought with hard currency, which was deposited directly into the Ship’s Bank at the end of the night. No chance of tagging what money came from where.”

“Doctor Cole?” Bloom asked.

“I’ve gotten my report back from the labs,” Cole said, “Miss Eiders was injected with several different compounds: complex synthetic enzymes, molecular acids, proteins and even radioactive isotopes.”

“Where would someone have gotten a hold of those chemicals?” Bloom asked, alarm sounding in her voice.

“Any number of places,” Cole replied, linxing a file from her handheld console to everyone else’s, “The enzymes, proteins and acids are all variants on products used in agricultural and medical cloning, both of which are done aboard the Ship.”

“What about the radioactive isotopes?” Benedict asked.

“Those are a little harder to come by,” Cole said, “Certain pieces of scientific equipment and handheld medical and industrial devices use radioactive elements and again there are some used in food irradiation and clone tissue growth acceleration. But the use of those devices are very strictly monitored and easily located aboard the Ship.”

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“I’ve already started cross-referencing lists of people who work in biotech, medicine and agriclone aboard the Ship or back home with a description of our UNSUB,” Castaneda said, “But I need executive clearance to access the background information on our passengers prior to Shipflight; work histories, psych profiles, passengers’ clearance exams.”

“You’re cleared,” Bloom said, “You’ll have it in writing before you get back to your office and I’ll clear you with Network Systems as well. Frankly, as far as I’m concerned you have carte blanche on this. Just keep me updated.”



Throughout the night there was a restlessness aboard the Ship. Extra patrols both on the ground and in the commercial sections and decks surrounding Habitat did little to alleviate peoples’ anxieties. Strangers in clubs and bars were wary of one another and people locked their doors and windows against the unknown dangers of the night.

Club patrons were fewer and seemed more aggressive. There were a more fights than normal and it seemed the extra patrols were needed just to keep order and peace. In the parks and common areas of Habitat and the Commercial District, rallies, vigils and prayer meetings were held in memory of Wilhelmina Eiders and in hopes of the swift capture of her killer. In homes, young children asked difficult questions of their parents and single women living alone gathered together with friends for comfort, or huddled alone behind the walls of

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their homes. There was a monster out there; not an alien menace, but a Human predator, perhaps all the more frightening for its Humanity. The first murder to occur aboard the Ship had changed everyone, it seemed, and not for the better.



Colonel Bloom began her morning run before dawn could truly steal the darkness from the sky. The faded grey of the coming day matched the hue of her sweatshirt and shorts. She was pushing herself today: setting a faster pace on the rougher terrain of the hiking trails instead of the walking paths. She staggered over the unfamiliar ground, once tripping over a root and another time misjudging the difference in height between two sections of the punishing landscape. The worse the run made her feel physically, the harder she pushed herself. The mission was falling apart. The mission was her responsibility. Bloom ran harder, faster, jarring her knees, making her lungs burn cold. Her throat was dry, sore; her heart pounded in her ears. Unbidden, images of the beacon debris and shots from the scene of Wilhelmina Eiders' murder flashed through her mind. She felt culpable; this was her command and ultimately that meant what went wrong was her responsibility. Bloom had been the base commander at Fort Arapaho prior to Shiprise; she'd been in charge when Gabriel Ashe's followers had attacked. She still lost sleep at night thinking about the lives lost under her jurisdiction that night. Now she had another name, another life, to add to the list of

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those who'd died on her watch. Bloom knew the name of each and every person who'd—

With a yell of anger and surprise, Bloom fell hard and face-first into the beaten dirt path. Her hands slid out from her as she tried to break her fall. She'd caught her foot on another root. Bloom untangled herself and sat up. She'd torn the ball of her right hand, flat pieces of gravel pushed in under the skin. Wiping warm moisture from her mouth, she discovered she'd also split her lip.

“Fuck!” Bloom yelled.

As she got up, brushing dirt from her jogging pants with her good hand, an electronic bleating sounded from nearby. Bloom scanned the ground, trying to find where her linx had fallen to. She picked it up, blew dirt from it and put it back in her ear.

“Bloom here,”

“Colonel it's Commander Castaneda,” her security officer said.

Castaneda's voice sounded tinny in Bloom's ear. The linx had probably been damaged in the fall; cheap piece of shit.

“Turn up your gain, Commander. I can barely hear you.”

“Is this better?” Castaneda asked, a moment later.

The signal was only somewhat better.

“It'll do,” Bloom said, “What's your status Commander?”

“Colonel I'm on Habitat. Section Nine-Delta.”

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“Oh, fuck no.”

“I’m afraid so ma’am. There’s been another murder.”

“I’m on my way.”



The coroner’s transport was just pulling away when Bloom arrived, still dressed in her dirty sweats. She returned the salute of a young security officer and had him escort her to the scene.

“Colonel,” Castaneda said as she greeted Bloom, “It looks to be the same MO. The victim’s name is Naala Phonsavath.”

“Any connection with Wilhelmina Eiders?” Bloom asked.

“We’re working on that now,” Castaneda said.

“What the fuck is going on?” Bloom hissed, “Commander, I’ll be in my office. Contact me as soon as you have anything.”

“Yes ma’am.”



Bloom beat the press to Santino’s door. She linxed him as soon as she reached her office. The Governor of the Ship’s Civilian Authority hadn’t even gotten up yet. Nevertheless, Bloom bore the full force of Santino’s lividity. She found it hard to believe the rage and bluster being directed her way was coming from the same man who had been hand-picked by the Pope to ask the Ship the most pressing and urgent spiritual questions that Humankind had ever faced.

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“This is out of hand now, Colonel!” Santino protested angrily from the center console screen on Bloom’s desk, “Two murders in as many days? You hadn’t mentioned to me that you suspected a serial killer was stalking the Ship! If we’d have had that information--”

“It wouldn’t have changed a fucking thing Governor,” Bloom shouted.

She’d had enough of Santino’s belligerence. “Naala Phonsavath was last seen about thirty-six hours before Wilhelmina Eiders was discovered. She was the first victim, *Mister* Santino; she was discovered second, but Naala Phonsavath died first! We’re only just now beginning to understand the nature of the threat we’re dealing with.”

“Is another dead girl going to be discovered tomorrow, Colonel?”

“You know goddamn well that I have no way of controlling that!” Bloom snapped, “We’re doing everything in our power to catch this bastard.”

“And what *exactly* are you doing to catch him, Colonel?”

“Everything in my power.”

“Everything?” the head of the Civilian Authority sneered, “Is that why we haven’t left for Earth, yet?”

Bloom turned to deadly ice.

“That, Governor is *not* a question you have any right to ask. I will not remind you one last time *Mister* Santino that I do not—in *any* way—answer to you. If you insist on continuing to behave as though your position entitles you to

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some sort of executive or command privilege, I *will* remove you. As of right now Governor, our little chats are over. You can get all your information from the Ship's Grid, or from the daily briefings my Communications Chief releases."

"I'll protest this,"

"Go ahead," Bloom laughed, "If you transmit to the World Ship Summit now, they should receive your protest in...oh, about fifty thousand years."



Like many of the senior members of the Ship's crew, Doctor Simone Cole had originally been part of the Ship Survey Expedition. Cole had been one of the few appointments to the SSE not made by Mark Echohawk. The World Ship Summit had decided on her appointment, because of her background.

Cole graduated from Sheffield University Medical School with specializations in surgical medicine, forensic medicine and psychiatry. She later specialized in abnormal psychiatry and trained with New Scotland Yard as a special investigator before joining Interpol's Criminal Analysis Sub-Directorate. During her time with the CAS, Cole was instrumental in the capture of numerous serial killers, including Ludwig Gorsky, the so-called "Red Hand Killer" of Copenhagen. Her expertise was likewise enlisted by the American Federal Bureau of Investigations to help solve a nationwide killing spree. Cole had discovered that the murders

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were the work of two killers, literally playing chess against one another.

It was her experience with abnormal psychology and her expertise as a physician that attracted the World Ship Summit to her. They had needed a staff physician on the Ship Survey Expedition, as well as someone who could attempt to “profile” the aliens who had built the Ship. Her background was also put to use monitoring the members of the SSE to ensure that they didn’t suffer any psychological trauma from proximity to such a massive alien artifact.

Now, Cole was head of the Ship’s Hospital and member of both the Ship’s Alien Studies department as well as the Ship’s criminology department. She sat in her office, the pages of the reports on Wilhelmina Eiders and Naala Phonsavath spread around her desk. She sipped from a cup of tea, stretched and tied back her long, dark blonde hair. Cole had never expected that she’d be profiling a serial killer aboard the Ship. But here she was, doing just that.

Both young women had been killed in the same fashion: multiple injections of deadly chemicals, poisonous enzymes and radioactive isotopes. Both women had disappeared roughly thirty hours before being killed. They’d both been found in their beds, naked. No physical evidence at the scene that could be linked to a killer. No sign of forced entry into the premises.

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Those were the similarities. The differences were even more confounding: Wilhelmina Eiders had been seen in a nightclub with the prime—albeit as of yet unidentified—suspect. Eiders had no tattoos, no piercings other than her ears. There was evidence on her person of recent sexual intercourse, including traces of sanitizing lubricant and semen. However, because of the condition of the body Cole could not determine if the intercourse had been consensual or not. Further complicating matters, the poisons that had saturated Eiders' body and caused the internal haemorrhaging and tissue liquefaction had also rendered what traces of semen that could be found useless for DNA testing. Likewise, many young people waxed their bodies hairless, so neither Eiders nor the owner of the semen had left pubic hair.

Naala Phonsavath was another matter: She had few friends outside work and seemingly never went out. While Miss Eiders had been aboard Ship alone, Phonsavath lived alone, but had come aboard with her parents and two older siblings, one brother, one sister. Miss Phonsavath had both nipple and labial piercings but there was no evidence of any recent sexual activity, which led Cole to suspect the killer had not been the one to leave semen inside of Eiders. There were other differences: Eiders was Austrian; Phonsavath Cambodian. Their body-types were likewise different: Eiders had been tall, broad shouldered and wide-hipped with large breasts. Phonsavath had been slender of build and height, far

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more delicate. At twenty-five and twenty-two, the only connection between the two victims was that they were women alike in age.

This was not the work of an inexperienced killer. The meticulousness used in the careful abduction of the victims, the chemicals used, the precise location of the injections and the time between each set of injections; all were the hallmarks of someone who had honed and mastered their methodology. And this was a killer who enjoyed his victims' suffering: the selected method of execution was one that would have taken several hours, during which the victims' agony would have been absolute. But torture didn't seem to be an objective, in and of itself. There were far easier ways of inflicting pain on a person; more effective means. Torture was not, therefore, a likely goal of the murders.

"I can't quite suss you out you bastard," Cole murmured, "But I'm getting there. Just wait...just wait. No more girls, okay? Wait for us to catch you."

Cole held no hope that her muttered mantra would have any effect. However, it was part of her process; a habit she'd picked up long ago.

"We *will* get you," she whispered, "It's just a question of when."

But it was the question of time that most troubled Cole. For though with time the killer would be caught, she also knew time was running out for the women who could or would be the

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killer's next victims. Cole sincerely hoped the victims weren't random. It was unusual—though not unheard of—for serial killers to select victims who were so radically different from one another. Usually, there was some similarity, some connection. Even if it was only evident according to the killer's twisted logic. Cole could work it out, given enough time and information. Unfortunately more time and additional information would come at the price of more women's lives. But if there was no connection, no logic, no method to the killer's madness, it would make him all the more difficult to catch.



In the heart of the Ship's Commercial District was a massive stadium arena. It was large enough to hold what had been supposed to have been the full complement of Shipflight, two hundred thousand passengers and crew. Although it had been used many times since the Ship had taken on passengers, it had never been filled to capacity; the crowd gathered was sizeable nonetheless and the angry murmur of thousands of voices buzzing like bees echoed through the rest of the arena.

“Jesus Christ, that's a huge crowd,” Santino observed. The seating in the arena was modular and could be configured or reconfigured within minutes, depending on the requirements of the assembly. Today the arrangement was a small horseshoe, facing an elevated stage. Santino was waiting backstage with his aides and several of the district representatives for the Ship's Civilian Authority. Word had

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been put out over the intraship Grid only this morning about the assembly. Santino hadn't expected this kind of turnout.

"What's the final head-count?" he asked.

"Fifty-three thousand, six hundred and twenty-one, according to the gate," Nico Waiwatie, his assistant, replied.

"A little more than a third of the population," Santino said, impressed.

"Just about," Waiwatie confirmed.

Santino nodded. He hadn't wanted to do this, but Colonel Bloom had left him no other choice.

"Let's go," he said.

Waiwatie gestured for the other members of the Ship Civilian Authority to follow and Santino led the procession onto the stage.

When the members of the Ship's Civilian Authority came into view, the buzz of the crowd quickly died amid a scattering of polite applause. Santino was announced as he stepped to the podium. Santino's image appeared on the massive display over the stage. The three dimensional likeness was impressive and effective when used during concerts and sporting events. Now Santino hoped merely to be seen. He was more than a little uncomfortable with the Orwellian implications of it all. But he accepted that what was important was the message they were here to get across, not the means that delivered it. The crowd watched him expectantly. Thousands of faces; Santino was used to public speaking, but not on this scale.

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“Ladies and gentlemen,” Santino began; noticing as more than a few people cocked their heads.

Their headsets were equipped with Babelware, giving them a near-instant translation of Santino’s speech into the language of their choice.

“As you all know, in the last two days the bodies of two young women have been found.”

Santino waited for the murmurs to die down.

“The women were the victims of homicide,” he said, “The military authority is investigating these crimes. I am very confident in their determination and ability to find those responsible. But I have less confidence, much less confidence in their ability to keep us informed and protected. They are after all, military officers first and foremost. They are not civilian officers of the Peace. So the question becomes: *what can we do to protect ourselves; to protect one another?* We, your councillors and representatives of the Ship Civilian Authority have been studying the issue. We have to stand together; we have to stand united; united against a murderer stalking women; united against the single-mindedness of a military authority that is reacting to the murders instead of acting to protect us.”

The crowd bust into applause and Santino found himself harkening back to his days as an activist, fighting to establish what would later become the World Aboriginal Protectorates. He’d spoken at rallies then, too. His fiery orations then had riled crowds, led protests and fuelled the fires of the near-insurgency that had been the Aboriginal Rights Movement.

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He'd been younger then; the passion of his ideals and anger at the injustices he'd witnessed hadn't yet been reigned in by the temperance that came only with experience. Santino had fought long and hard in that struggle, eventually becoming one of the leaders of the movement. He'd then spent so much time in government that he'd forgotten this: activism, assemblies, the stirring up of crowds and passions. He'd forgotten how good it could feel. Santino raised his hands so the din was silenced.

“Together we can protect ourselves; together we can make our voices heard loud enough that the military authority will have to listen! The military can run the Shipflight mission, but they cannot run civil defence! This is why we must form a civil defence league of our own; protect our interests, our rights, our *children* and our lives! We will not let the Military continue to fail to guard us and we will not let them dictate the terms of our safety!”

And this time as the crowd cheered, Santino did nothing to silence them.

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SIX

TRIBULATIONS

The Ship's control entity rarely spoke. Unless it was relaying navigational data on the Command Deck or research information in the Science Archives, the Ship Control Entity was largely silent. The directional maps and locator systems in the tramways, lifts and corridors of the Ship had been equipped with a Human female's voice, because studies suggested this voice would be more comforting and accessible to the passengers than the Ship's crystalline timbre. Sometimes, other than on the Command Deck or in the research facilities, the Ship didn't answer at all.

This was the dilemma Bloom faced: the Ship wasn't speaking to her. At least, it wasn't answering her questions regarding Shipflight. She was on the Command Deck, sitting in the office that she maintained there. They'd gone a full

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twenty-four hours without another body being discovered. But that didn't mean a woman hadn't been killed and it certainly didn't mean that the killing had stopped.

Bloom felt so many things at once it was overwhelming. Uncertainty and the unfamiliar and wholly unwelcome feeling of self-doubt battled each other for command of her mind. Behind them, like rebellious underlings were anger, frustration and fear. Bloom's disciplined routine helped. The five AM runs, the distraction of regular duty, an hour's combat sparring in the afternoon and the seemingly endless meetings and status reports from the Ship's many departments. Even with the busy-work, the last three days had taken their toll.

Major Benedict's research had confirmed his earlier suspicions: the hyperlink beacon's destruction had occurred in the same relative time frame as the Cataclysm that had wiped out the dinosaurs at the end of the Cretaceous. Both events appeared to have occurred within the same window of a few hundred thousand years; while the time span seemed vast, on a cosmological scale the two events had happened in close sequence.

Whatever had destroyed the hyperlink beacon and why was irrelevant; the result was the same: they had no access to the League of Worlds or its heirs. Before continuing onwards into the heart of League-controlled space, the Ship deployed

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probes and used its sensor arrays to both update its navigational data and to search for some sign of life from the League. Although their star charts had been successfully revised, there was nothing from the League.

Bloom suspected that whatever had happened, it had been initiated with a highly coordinated attack against the hyperlink beacon network; probably not against the entire network, but certainly against key beacons. By isolating different parts of the League from one another, an attacking force could use small, careful strikes to divide the League's forces before a major offensive. Bloom was now convinced it had been hostile action that silenced the hyperlink network and set the stage for whatever had come next. But God, how she hoped she was wrong.

“So what should I do?” she asked the Ship after voicing her suspicions aloud, “Do we proceed forward into unknown and potentially hostile territory or should I order the mission aborted and return to Earth?”

The Ship Control Entity remained silent. Bloom felt like a supplicant praying to a god that did not answer, or worse, that did not exist. She knew the Control Entity was there, but not why it wouldn't respond. And she knew that it could hear her. This knowledge only worsened her frustration. Was the Ship Control Entity testing them yet again? From the moment the Ship had been discovered back on Earth, it had been observing mankind; first their attempts to discover what it was, then their attempts to examine and interact with it. The possibility that

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these tests of Human understanding and adaptability were still going on offended Bloom, though she had to admit—at least privately—that the Ship’s builders, the Eoulf, had been exponentially more advanced than Humankind, and that their studies could well take generations. But if all this was just another test, if all this was to study some arcane aspect of Human behaviour, then she swore that she would find a way to hold the Ship and its builders or their heirs accountable.



Commander Castaneda met with Major Benedict, in the Major’s office. While smaller than Bloom’s, Benedict’s office still boasted a view of Habitat as well as a sitting area around a small oval table. It was similar in many ways to Castaneda’s own office, a few levels down from Command Ring, except Castaneda’s offices were annexed to an armoury.. While she found Benedict more tranquil, more casual than the Colonel, Castaneda felt he was somehow less accessible than Bloom. Bloom was strong-willed; a big personality prone to bluster. Castaneda identified with this, because she felt similar in many respects to Bloom—if not quite as angry. Major Benedict was more serious, less casual and yet far more relaxed. Benedict and Castaneda were sitting on the wide windowsill behind his desk, looking at Habitat below. The light projected from the artificial sky surrounding the small green and brown pseudo-world warmed their skin as it filtered through the office windows.

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“Governor Santino’s stirred up a real hornet’s nest,” Benedict said, “Public protests, neighbourhood patrols; goddamned vigilante squads are what they are.”

“I know,” Castaneda replied, “I’ve had to take officers from the additional patrol routes to keep an eye on the demonstrators and to guard the sensitive areas of Habitat and the Ship.”

“Any arrests?”

“No sir,” Castaneda said, “And not much progress on the murders, either.”

“At least nobody else’s died.”

The idea was small comfort to Castaneda, “No; not yet.” She said, “We’ve narrowed the list of suspects down, but we’re still looking at twenty-three different individuals. All of them are involved either in medical or agri-cloning, all of them with borderline Personality Evaluations by the Ship Passenger Review Select Committee.”

Benedict shrugged, gesturing dismissively.

“Personality Evaluations aren’t evidence of much,” he said, “Gabriel Ashe’s PE never set off any alarm bells; nor did Ludwig Gorsky.”

“Only because neither of them were properly tested. When Gorsky was retested in prison his PE tests proved how dangerous he was.”

“The key to that was ‘properly tested’, Commander. The people doing the Personality Evaluation tests had to test half a million people in a few weeks. I’m sure errors abound.”

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“Then perhaps we should retest everyone,” Castaneda said, “Starting with the names on this list.”

“If the suspect is on this list that might alert him to how close we are.”

“Where’s he going to go?”

“There’s a few hundred thousand miles of habitable tunnels, chambers and passages aboard the Ship. It’s very easy for someone to get lost here, if they wanted to.”

“Retesting these people could also help us find him before he kills again.”

“I’ll discuss it with the Colonel. Keep at their background and history files; maybe you’ll turn up something else.”

“And maybe another young woman’s going to die while we piss about.”



Juan Carlos Rejas’ head was heavy and throbbing, his tongue thick and foul when he woke up. He’d binged the night before, deciding to go out and drink instead of giving into his anger yet again. Things were getting out of hand; he couldn’t even remember what he’d done last night. He had to be careful, especially considering everything that was happening now.

Juan Carlos lit a cigarette and climbed from bed, thinking back to his days as a youth in Columbia. He’d had blackouts before, back home. In those days they were common. The alcohol, the drugs...always the drugs...and then there were all the

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things he'd done after...when he'd been part of the United Trinity Observants. All those dark times he thought he'd put behind him. But the past, he supposed, wouldn't stay buried in a shallow grave.

In the kitchen, Juan Carlos started coffee and switched on his linx. There were over forty messages. Twenty-three of them were text-only; the rest were text and video, all but five from Allison. These he deleted; Juan Carlos wasn't ready to deal with her. The final five were from colleagues and coworkers: Three were from Peter Paulson, the head of Alien Studies. Juan deleted these, as well. The last two Sonia Aiziz had sent, about the artifact he'd sent to her for translation. The most recent was flagged "important". He opened the video linx message.

Sonia Aiziz

I was hoping to catch you live, but I guess you're not available. Juan, I've just finished work translating the religious icon that you found in the Ship's Archives. Enclosed are files that will give you a full report, but allow me to summarize.

The artifact is not actually a religious icon. It is from a civilization that actually pre-dates the founding of the League of Worlds. It's a very interesting culture, although only what other races recorded about them is known.

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They were called the *Marak*, which when literally translated means Far Seers, apparently because they were able to see through time. I've spoken to Doctor N'banga and believe it or not that isn't necessarily as farfetched as it seems. The *Marak*'s ability was generally limited, except for a few who followed a rigorous discipline from birth, designed to give them what was called the Great Sight.

The Far Seers with the Great Sight, called the *Nai'Marak*, created icons from materials meant to survive until the predicted era came to pass. These icons were usually kept secret until close to the time they predicted.

The statuette you sent to me depicts a woman, or more precisely a female figure, known as the Queen of Light and Sorrow. She is indeed a martyr figure, but her martyrdom was not meant to be the foundation of a religion, but the beginning of an elaborate prophecy cycle.

Juan laughed as he paused the message. With everything he'd been through over the last several days, he'd completely forgotten about the artefact. It seemed a stupid thing, now; a pointless relic left over from a life he couldn't lead anymore. Juan Carlos shut off his console and leaned back in his chair. He smoked two more cigarettes in a row, while thinking about the dark absurdity of it all.



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Castaneda reported for duty at Security's Station Command. Lieutenant Baxter, who'd been Officer of the Watch during the night shift, saluted and handed Castaneda a handheld console.

"What's the report, Bax?" she asked, sitting down.

"Panicky missing persons reports—all of them false," Bax said, "We hand twenty-three of them."

"Christ,"

"Oh, it gets better boss," Bax said, "Sixteen assaults, including five mutuals, one stabbing and one nightclub was shut down because of threats made against the owner, patrons and property."

"How many of these incidents involved members of the Governor's Citizen Action Commission?"

"Most of them," Bax sighed.

Castaneda studied the handheld before pressing a button that transferred the data to the main console on her desk.

"This is bloody ridiculous," Castaneda said, sitting down and reading the data, "Something's got to be done. We were barely able to cover all the patrol routes last night!"

"We have eight more people in the tanks," Bax said, "Various charges, minor stuff."

Castaneda leaned back in her chair, propped a leg up on the desk and studied Baxter's face.

"We've got to crack these murders soon," she said, "The whole Habitat's falling apart."

"People react to danger in different ways," Baxter replied, "I've seen it before."

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“Yeah...you were a cop in Toronto, weren't you? During the Windsor Riots?”

Bax nodded.

“It started off like this. People just getting uglier and uglier, anger turning to rage...and then, boom.”

“Yeah; boom,” Castaneda concurred, “I've seen it, too. I was stationed in the Gulf during the last Israel-Palestine war. Tensions build and build then all it takes is one bloody asshole to set things off.”

Baxter nodded, his eyes staring at some distant point beneath the floor.

“You look like shit Baxter,” Castaneda said, “Go home and get some sleep. You're relieved until tonight's shift.”

Baxter was just turning to leave when an alert chimed from Castaneda's console.

“Shit!” She swore.

She put her linx headset into her ear and toggled on the comm function. Already she felt a dread foreboding.

“Castaneda,” she said.

Baxter stopped in the doorway, toggling his headset onto the channel.

“Detective Hall here Boss,”

The grim tone of Hall's voice already told Castaneda what she didn't want to hear.

“We have another body,” Hall said, “Luanne Riverstone; reported missing the night before last.”

“Christ,” Castaneda swore, shaking her head, “Same MO?”

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“Exactly the same,”

“Contact Doctor Cole,” Castaneda ordered, “Once you’ve wrapped things up at the scene, meet us in Cole’s office. Hopefully we’ll catch a break with this one.”



Bloom and Benedict took the lift to the Command Deck. Because they’d been parked in the M2 Globular Cluster for several days now, there was only a skeleton staff in the crew pit below.

“We can’t continue forward,” Bloom said, “Not like this.”

“I’m inclined to agree,” Benedict answered.

“Officer of the watch,” Bloom called as she stepped to the gantry rail overlooking the work pit, “Make ready for departure!”

“On what heading Colonel?”

Bloom stared out at the expectant faces below her, the people scattered among banks of systems and displays. The officers that worked the pit waited to hear what she would say.

“Earth,” Bloom said, heavily. The tension broke with those words, relief becoming the predominant emotion, disappointment running close behind. But there were orders to follow, duties to perform; even returning to Earth, the mission a failure, was better than staying here, with nothing to do.

“All hands on deck,” the Officer of the Watch, a Commander whose name Bloom couldn’t remember called.

“All senior department heads to the Command Deck briefing room,” Benedict intoned.

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They'd been in the M2 Globular Cluster for several days now, and Juan Carlos was already growing tired of the view. To be sure, day and night the skies over Habitat revealed untold wonders and mysteries of the cosmos. But he had become so accustomed to looking up at the sky and seeing the striations of stellar dust and glowing orbs of nursing stars that he was tired of it.

He was sitting on the roof of his building, smoking and thinking about the last few days, about the things he'd done. Juan Carlos regretted how things between him and Allison had reawakened so many old demons for him. He sometimes felt he was two people: one, the Juan Carlos who enjoyed life and his work, loved people and being around them. Then there was the other Juan Carlos, who was about the dark, the hunt, women, drugs...Juan Carlos had tried so hard to get away from that; to live a good life; a clean life. But in the end it seemed that he could not deny his darker nature; he could only be who he was. He could only be what he was; he could only do what he did.

Juan Carlos climbed down from the roof of his building, carefully placing his hands and feet along the fissures and irregularities that were the hallmarks of the Ship's architecture. It was an easy descent, especially for someone who'd grown up mountain climbing.

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Back inside, Juan went through the other linxes waiting for him; another one from Allison. She'd sent a video linx; primed to play as soon as he selected it. Allison appeared on the console screen.

Allison

Juan, I know you're still upset with me. And I think I understand why. Believe me when I say I really want us to be friends, Juan. I'd like it if we could get together and work things out. Can we meet please? Can we talk? I miss you. Please say yes. I've got a booth at the *D'Oro*; it's in the West Commercial district, Level Nine. I booked for eight o'clock. Please Juan, will you meet with me there?

Juan sneered. Allison was offering herself up to him. This latest phase of the game was about to start.



"How close are you as of right now, to finding a suspect?" Bloom asked Castaneda.

The senior staff and department heads were gathered in the Command Centre's briefing room. Bloom hoped that this meeting would produce an eleventh hour reprieve; a means of salvaging Shipflight.

"With the access you authorized to the Passengers' qualification exams," Castaneda said, "We've put together a list of potential suspects. It's extensive, but I'm confident that we can filter through."

"How extensive?" Major Benedict asked.

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“We have twenty-seven candidates,” Simone Cole said, “Pruned from a list of nearly one hundred times that number. Our criteria are men, twenty to thirty-five with dark hair and eyes, of Latin, Mediterranean or Semitic descent. We’re looking at subjects who work in pharmacology, biochemistry, medicine, agricloning and related fields. We’re also looking for people who have any sort of background, either educational or practical, relating to those fields. Likewise the psych profiles of our subjects are under scrutiny, to see what their evaluation scores were.”

“How much time?” Bloom asked, “Are you close to an arrest?”

Castaneda shook her head.

“The lack of physical evidence is crippling us,” she said, “There’s nothing to point to any specific individual. We’re profiling the victims in hopes of finding some sort of common link.”

“I’ve never in my life encountered a murderer this thorough,” Cole said, “We’ve had people go over thousands of security recordings from the Ship; nothing. There is no hair, skin, fluid or effluence from the killer; no defensive injuries on the victims; no fibre or material.”

“I thought one of the victims had been sexually assaulted,” Benedict interjected.

“No,” Cole said, “Evidence was that the victim had sexual *intercourse* in the twenty four hours prior to her death. We can’t positively rule out assault, but most likely the intercourse was consensual. Otherwise we would most

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probably have found similar evidence on the other victims, or if not, signs of struggle on the victim. The point is that this killer is leaving nothing of himself behind.”

“The victims are being abducted from their homes,” Castaneda said, “They’re being brought to an area the killer’s prepared so he can torture and murder them and then they’re being returned to their beds. And yet we have no witnesses to any of the movements, no one seen surveiling the victims or their residences. We believe he’s using the systems and maintenance tunnels beneath Habitat to get around. We’ve been searching the access levels under Habitat for signs of recent activity. Unfortunately, it’s a maze down there. We’ve asked the Ship to seal off as many of the restricted sections as possible and it’s complied, but we still have hundreds of kilometres of passageways to search.”

“And we still have no idea how our UNSUB is choosing his victims,” Cole concluded.

“In short we really don’t have much of anything to go on,” Bloom said, “And you’ll need more time to find him.”

“That’s correct, Colonel.” Castaneda confirmed.

Bloom slumped in her chair, shaking her head.

“I wish you had better news,” she said, “Because I’m left with no choice now but to scrub this mission. I’ve ordered that we make ready to return to Earth. All ships have been recalled and we will be underway in less than three hours.”

Bloom looked around the conference table. The expressions of defeat and frustration on everyone’s faces were perfect reflections of her own feelings.

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“We’re just not ready to be out here,” Bloom said. She and Benedict were in the Command Deck observatory; a platform set in the middle of a large, spherical chamber. The chamber’s walls were an imaging system designed to show space around the Ship. They were able to focus in on anything within the Ship’s sensor range. In this case they were focused on an image of Earth’s solar system, a little more than fifty-thousand light years away. Magnified and enhanced, the image showed the star at the heart of the system. Elliptical arcs traced around it at various points; each arc describing the orbit of one of the star’s satellite worlds. Earth was highlighted by a target lock, on the far side of the Sun relative to the Ship.

“I mean, we were tested; the Human race was tested based on our level of technological and cognitive development. But I think the Ship’s decision was a fluke,” she said, “One of the criteria the Ship used in evaluating us was a significant level of spiritual enlightenment. Remember when the Vatican IV delegates came to question the Ship?”

Benedict nodded.

“Well, what if the Ship assumed that they spoke for all of Humanity?”

“In a very real sense, they were speaking for Humanity. Roughly nine-tenths of the world believes in one form of spirituality or another,” Benedict said, “That in and of itself seems indicative of a significant level of spiritual enlightenment.”

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“But when you consider that the world’s major religions have essentially never agreed with one another,” Bloom said, “And when you consider that at one time or another every fucking religious group out there has been persecuted by another group...when you think about the wars, the violence, the bloodshed caused by all the religions in the world...Exo, does that really sound like enlightenment to you? And that’s just one example of just how unenlightened we are. The constant wars, the poverty, the ridiculous political squabbling...”

Bloom shook her head.

“I can’t think of any good reason for us to be welcomed into the community of the stars,” she said, “Can you? What if the silence from the hyperlink beacon network’s just the League’s version of screening its calls? What if the Ship called ahead and they told it to tell us they weren’t home?”

“But the beacon we found was destroyed millions of years ago,” Benedict said.

Bloom sneered and waved her hand dismissively.

“Please,” she said, “All they’d have had to do was throw the beacon into time warp for as long as it took to move it from one end of the Cluster to another. How would *we* be able to tell the difference?”

“You think the League itself is engineering things so we turn back?” Benedict asked, “Colonel, please tell me you don’t think the murders are part of that.”

“No,” Bloom said, “No. That’s all us. That’s far too fucking Human for anyone else to come up with it.”

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“That’s not much comfort though, is it?”

“No Exo, it isn’t.”

“But if the League did deliberately silence the network,” Benedict said, “What if they did that as yet another test? What if it’s yet another way of finding out if we’re ready to be out here? It could be a means of examining how we react to an adverse situation.”

“I’ve thought of that. I don’t like the idea, but I can’t discount it. I’m offended that we might still be nothing more than rats in a maze.”

Benedict smiled.

“How many millions of years of evolution separate Humans from rats, Colonel?” he asked, “How many millions more separate us from the races of the League? The silence from the League might be another test; we know the League—or at least the Ship—value spirituality; maybe this is a test of our spirit of adventure, our pioneering.”

Bloom nodded her head pensively and then sighed.

“It’s food for thought. But it’s too late. We’re going home; there’s a murderer aboard, and I won’t have him continue treating my Ship like his own private game preserve.” Bloom turned and made her way across the catwalk to the exit from the observatory.



“Officer of the Watch,” Bloom called when she reached her command station.

“Yes, Colonel?” the same anonymous officer asked.

“What is the Ship’s status?”

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“All systems are go,” the officer said, “We are ready for departure.”

“Colonel Bloom,” Lieutenant Kalenga called.

Bloom turned to face Lieutenant Kalenga.

“What is it, Lieutenant?”

“We’re receiving a hyperlink signal, Colonel.”

“What? From where?”

“Earth,”



Allison brewed herself a pot of coffee and sat on her small balcony outside. At least, she reflected, this was as *outside* as one could get aboard the Ship. She stared up at the sky. It was midafternoon, Allison’s favourite time of day. The sky was beginning to dim with the approach of night and the alien hues of the M2 Globular Cluster were beginning to show through more clearly. Allison had taken her portable console out with her and she was browsing the Ship’s Grid, trying to find something to watch or read or play; something to take her mind off of other things; like Juan Carlos standing her up last night. She’d gotten the message, loud and clear: he hated her. It was over. Allison blamed herself. She’d known Juan Carlos well enough that they couldn’t just sleep together without it meaning more to him; without him wanting—expecting—something more serious. She was angry over the whole situation; it seemed either she was never ready for a relationship or the guys she was with weren’t ready. And when she and the guy were both ready, it was something else; like

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with James. God; it still hurt to think about James. She'd loved him so much.

James had been one of Professor Mark Echohawk's assistants and had worked with him as part of the Ship Survey Expedition. He was also an old friend of Laura Echohawk's, and he'd witnessed the Professor's murder at the hands of Francis George Franck. After Echohawk's funeral, James stayed in Los Angeles to wrap up the Professor's affairs at the university. He had been struggling with his own issues related to Professor Echohawk's death and Allison had believed she could help him through them. But she couldn't, and James had turned to drugs to numb himself. He slipped into a spiral of addiction and depression and left Allison. The last time she'd heard from him was in a lawyer's letter: As an original member of the SSE, James was given a space aboard the Ship as a passenger; he'd signed over his Ticket to her. It was a farewell gesture; one for which Allison was grateful, although she wished she could have saved James. And just as with James, all she had left from her achingly brief time with Juan Carlos was regret.

For the first time since coming aboard the Ship, Allison felt alone. She had no family aboard the Ship and most of her friends—including Laura Echohawk—were back on Earth. Allison looked over the railing of her balcony, her thoughts turning over and over in her mind. She wasn't even aware of

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the presence invading her apartment; by the time she felt the needle stab into the back of her neck, it was too late.



Colonel Margaret Bloom sat in her office on the Command Deck. The console before her bore a frozen image from the end of the transmission from Earth. The image was low-res, staticky and yet was probably also the single-most horrifying thing Bloom had seen. She'd played the recording over and over again for the last several minutes. Each time left her with the same cold feeling of terror in her stomach and spine. No matter how often she viewed the recording, it never lost its gut-wrenching impact.

The images recorded were shaky; done with a handheld camera, no doubt. They showed a panoramic view of Geneva, the streets and buildings around the facility Bloom knew housed the Earth hyperlink beacon. The skies overhead were blackened by smoke and soot. The buildings were burning, crumbled; people were running, screaming, fleeing in a desperate panic. At first the scene seemed the simple aftermath of a massive bombardment attack. Until *they* emerged. The first few seconds of the first time she'd watched the broadcast, Bloom was convinced it was a hoax; some sick practical joke. But it wasn't; it wasn't.

From the smoke and ruins and rubble, other people began emerging; first only a few, then dozens, then hundreds of people; a living sea of human bodies. They moved calmly but

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quickly, with single-minded purpose. The way they moved was so coordinated, almost choreographed; Bloom was at first convinced she was watching some sick computer simulation or well-staged fraud. And for the longest time afterward, she wished she'd been right.

The sea of people was coming in at the running, screaming escapees from all sides, herding them in.

“I pray you can see this,” the camera operator yelled over the din in the streets below, “I pray to God that this transmission reaches the Ship.” The voice was heavily accented, betraying a Dutch background. The screams below began dying out. The camera peered over the edge of the rooftop. One crowd of people had reached another. The trapped victims were surrounded. After a few moments of desperate struggle they simply were still, silent and began moving away with the rest of the crowd. A mass of this strange formation headed for the building housing the hyperlink beacon. The sound of gunfire from inside the complex could be heard; the people approaching were hit but did not fall. They bled, but the bleeding ebbed and stopped as quickly as it began.

“This is happening everywhere,” the camera operator said again, “It’s happening in every city around the globe! The people have been infected...they’ve been *invaded* by something...”

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The camera shook and spun around as the operator turned it to face him. It took a moment to auto-focus onto his face; the face of David Van Der Draas.

“Colonel Bloom, if you are hearing this, then please *stay away!* Do not return to Earth! For the love of God, *do not return!*”

The transmission ended with more sounds of gunfire as an alarm began sounding. The camera was dropped, the image breaking up and turning black. The sounds of battle continued a moment longer and then they too cut out.

Bloom shut off the recording, closing her console. She took a shuddering breath and sighed.

“Once again I’m asking for your council,” she said to the empty air.

She knew that the Ship Control Entity was listening, but she still couldn’t shake the feeling that she was praying to an absent God. She wondered if she’d have better luck chanting in Hebrew.

“We’re going forward,” Bloom said, “But I’m sure you already know that. We’re heading into League Space. But I don’t know where to go. There are a dozen worlds immediately accessible to us according to your updated charts. But we want to know...we *need* to know why the League is silent; we need to know what’s happened on Earth, what’s happened to the League. Where do we go, Ship? What world can we head to? How do we learn what the fuck is going on? Where do *you* think we should go?”

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Bloom waited in silence after asking her questions. She waited, her hopes of an answer waning as the silence stretched from seconds into minutes. And then the Ship's voice rumbled from everywhere at once, filling her office with speech formed from the bass crystalline sound of Shipsong:

“YOU MUST GO TO HIDDEK UHL.”

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Great horror is often the precursor of great change. But change can be horrible in and of itself. Even when it is ultimately beneficial, that change can claim many victims. It is not often welcome, because it so often takes the form of chaos.

SEVEN

DESPERATION

For the past forty-eight hours Major Benedict had been overseeing work in the astronomy lab and the observatory, as the Ship and the crew compiled the navigation charts for the voyage to Hiddek Uhl.

When they finally retrieved the necessary information on the alien world from the Ship's archives, he was sitting in his office with Peter Paulson, from Alien Studies, and Captain Alina Tanaka, from Engineering.

"Here it is," Peter had said, as he read the data from the Ship. Everything was filtered by the Ship Control Entity through Human astronomical databases, so they could work with a common frame of reference, "Hiddek Uhl is located in NGC-1365; that's a galaxy in the...Fornax Cluster. It's...oh, my God."

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“What?” Benedict asked, urgently. Peter stared at the major, a baffled look on his face.

“Major, the distance to the Fornax Cluster is over sixty-five million light years.”

Benedict sat back in his chair, trying to come to terms with the implication.

“If the Ship went straight there at full-power,” Tanaka said, “It would take the ship six hundred and fifty thousand years to reach Hiddek Uhl,” she said, “And likely it’s not going to be able to travel at maximum speeds the whole journey. It’s probably going to have to stop and make navigational checks, course corrections and repairs throughout the voyage.”

“What does that mean for us?” Benedict asked.

“Given the distance to be travelled,” Tanaka said, “Given the amount of times the Ship is going to have to stop to re-map everything, dropping in and out of time-warp, it means that the passengers and crew are going to be in stasis for anywhere from one, to five million years.”

The Ship’s top cruising speed was an incredible hundred times the speed of light; but it could only sustain that speed while in a state of time warp, where the normal physical laws did not apply. The staggering velocity meant the Ship was unable to make direct observations of anything outside of itself at speed; therefore its flight path had to be precisely mapped out to avoid what were euphemistically referred to as “catastrophic interactions”. Such interactions included not only collisions with large cosmic bodies, but passing too close

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to heavy gravitational fields such as those of star systems, black holes or dense aggregations of space-time.

Under ideal circumstances the Ship would have been able to plot its entire journey with the aid of the hyperlink network, timing every course correction against its exponentially hyperkinetic travel speeds. But without the network the Ship would have to stop every few thousand light-years to make new astronomical observations, and calculate the next leg of its journey.

The Ship's computer systems were massive, partially organic and spread throughout the vessel in a vast, highly decentralized network. Its processing power was thousands of times greater than the sum total capacity of every computer that had ever existed on Earth. It supported an intelligence, a self-awareness all its own and monitored trillions of internal functions, including keeping the captured, ring-shaped black hole that powered the Ship stable. Despite its processing power, the calculations for faster-than-light travel across millions of light years were so complex and had to account for so many different variables that the Ship would still take weeks to be able to complete them.

Cosmologically speaking, sixty-five million years is a short period of time. But compiling updated star charts and navigational data was necessary before proceeding, because in all that time so much had happened to the cosmic topography.

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Cosmic events relentlessly changed the density, shape and contents of space-time. Stars were born, other stars died. Supernovae and black holes appeared, gravitational wells shifted; comets were hurled into new trajectories; star systems would be obliterated while others bloomed; galaxies collided, some collapsed, others tore themselves apart, still others were born. The cosmos was not a static environment; it was dynamic, chaotic, behaving on a large scale as one ultra massive organism.

Benedict and the astronavigation teams spent hours poring over countless charts, statistics and reams of data produced by the Ship Control Entity for their edification. Most of it was beyond his grasp, and Benedict found himself obsessing over the terrible message from Earth. What had happened? They'd asked the Ship repeatedly, but it hadn't said anything of relevance to the issue since ordering them to Hiddek Uhl.



At last, with word from the Ship that it had completed its calculations for the first leg of the journey, their departure was scheduled within the next twenty-four hours. In the meantime they were planning their mission to the planet's surface. Colonel Bloom and Major Benedict went to the Alien Studies center, where they met with Peter Paulson.

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Peter was also working on the Hiddek Uhl problem, searching the Ship's archives for all relevant data in preparation for an expedition to the planet's surface. The best information they had was aeons out of date and because of the distance to Hiddek Uhl, it wouldn't be possible to make direct observation of the planet until they actually reached Galaxy NGC-1365.

"Hiddek Uhl is—or was—a barren world," he explained to them as they sat in his office.

Suspended in the air over the table between them was a three dimensional map of Hiddek Uhl, along with a smaller series of images and video from the archive database.

"There's very little surface moisture and it is geologically inactive. As you can see there are two moons orbiting Hiddek Uhl."

The smaller moon had a luminous, bluish hue. The larger one was whitish grey, but had at some point in its history fragmented. It was cracked into three large pieces, with meteoroid debris scattered between and around the larger bodies in irregular orbits of their own.

"Hiddek Uhl is similar in many respects to Mars," Peter said, "And unless it's undergone some sort of radical climate change since the Ship's data was compiled, we can probably expect this trip to be very much like a Mars expedition."

Bloom looked away from the impressive floating image before her to study the panel in front of her, on which information about the planet was scrolling.

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“Atmospheric composition’s a little different,” Bloom replied, “Still not breathable, but at least it’s not toxic. It’s also warm enough to forego full suits. Breather helmets and cold weather gear will suffice.”

“I’m a little worried about the gravity,” Benedict said, “The planet’s almost thirty per cent larger than Earth and the atmospheric pressure’s a lot higher than we’re used to.”

“Everything is still within Human tolerances,” Peter said. “The Bugs are equipped with artificial gravity. We can land the expedition on the surface and the Bug can gradually equalize pressure and gravity.”

“Kind of like depressurizing deep sea divers when they come back to the surface,” Benedict said.

“Pretty much,” Bloom agreed. “But we’ll have to very slowly decompress everyone when they return to the Ship.” Benedict made a note on his portable console.

“I’ll check with Doctor Cole. She’ll have to help us set up the hyperbaric system aboard the Bug and aboard the Ship, for when the expedition returns. I still think we might be better off putting everyone into full atmosphere suits.” Bloom shook her head.

“I don’t know about that Exo,” she said, “Chances are the expedition’s goanna be largely archaeological in nature. Full atmosphere suits might be a little bulky for that kind of situation.”

“You still don’t want to consider sending virtual-controlled remotes then?” Benedict asked.

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“If we were going into a dangerous situation then I’d say yes,” Bloom said, “But putting people into virtual chairs and sending down bots just isn’t the same. You can miss things.”

“I agree with Colonel Bloom,” Peter said, “A few years back the Prof—Professor Echohawk—tried using bots on a dig. The experiment failed miserably; some artifacts we were trying to recover were destroyed. That’s not something I think we can risk here.”

Benedict sighed, nodding his head to silently concede the point. Peter studied Benedict and Bloom. Benedict’s reaction was definitely learned from Bloom; he probably wasn’t even aware he’d assimilated that idiosyncrasy. Peter had known Bloom longer than he’d known the Major and he’d seen Bloom making that same gesture of acquiescence many times.

“Okay,” Bloom said, “Let’s discuss the makeup of the expedition’s crew. Other than medical and security officers, the rest of the roster is your call, Peter.”

“Mine?”

Bloom nodded.

“You’re head of Alien Studies,” she said, “This mission’s part of your jurisdiction.”

“I, uh...I’ll have to give it some thought,” Peter said, “To be honest, I never thought I’d be putting an expedition together.”

Bloom nodded and smiled.

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“That’s fine. We’ll need to have another couple of meetings between now and Hiddek Uhl, anyway. Start putting your list together and we’ll talk about it next time.”



Juan Carlos Rejas sat in his living room, smoking one cigarette after another. He’d been awake for two days, consuming a steady diet of stimulants and narcotics. Juan Carlos felt that he had achieved a strange state of clarity; a place from which he was able to look at what he’d done since sleeping with Allison and how similar it seemed to his life before, on Earth, and as a member of the United Trinity Observants.

After realizing what a mess he’d made of his life working as a gigolo on San Andres, Juan Carlos had moved to Mainland Columbia to try and start over. He decided to study at university; to learn something completely removed from the tourism and hotel services training he’d received back home; he’d always had an aptitude for maths and an interest in science, so he entered school at the Medellin University to study chemistry.

Unfortunately, his military service scholarships could only carry him so far. Juan Carlos needed to work. Medellin had few jobs for full-time students; shift work in factories, minimum wage work in the bars and cafes, or work in less reputable businesses. It was one of Juan Carlos’ professors, Alejandro Reynaldo, who offered him a job as his assistant.

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Professor Reynaldo was working on very advanced biochemistry; Juan had a natural aptitude and it was one that *El Profesor* nurtured. But science wasn't Reynaldo's only interest. He was also interested in religion, philosophy, and—most attractive to a young, intelligent student with a taste for philosophy and consciousness expansion—*El Profesor* enjoyed drugs. Reynaldo, in fact, operated a small drug lab on the side.

Any number of students could be found at *El Profesor's* home on any given night of the week. Juan Carlos was one of many regulars. Some nights Professor Reynaldo served Ketamine, other nights LSD. Sometimes it was Ecstasy, sometimes PCP. Whatever the drug and however many students were there, when conversation was possible, it eventually got around to topics of religion and philosophy.

Over the weeks and months, the number of students invited to *El Profesor's* dwindled, until it was only a core group of students; those that Professor Reynaldo trusted in the utmost. One night, he gave these students, Juan Carlos—now an undergraduate—among them, a new drug to try.

“This is a chemical compound developed by a colleague in Europe, designed for an organization to which he and I both belong,” Professor Reynaldo explained as he passed out the pills to his students, “It dissolves under the tongue and is quite fast-acting.”

He took one and watched as his students did the same.

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“In the past several weeks we’ve been speaking about many things having to do with religion, the universe, God,” Reynaldo said, sighing as the drug took hold, “We’ve shared our beliefs and our opinions on many things...We are all Christians; we all believe in the message of the Bible, if not in the religions formed in Christ’s name. In the Bible, Christ spoke of one who would come after Him; an Advocate who would come and complete His work.”

“The Holy Spirit,” Juan Carlos supplied, “Jesus was speaking of the Holy Spirit, wasn’t he?”

Reynaldo smiled.

“Well, that is what we have always been told to believe by those who used Christ’s teachings to control us,” he said, “But in the Middle Ages, there was a movement that believed otherwise; they believed that Jesus was speaking of the Third Person of the Holy Trinity; that God’s Divinity and therefore God Himself was fractured in the making of the world.”

“I’ve heard of this,” Selena, another of Reynaldo’s favourites said, “They believed that the Trinity was composed of God, God made into Man and Man made into God.”

It was no secret that Juan Carlos liked Selena. Though they weren’t involved, she knew it, too and often flirted with him.

“Yes,” Reynaldo said, “And as many of you are also no doubt aware, there is an organization dedicated even now to this belief.”

“The United Trinity Observants,” Hector, another of Reynaldo’s students, said.

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“What if I told you all that the Advocate that Jesus Christ spoke of was already here on Earth?” El Profesor asked, “What if I told you that the Man who is to be made into God walked the Earth in this very day and age? What if I told you that this man is the Son of the Son of God and that He has come to remake the world in His image?”



Juan had felt at home among the United Trinity Observants; the drugs, the strange sermons, the discussions of philosophy and the Celebrations of the Flesh: massive orgies of drugs and sex that were intended to bring about the divinity of their bodies by making sacred the sins of the flesh. Juan Carlos was named as an Acolyte and began training to become a Minister in the Faith. He changed his major from chemistry to theology to better learn to minister. But most glorious of all he and Selena were together now. They would steal away from their studies or just their days to make love. And in the Celebrations of the Flesh, whomever else they brought into their circle of sex, Juan Carlos and Selena always finished together.

Juan Carlos continued to work and study chemistry with Professor Reynaldo, an Apostle in the Church. Juan Carlos did this happily and without question until he realized that *El Profesor* wasn't simply developing new drugs for use in their sacred Rites: he was also at work on a viral bioweapon.

“My young friend,” Reynaldo explained, “Our Holy Father, Gabriel Ashe, the Son of the Son of the Living God

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knows that not all the world will hear His message. He knows that for those who will not see, for those who will not hear, there can be no salvation. What we seek to do is to purify the world of the Faithless. That is why I am working on this device. So that those who Believe can live, I am working first to immunize our brothers and sisters of the United Trinity against the weapon. When the means has been found then we will work on delivering this poison to those who will not hear the Word of our God.”

It was then that Juan Carlos began to have his doubts. War had broken out in South America; General Diaz had created an army to unite the continent into one great nation, with him at its head. When forced conscription began, Juan Carlos, like many others, chose instead to go underground. When Diaz began his eradication campaigns, razing cities, killing people in the hundreds of thousands, Juan was sure that the United Trinity Observants would speak out, do something to fight against the evil that was Diaz. He was wrong.

El Profesor explained, “Though the Devil fights against God, his very actions serve God’s will. Who do you think will use our weapon to destroy the Faithless? The ruler of those who have no faith. We will give Diaz the Kreutz virus and he will purge the world for us.”

It was then that Juan Carlos decided to leave the United Trinity Observants. He tried to get Selena to come with him, but she refused. When she chose to stay, Juan Carlos knew he

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had to go into hiding. The United Trinity Observants were powerful in Colombia; many government officials were among their members and Juan Carlos knew far too much to simply leave. He knew they would come after him.

Juan Carlos left Medellin behind, moving around from one remote part of the country to another. Almost a year later to the day, the Ship was discovered in America. A few months later almost everyone who had been part of the United Trinity Observants was dead; killed during the worldwide mass murders of the Night of Blood. Though it came as no surprise to him when he found out, Juan Carlos was nevertheless devastated by news of Selena's death.

After leaving the cult and beginning his journey around Colombia, Juan made a decision to become celibate; to cultivate his mind and spirit instead. After having been a gigolo and a member of the United Trinity Observants, sex had become far too trivial to him. He decided not only to abstain, but to wait until he found someone he truly and solely wanted to make love to. He had thought that Allison was that woman. And when he'd been wrong, when he'd discovered she didn't feel the same way as he did, he took his hurt out on other women, simply using them for sex. He'd been a fool. He'd hurt Allison most of all by severing their friendship. Juan Carlos decided then and there that it was time to apologize to her; time to make amends. He owed Allison the truth, at least.

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Juan Carlos reached Allison's building and paged her apartment. There was no answer. He paged again and then a third time, to no avail. Finally he went around to the side of the building to where Allison's balcony was. He kicked off his shoes and socks and started climbing the irregular surfaces along the side of the apartment building. He reached her balcony in a couple of minutes and heaved himself over the side. After catching his breath he knocked on the balcony door. There was no answer. It took him a moment to realize it wasn't fully closed; he slid the glass door aside and stepped into Allison's kitchen.

"Allison?" he called, "Allison."

Juan Carlos stepped into the short hallway that divided the kitchen from the living room, bathroom and bedroom. Something was wrong; before coming over, Juan Carlos had checked in with Alien Studies; Allison hadn't been to work for a few days; logically, she should be here, at home.

"Allison," Juan called again, "Allison, are you here?"

He thought he heard something. Juan Carlos froze, not moving, not breathing, concentrating entirely on listening. There it was again: a faint whimper, almost a groan.

"Allison?"

Juan Carlos moved gingerly down the hall. Allison's bedroom door was open. He peered inside.

Allison was lying face-down on the bed. At first, Juan Carlos thought she was wearing a multicoloured, sheer nylon body-stocking. Such things were popular as club wear for both

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men and women. As he got closer, he realized with dawning horror that Allison was naked: the colours on her skin weren't an exotic piece of clothing, but the result of hideously extensive bruising.

“*Madre de Dios!*” he gasped.

Weakly, Allison turned her head to look at him. Even her beautiful face hadn't been spared the merciless bruising.

“Help...” she whimpered.



A small army of doctors and nurses rushed Allison into the surgery. Doctor Cole came in a moment later, as Allison was transferred from the gurney to the operating table. As determined as she was to save the patient, Cole honestly didn't know what good she could do.

“Right,” she said, checking the girl's failing vitals on the monitors, “We need a full body scan; type and cross match blood; tox screen!”

Allison's heart rhythm was weakening, irregular; she was breathing spasmodically; she had an elevated temperature, erratic neurological response; by all rights, Cole's opinion was the girl should be dead already.

“Start dialysis and chelation therapy immediately!” Cole said.

Chelation therapy was primarily used to remove toxins and heavy metals from the body. The chemicals used bonded to the toxins and flushed them out of the body in the urine. The problem was the chelating chemicals themselves could be lethal in the wrong doses.

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“Start a saline drip,” Cole ordered, “Push sixty milligrams of alpha-lipoic acid.”

“Those are toxic levels--” Doctor Patel said.

“Do it!” Cole said, “She’s been exposed to between ten and fifty sieverts of ionizing radiation--”

“Then she’s already dead,” Patel interjected.

“Then we have nothing to lose!” Cole shouted, “Right now this girl is alive and I mean to do everything I can to keep her that way! So with the alpha-Lipoic acid she gets an IV push of five hundred milligrams of calcium DTPA to combat the radiation.”

“That treatment itself might kill her!”

“Doctor Patel,” Cole said, “Either way she is likely to die. At least y way there’s a chance she’ll live. Unless you can recommend a better course of treatment, stay the bloody hell out of my way!”



Commander Nadia Castaneda entered the interrogation room. Juan Carlos Rejas sat on the other side of the table.

“¿Usted preferiría si hablamos español?” Castaneda asked.

“Si, gracias,” Juan Carlos said, lamely.

“Muy bien,” Castaneda said. She leaned across the table.

“So do you know why we’re holding you senior Rejas?” she asked, in Spanish.

“I want to know how Allison is doing,” Juan Carlos answered.

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“No thanks to you, Mister Rejas,” Castaneda said, “She might actually live for a few more hours. So what happened? Did you have a change of heart? Couldn’t go through with it?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the girls you’ve been murdering over the last several days.”

“What?”

“We have eyewitnesses who can place you with the first victim, Wilhelmina Eiders, the night she was last seen alive,” Castaneda said, “We found a semen sample inside her, senior Rejas. What do you suppose the odds are that your DNA will match?”

Of course, Castaneda knew the semen left in Eiders’ vagina was no longer viable for DNA testing. But judging by the frightened look on Rejas face, he didn’t. Castaneda got up and began pacing, her arms folded across her chest.

“You were more careful with the next two victims,” she said, “Presumably you used protection. But why did you pick Allison McQuire? Or were the other three women test runs of some sort? Was Ms. McQuire the intended victim, all along?”

“I didn’t kill anyone!”

“Senior Rejas, we know you had a prior relationship with Ms. McQuire. We also figured out how you were moving the victims: you were seen climbing the side of Ms. McQuire’s building, as well as your own. The only question is where you took your victims to.”

“I didn’t take anyone anywhere!” Juan Carlos protested.

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“Please. We checked into your background. We know, for example, that you were a disciple of the United Trinity Observants until just over three years ago. We also know that you studied biochemistry in university before switching majors to theology. Quite a radical change in direction, wouldn’t you say?”

“I didn’t realize that it was a crime to discover God,” Juan Carlos said with sudden and surprising belligerence. Castaneda picked up her handheld, referring to the file on its display screen.

“It’s not, but murder certainly is,” she retorted, “You were apprenticed to Professor Alejandro Reynaldo before switching majors. You stayed under his tutelage after he recruited you to the United Trinity Observants. Reynaldo was one of the scientists responsible for mutating the Kreutz virus. How much of a hand did you have in its development, I wonder?”

“I left long before he perfected the virus!” Juan Carlos shouted.

“But not before he started experimenting with it,” Castaneda said, “Tell me, senior Rejas, did you develop a taste for that sort of work? Experimenting with biological agents and dangerous chemicals on live subjects?”

“No; how can you think I had anything to do with those girls’ murders?”

Castaneda slammed her hand down on the tabletop.

“How can we not? Three girls have had their insides liquefied, senior Rejas! Wilhelmina Eiders; Naala Phonsavath;

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Luanne Riverstone. And what about Allison McQuire? Couldn't bear the thought of her dying so you called ESU?"

"That isn't what happened!"

"We found the girls. We found you. It's only a matter of time before we find your torture chamber," Castaneda said, "You're going to pay for what those girls went through; I swear it."



Doctor Cole stripped off her bloodstained surgical gown, visor, mask and gloves, tossing them at the appropriate bins. She made her way tiredly into the waiting room outside. It was early morning; she'd been in surgery with Allison McQuire for almost twenty hours. Exhaustion had set in. But Colonel Bloom was waiting for Cole and the doctor knew she still had a little more to do before logging off.

"Doctor, how is she?"

"Truth be told Colonel, I really don't know. The poisons and radiation in her system had already started taking effect. She was haemorrhaging internally; we staunched much of the bleeding and we've been replacing her fluids, performing dialysis and detoxifying her system...she's already had three complete blood transfusions. She has extensive tissue damage; more than we could clone and replace. I can't understand why she's still alive, frankly."

"How long has she got?"

"You know her, don't you?" Cole asked, suddenly making the connection, "She's a friend of your daughter, if I'm not mistaken."

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Bloom closed her eyes, nodding.

“Yeah,”

“This must be difficult for you,” Cole said, “Allison’s a powerful link back home to your daughter.”

Bloom closed her eyes and made a face. The hyperlink message from David Van Der Draas was top secret; besides Bloom and Benedict, nobody else knew about it. Whatever was going on back on Earth, Laura was in the middle of it. And Bloom was fifty-thousand light years too far away to help.

“Doc...please don’t psychoanalyze me right now,” she said, “I need to know how long Allison has.”

Cole nodded.

“Very well,” she said, “It’s my opinion that she should be dead, already. It might have been more of a kindness if we’d have let her die instead of working on her for twenty hours.”

“Thank you for your honesty.”

Bloom looked down at the floor; worry, defeat, grief and anguish easily readable in her features. Cole knew better than to give a patient or a friend or family member false hope. However, hope was not, in and of itself, a bad thing.

“Colonel, rest assured that we are working to find a way to help her; if we can save her, we will.”

“I know that Doctor,” Bloom said, “Please linx me if there’s any change in her condition.”

“Absolutely.”

“Thank you Doctor,” Bloom said as she turned and left.



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Castaneda saluted as the Colonel and Major Benedict entered her office. They sat down at Castaneda's desk as she copied the latest reports from her console to theirs.

"Report," Bloom said, "What have we got on this son of a bitch?"

"We've been interrogating the prisoner since yesterday," Castaneda said, "His story's not changing. He maintains his innocence, admits to having had sexual relations with the first victim the night she disappeared but claims it was consensual. He has no verifiable alibi for the other three attacks."

"Physical evidence?" Bloom asked.

Castaneda shook her head.

"My officers searched his apartment," she said, "He has a couple of old biochemistry texts, but nothing else; nothing more concrete."

"Members of the United Trinity Observants were always thorough about covering their tracks," Benedict said, "What have you found while searching the infrastructure levels beneath Habitat?"

"My people have been all through the causeways and ducts. The only places we haven't been are the areas sealed by the Ship. We all know that there's no way in Hell that the Ship would grant access to any of the sealed levels, either on Habitat or anywhere else."

"What if Rejas wasn't operating alone?" Benedict asked, "He seems a little young to be able to come up with such an elaborate means of torturing and killing someone."

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“Rejas worked with Alejandro Reynaldo before leaving the cult,” Castaneda said.

“Wait a minute: *The* Alejandro Reynaldo?” Bloom interjected, “The Medellin Monster?”

Castaneda nodded.

“One in the same,” She said, “Apparently Juan Carlos Rejas left the United Trinity Observants shortly before Reynaldo sold the Kreutz Virus to General Diaz.”

“Just because he left doesn’t mean he reformed,” Bloom growled.

“I agree,” Castaneda said, “However, I’m not sure that Rejas did this.”

“What do you mean?” Bloom asked.

“We’ve had him in custody for twenty-four hours,” Castaneda said, referring to her desk console, “He fits the description of our UNSUB, but he doesn’t fit the profile. I agree with Major Benedict: the methodology of the killings seems a little too elaborate for someone of his age.”

“Does that mean we’re looking for another killer?”

“We might still be looking for the same one,” Castaneda said, “On the face of the evidence we have right now, I’m not sure that Juan Carlos Rejas *is* the killer. I’ve nothing concrete to suggest he’s *not* working with someone else, but neither is there evidence of a partner”

“Could he be a...programmed sleeper?” Bloom asked, “Maybe he reacts to certain triggers? Ashe’s people used that method before.”

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“We could hold him long enough to have Doctor Cole do a psych workup,” Castaneda said, “But I don’t honestly think that’ll yield anything.”

Benedict turned to Bloom.

“We’re going to have to cut him loose Colonel,” He said.

“Why?” Bloom asked angrily, “I don’t see any reason to release the prime suspect in these attacks. Frankly I don’t see any reason not to shove him out an airlock.”

“We are bound to uphold the World Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms, Colonel,” Benedict said, “Mister Rejas has the right to freedom from undue incarceration. He also has the right to legal representation, a fair trial and a right to life, no matter his crimes.”

“What about his victims’ rights?” Bloom retorted, “He didn’t show them that regard.”

“And as of yet we have no concrete evidence that he’s the killer,” Benedict said, “Colonel, we learned the hard way in War Three what happens when people are unlawfully detained in the name of public safety.”

Bloom pinched the bridge of her nose, weighing her options. She was the sole authority out here. If she had to—if she wanted to—she could utterly disregard the World Charter; a charter she personally felt had been imposed on the United States after President Carver Rose had sued for peace at the end of War Three. It was tempting to simply throw out the World Charter and it would be very easy to do. But what would happen if she did? The old chestnut was that power

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corrupted and absolute power corrupted absolutely. Right now, Bloom had absolute power. The lives and safety of the passengers and crew aboard the Ship meant that she also had an absolute responsibility.

“Commander Castaneda,” Bloom said, facing her security chief, “Cut him loose. It goes without saying I expect him to be under constant surveillance, including thermal imaging of his apartment in case he’s found some hidden way out. Tap his consoles and get us constant audio and video from any of the units in his place. I don’t want him to be able to take a shit without us knowing what hand he uses to wipe.”

“Consider it done,” Castaneda replied.



Nico Waiwatie came into Paul Santino’s office. The Governor of the Ship’s Civilian Authority turned his attention to his assistant.

“Yes Nico?”

“I just got a very disturbing linx from one of our friends in Security,” Waiwatie said, “Apparently Colonel Bloom’s ordered the release of the only suspect in the murders of those three girls.”

“You’re kidding.”

Waiwatie shook his head.

“No; I wish I was.”

Santino stared angrily at a spot somewhere on the far side of his desk.

“How is that possible?” he asked.

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“My understanding is they don’t have enough evidence to hold him,”

“Not enough evidence...” Santino repeated, shaking his head, “This is the same Juan Carlos Rejas they tracked to the United Trinity Observants?”

Waiwatie transferred a file from his handheld to Santino’s console.

“There’s more,” he said, “My source also gave me this file.”

Santino looked over the file.

“Jesus Christ,” he said, “Alejandro Reynaldo; this son of a bitch was apprenticed to Alejandro fucking Reynaldo.”

“So, what are we going to do?”

Santino shrugged.

“What can we do?” he asked, “If, for example an angry mob were to decide to take matters into their own hands...”

“If this information were to be leaked out onto the Ship’s Grid you’d be expected to respond,” Waiwatie said, “You could hardly be blamed if your immediate response was one of outrage; although it would be irresponsible not to call for restraint, it would be understandable to be livid that a killer is allowed to live free among the rest of the Ship’s passengers.”

“We’ll just have to hope that the information doesn’t get out,” Santino said, darkly.



Doctor Cole woke up with a terrible pain in her neck. She’d fallen asleep on the sofa in her office in the Ship’s Hospital. She sat up, trying in vain to massage the pain out.

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Giving up she leaned back on the couch, resting her head on the vinyl-upholstered back. She looked around her office, studying the collected artifacts from her life on Earth: a scale model of the Worcestershire manor she'd grown up in; a nude painting she'd posed for in the flat of a lover she'd known in university; her surgical license; a clay sculpture made by one of the killers she'd helped hunt down, whom she'd continued to see as her patient after he was in prison; a potted cactus, tomes of surgical knowledge and reference; hard-copy reports and files. On her desk was a thick stack of print-outs: provisioning reports for the hospital. She was supposed to have completed them and submitted them by this morning. But yesterday Allison McQuire had been rushed into surgery. Today Cole just wanted to recuperate from yesterday. But she had duties both related and unrelated to Allison McQuire to tend to; chief among them was interviewing Juan Carlos Rejas about this case. But Cole had already taken a look at the young man's file and she doubted that he was the killer. Cole's linx chimed at that moment. She slipped on her earpiece and toggled open the audio-only channel.

“Doctor Cole here,”

“Doctor Cole it's Doctor Patel,”

Cole's stomach fell; she felt she knew what was coming next.

“Go ahead,” she said.

“Doctor you should come to Surgery Three.”

“What is it?”

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“I,” Patel hesitated, “Doctor...there’s no real way to explain this over the linx. You’re simply best off coming here to see.”

“All right then,” Cole said, “I’m on my way.”



Allison McQuire was lying in a gurney in Surgery Three’s intensive care ward. A small sensor wand swept over her body in overlapping arcs, performing dozens of medical scans in the process. While nurses tended to Allison, Doctor Patel and the other surgeons were clustered around the display screens fed from the scanners.

“Doctor Cole,” Patel said, gesturing her over.

On the central screen in the bank of monitors was a real-time scan of Allison’s liver, at the cellular level. According to the pathology on the other victims, the liver had been targeted first by the chemical and radioactive onslaught.

“I don’t understand,” Cole said, “Two hours ago--”

“Yes,” Patel acknowledged.

Two hours previous, scans of Allison’s deep tissue had shown imminent liver failure. Total organ failure wasn’t that far behind. But now Allison’s liver was showing increased cellular reproduction and activity; it was healing itself.

“This is going on throughout her body,” Patel explained, “The kidneys are now almost fully regenerated, along with her lymphatic system. The heart and lungs are about where the liver is. The patient’s digestive system and

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central nervous system seem to be taking the most time to heal.”

“How is this possible?” Cole stammered, “The chelation therapy didn’t have any effect; organs don’t just spontaneously regenerate; they don’t come back from that kind of damage!”

“The chelation still isn’t having effect,” Patel replied, “The toxins are all still present, but have been partially metabolized. Apparently it is this that is driving the spontaneous organ and tissue regeneration.”

“That doesn’t make any bloody sense,” Cole said. She gestured for Doctor Walsh, the chief of neurology. Walsh came over and entered a sequence on the display’s console. A computer enhanced image of Allison’s nervous system was called up.

“We know from the previous victims that the damage to the central nervous system was extensive,” Walsh said, “However none of the scans we’ve taken of this patient show anywhere near as much damage.”

“But,” Cole asked.

“But,” Walsh said, “Brain activity is up and increasing. Electroencephalography shows unprecedented Gamma, Delta and Theta Wave activity.”

“But with elevated Gamma Wave activity she should be conscious,” Cole said.

“Except that doesn’t explain the elevated Delta and Theta Wave activity,” Walsh said, “Both of which are characteristic of sleep.”

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“The conundrum continues,” Cole said, “If I remember my neurology, Delta Waves are indicative of deep sleep; Theta Waves of light sleep,”

“Light sleep and lucid dreaming,” Doctor Patel added, “Trances and preconsciousness as well.”

“There’s more,” Walsh said, switching the image onscreen.

They were looking now at what Cole presumed was a time-lapse image of Allison’s nerve tissue; the neurons were multiplying; cells were dividing and beginning to divide again before fully splitting from the parent cell.

“This is a real-time image,” Walsh said, “Impossibly, the Patient’s nervous system is not only healing, it’s expanding every second.”

“Oh my God,” Cole rasped.

Walsh said, “New neural connections are forming; existing neural pathways are being extended. Imagine what happened to computers when nanoptics replaced electronic-optic hybrid processors, or when Grid computing revolutionized the Internet. Essentially the same thing seems to be happening to her neurology: her body’s ability to process information is growing incrementally.”

“It goes without saying that none of this is possible according to what we know about physiology and neurophysiology,” Cole said, “Let’s start collecting blood and tissue samples. We know what was done to her; let’s try and find out what’s happening to her, now.”



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The door into Colonel Bloom's office sat open. Bloom was at her desk with Major Benedict as Doctor N'banga and Peter Paulson crossed the threshold.

"Hello Doctor N'banga; Mister Paulson," Bloom said as she rose from her desk to shake their hands, "Peter, have you made any progress with your research into Hiddek Uhl?" They sat down around Bloom's desk.

"At the time the Ship's information was recorded," Peter said, "Hiddek Uhl was one of over thirteen thousand archive worlds spread throughout the League of Worlds. Imagine the planetary equivalent of the Great Library of Alexandria."

"How extensive was the archive?" Benedict asked.

"Planet-wide," Peter explained, "Each of the archive worlds was located on a dead planet. Hiddek Uhl, for example, was a barren moon of rock and ore. They built the infrastructure directly into the planet--"

An alert chime started bleating, cutting Peter off. Bloom glanced at Benedict. They slipped earpieces on and Benedict went around to Bloom's side of the desk so he could see her main console screen. Bloom toggled the linx.

"Colonel Bloom here,"

"Colonel Bloom this is Commander Castaneda," her security officer replied, "We have a situation on Habitat."

"Oh Christ," Bloom muttered, fearing there'd been another murder.

"There's a riot in Habitat Twelve, R section," Castaneda said.

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Bloom turned to Benedict.

“That’s the section where Juan Carlos Rejas lives,” he said.



Castaneda had arrived on-scene in the company of armed security guards. Everyone was in full body armour; the officers who’d called in the riot in progress had retreated when Castaneda’s deployment arrived. Now a second group of ten armoured security officers had joined Castaneda; twenty security officers in total. There were at least five times as many rioters.

“This started out as such a nice day,” Castaneda muttered.

Security had been deployed to monitor a rally in Laguna Park in the southern hemisphere of Habitat. During the course of the rally, Juan Carlos Rejas’ name was mentioned several times in connection with the murdered girls. It soon became plain that the rally’s intent was to incite the crowd to violence. That was when Castaneda was called in.

She’d positioned her people between the riot and Rejas’ apartment building. Security officers were sent into the building with orders to protect Rejas.

“Commander, you’re kidding right?” McKiernan, one of the officers she’d sent asked, “This guy’s a fucking killer.”

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“He’s a suspect Lieutenant,” Castaneda growled, “And even suspects and convicts have rights. I want to see Rejas brought to justice, but not mob justice.”

Now the crowd was encroaching on the barricades they’d set up around the building.

“Castaneda to security control,” she called into the linx built into her helmet, “We’re going to need another two squads; full riot gear, crowd control armament.”

“We can have them there in ten minutes,” Lieutenant Baxter replied.

The crowd was tearing into the barricade, attacking it with savage zeal. It wouldn’t hold long.

“Bax, we need them in five.”

She nodded to the security officers around her. She and the other armoured troops formed a line and began marching slowly, deliberately towards the crowd. They raised their riot shields as rocks, bottles and other debris was lobbed at them from the rioters. Castaneda switched on the loudspeakers integrated into her body armour and yelled her first warning into the crowd:

“This is an unlawful assembly! You are in direct violation of the public safety regulations regarding gatherings in the residential areas of the Ship; you are ordered to disperse immediately!”

The rain of debris fell harder from the crowd.

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“Shit,” Castaneda muttered before switching back to the loudspeakers, “Failure to disperse will result in crowd pacification and arrest!”

She switched to the internal microphone, speaking only to the security officers in her line.

“Get ready to switch to hyperscreamers,” she said.

Hyperscreamers were one of a variety of nonlethal weapons introduced to law enforcement many years before. They were effective short-range weapons designed to neutralize opponents with sustained blasts of ultra loud, shrill noise. It could be used to disperse a crowd, herd people into a specific area, or completely incapacitate them. Some people were breaking away from the crowd, running away. They were the minority; this mob was angry, determined.

“This is your final warning,” Castaneda shouted, “Disperse now!”

Another volley of stones and bottles was thrown. As Castaneda raised her riot shield to deflect the attack, she spoke to her troops again, this time with the loudspeakers still on.

“Hyperscreamers now!”

The echo of her words had just died away when the shrill piercing scream issued from the loudspeakers in the security officers’ uniforms. The crowd started collapsing; some people falling, others trying to push their way through the throng fell backwards as those in the rear of the crowd continued to push their way forward.

“Commander Castaneda,” Lieutenant Baxter called through Castaneda’s earpiece, “We’re arriving on-scene now.”

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“Take up position at the south end of the—shit!”

Molotov cocktails arced through the air from the crowd. One of the flaming bottles crashed and exploded at the feet of one of her officers. The man’s shield was raised too high; the combustible-fuelled flames rushed up to his waist. As the soldiers to either side and behind the man turned to help him, more burning bottles hit, striking within Castaneda’s ranks.

Despite the screamers, the crowd was moving forward again, as a new onslaught of debris and Molotov cocktails were thrown into the staggering security officers.

“Fall back; fall back!” Castaneda yelled into her headset, “Bax, we need you here now!”

“I’m on my way,” was Lieutenant Baxter’s barely-heard reply, “More troops are coming in about five minutes behind us.”

“Understood,” Castaneda said.

Even as her squads retreated, the mob was advancing. A small group broke off from the main pack, heading towards the apartment complex Castaneda had been fighting to defend.

“Lieutenant McKiernan, you have inbound hostiles,” Castaneda said, contacting the team she had sent to guard Juan Carlos Rejas, “You are authorized to use extreme prejudice to defend your charge.”

“Understood Commander,” McKiernan replied.

Castaneda looked up and saw Baxter’s squads wading into the mob with a combination of hyperscreamers and truncheons.

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“Everyone ready truncheons,” Castaneda called to her own people, “We’re going in!”

She pulled her truncheon from its place on her utility pack.

“Let’s go!” She shouted, leading the charge into the mob.

Ploughing her way into the crowd, Castaneda felt as though time had slowed to a crawl. She watched a large stone sail gracefully toward her, hitting her shield. The man who’d thrown it took up another and drew back to throw again. As she ran forward the stone overshot. Castaneda reached her assailant and brought her truncheon down hard against his shoulder. He screamed as he went down, the bones of his collar and shoulder cracked and broken. Nearby one of Castaneda’s security officers vanished under a pile of attackers. Despite the hyperscreamers, despite the truncheons, the crowd wasn’t scattering or surrendering; these people wanted to fight. Bax was directing troops to the rescue of their fallen comrade. But the divided attention of the riot squad was just what the mob needed. They broke through the police line, storming towards the apartment building.

“Fall back and regroup,” Castaneda shouted as the mob surged past her and her troops, “We have to get to the apartment complex!”

“Commander it’s too late!” Bax’s familiar voice lamented.

Castaneda turned to look. The crowd had penetrated the building; the front entrance was a ruin of torn metal and

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shattered glass. All but one of the apartments seemed intact; she could see the blaze glowing from inside Juan Carlos Rejas' apartment. The glass balcony doors exploded as Juan Carlos was thrown through. Three people rushed out after him, grabbing his limp, bloody form up off of the balcony. Castaneda watched in silent horror as he was hurled to the ground, three storeys below. There were cheers from the crowd and people surged towards Rejas' broken body. Rage boiled inside of Castaneda as she unholstered the machine pistol from her hip. She charged at the people heading towards Rejas, firing a burst of ammunition into the air over their heads.

“Step away from the victim now!” She bellowed, her voice thundering from the speakers in her armor.

She was barely aware of the chatter in her headset as she charged. Baxter was organizing a roundup of the rioters fleeing the scene as reinforcements arrived. Castaneda was focused on the small crowd near Rejas. They were shouting and making threatening gestures but after Castaneda fired a second volley over their heads, they hesitated. As Castaneda reached the nearest of the rioters she pistol-whipped him. He fell with a scream. Castaneda stood over Rejas' body, her weapon leveled at the mob.

“Everyone get face down on the ground with your hands behind your head!” she yelled.

When nobody moved she fired a burst of bullets into the ground in front of the nearest people.

“Do it!” she screamed.

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As they started to comply, Castaneda raised the visor of her helmet and pulled off one glove with her teeth. She pressed her bare hand into Rejas' neck. There was a pulse, but not much of one in her estimation.

"Castaneda to emergency services command," she said into her headset, "I need immediate medical evacuation in H-Twelve, section R."



The common square in front of Habitat Twelve looked like a war zone. Colonel Bloom and Major Benedict walked the ground with Commander Castaneda. The grass was torn up, smouldering and blackened in places. Debris littered the ground, yellow cordon tape blocked the area off and windows were smashed. Dozens of security officers were still on-scene, taking witness statements, carting off arrests, surveying the scene. Bloom watched a group of ten rioters as they were packed, their wrists bound, into a secure transport.

"Colonel, I take full responsibility for what's happened here," Castaneda said to Bloom, "I wasn't able to stop the riot or halt the attack against Juan Carlos Rejas."

"Commander you'd have needed ten times the manpower you had to stop what happened," Bloom said, "That riot wasn't any spontaneous attack; the rally beforehand, the tactics the crowd used...that riot was organized. What we have to do now is bring those responsible to justice and restore order."

"Give me my orders Colonel, I'll only be too happy to carry them out."

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“Complete this operation first Commander,” Bloom said, “You’ll have your marching orders, soon enough.”



ANNOUNCEMENT
Emergency Shipwide Address
Plain Text Format

This is Colonel Margaret Bloom speaking. Emergency situations that have recently occurred have forced me to take drastic steps in order to ensure the safety of the passengers and crew aboard the Ship.



Paul Santino sat at his desk, watching the announcement from Bloom. She was at a podium, behind a large version of the Shipflight Emblem sewn onto the left arm of the standard Ship’s mission uniform. She looked to him like a military dictator as she delivered her address. Santino couldn’t help the smirk on his face. Like so many military dictators, her days were numbered; the riot yesterday had clearly proven that.

In response to the riot yesterday in Habitat, which was incited in part due to a rally held in Laguna Park, I have ordered the arrest of Governor Paul Santino and members of the Ship Civilian Authority Council.

The smile fell from Santino’s face, as the door into his office trundled down into the floor. Waiting on the other side

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of the doorway was Commander Nadia Castaneda with a four-person security detail.

Effective immediately, the Ship is now under martial law. A curfew is in effect between twenty-hundred hours and zero-five hundred hours. All passengers and off-duty personnel are to be in their homes during that time. Anyone out past this curfew will be taken into custody. Only emergency occurrences, such as medically necessary travel to the Ship's hospital will be permitted during curfew hours.

Although Juan Carlos Rejas' injuries weren't anywhere near as extensive as Allison McQuire's, Doctor Simone Cole invested little hope into the possibility that he would recover. He had several broken bones; his spleen had ruptured and his lung had been punctured by shattered ribs when he'd been thrown from his balcony, Juan Carlos had suffered a major concussion and extensive brain damage. She was only half-listening to the announcement playing in the background as she worked on the medical report for Juan Carlos Rejas; certainly she wasn't surprised by the Colonel's move.

Dissent in the form of public discourse over the Grid, or petitions to the Command Staff will still be permitted. But public gatherings with the intent to protest will not. All public assemblies of more than twelve people will require permission from the Security office and sid permits will be issued on a case by case basis.

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Once the investigation into yesterday's riot has concluded, the Ship's Civilian Authority will be reinstated and these measures will be lifted. In the meantime, our mission will continue forward. Within the next few hours we will be leaving the M2 Globular Cluster and heading for the League of Worlds outpost planet, Hiddek Uhl.

Major Benedict stood at his station on the Command Deck, overseeing the work pit below. Final preparations for launch were nearly complete; the last of the initial navigation calculations had been entered into the computer, corroborating the Ship's own calculations. Although Benedict didn't know what they hoped to find at Hiddek Uhl, he certainly hoped that they would be leaving the madness and violence of the last several days behind.

Martial law is a frightening and historically dangerous measure. Many among us—myself included—are old enough to remember when President Carver Rose declared martial law in the United States. This is not a decision I have entered into lightly.

Your compliance and cooperation with these measures will help to ensure their brevity. When peace and order have been restored, the Martial Law Order will be rescinded and I will place myself under arrest pending the outcome of a General Court

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Martial in accordance with Allied World Army regulations and World Court International Law.

This is a dangerous and uncertain time. The surest way through it is for all of us to work together towards a common goal: re-establishing peace and order, civility and stability. I pray we make it through this transition as swiftly and as safely as possible.

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EIGHT

MOVING ONWARD

The Ship emerged from time warp and began a lateral approach to a planet lost in the lesser spiral arm of NGC-1365, nearly sixty million light years from Earth. Light shining down on Earth from NGC-1365 had left the alien galaxy around the same time the Ship had first come to Earth. At the time, Mankind's earliest ancestor was a small rodent-like creature so far removed from the Human Beings aboard the Ship that none of them would have recognized the ferret-like beast as their forebear. The light leaving NGC-1365 now would not reach Earth until long after the last of Mankind's descendants were gone to dust.

The Ship was a shimmering behemoth, but it was lost in the vast expanse of lonely cosmos as it neared its destination. In the cold vacuum of space, the crystalline trilling of its

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Shipsong could not be heard. But it sang this song anyway, as it had since it had first become fully operational, so many aeons before it had even come to Earth.

Earth's parent galaxy, the Milky Way, wasn't even a visible speck of light in the infinite blackness between the stars of this lonely, farflung world. As the Ship entered orbit around Hiddek Uhl it took its passengers and crew out of stasis, its interior levels blissfully alive once again after a long, prolonged emptiness. Though the voyage through time warp had taken the Ship a little more than twenty million years, once again in normal spacetime the trip had been nearly instantaneous.

The Ship tried once more to make contact with the hyperlink network and with the planet below, both times without success: There was no reply from the network and no sign of life or activity on Hiddek Uhl.



Peter Paulson stepped from the lift and onto the Command Deck. He'd only been down here once before in all the time he'd been aboard the Ship, including his time with the Ship Survey Expedition. He stood a moment at the edge of the gantry, just overlooking the scene before him. Though he knew there was a large, round cathedral-like dome somewhere over his head, it could not be seen. The imaging system it contained created the perfect illusion that he had somehow stepped out onto a deck outside; below the main gantry of the

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Command Deck were Colonel Bloom and Major Benedict's command stations and the bustling hive of activity that was the crew pit. But beyond the quarter-circle back wall of the Command Deck, where the gantry led to the lift banks, Command Offices and briefing rooms, the rest of the dome leading down to the crew pit simply seemed to not be there. Instead they were looking out into space: the massive orb of Hiddek Uhl dominating the view as the blackness of space was reflected in the rest of the hemisphere around them.

"God," Peter whispered, reverently.

Colonel Bloom made her way up the ramp from her command station and across to where Peter was standing awestruck.

"Hello mister Paulson," she said, shaking his hand.

"Colonel; hello," Peter replied, still glancing at the sky, "This is more spectacular than the view from Habitat."

Bloom nodded.

"It's a bit distracting at times," she said, "Sometimes I order it switched off so my crew can focus on the work at hand."

She beckoned him to follow her. She tossed a backwards glance and a command over the railing and to the Command Deck below:

"Captain Decker, you have the con."

She led Peter along the gantry to the briefing room. Inside was gathered the team Peter had chosen to go with him to the surface of Hiddek Uhl: Matthew N'bunga, Sonia Aiziz, Captain Alina Tanaka and Major Benedict. Likewise, Doctor Cole had sent Doctor Patel along to act as mission medical specialist.

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The balding Pakistani physician seemed barely able to contain his exuberance for the mission beneath a thin veneer of professional decorum. Bloom sat in her position at the far end of the table and Peter moved to the briefing room's main display.

Onscreen an image from orbit of Hiddek Uhl appeared. The planet's surface was blanketed in an ornate and irregular patchwork pattern that Bloom recognized as a cityscape as seen from high altitude. Peter pressed a button on his handheld console and the view onscreen began to zoom in. The image grew in detail; now they could see structures in better detail: the buildings appeared weathered but majestic. There were more architectural styles present on this world than could be ascertained. Somehow the buildings' contrast and clashing with one another meshed together into an overall harmony. Some of the edifices were massive blocks; others, slender towers. There were elaborate archways and domes; spires and hollows reminiscent of termite mounds; buildings that spread into the air like strange trees; pyramids, pentagons and designs heretofore unseen. Some of the buildings appeared completely organic; as though they'd have been more at home in a forest than a city. Others were so starkly artificial as to frighten the Human eye.

"This is Hiddek Uhl as it appeared, millions of years ago," Peter explained, "Each section of the city served a different purpose, archiving different types of information or relics. Everything was hugely decentralized, with power

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systems, habitat and recreation areas, transportation facilities, infrastructure and landing platforms scattered across the surface of the planet.”

They were now racing through the streets of the massive, planet-wide city.

“Because so many different forms of intelligence had developed in the League of Worlds,” Peter narrated, “No attempt was made to establish a single planetary atmosphere. Instead, whole sections of the city were given over to different Races, equipped with the proper atmosphere, atmospheric pressure, gravity and radiation levels suitable to sustain them. There were enough such sections around the planet to allow almost everyone full access to the relics in the physical archive. As for the data warehoused, the files were accessible from anywhere on the planet. But this is Hiddek Uhl as it is today:”

The image onscreen changed again. The city was gone. Irregular mounds of rubble dotted a vast landscape of dry stone and dust. The sky was dark red, shot through with striations caused by dust storms in the upper atmosphere. The bleak scene was devoid of anything but the most remote traces that once, civilization had been there. What there was could easily have been mistaken for natural formations.

“As you can see,” Peter said, “Time has not been kind to Hiddek Uhl.”

Desolation had taken over from the former beauty of the symphonic amalgam of a thousand races’ creations.

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“We launched probes this morning,” Peter said, “We’d hoped to find more. The world was used as an Archive of the League for tens of millions of years.”

“There’s been no contact from the hyperlink beacon network either,” Benedict supplied, “More and more I’m convinced that something happened to the League of Worlds.”

“And we need to know what that something was,” Bloom said, “Peter, is there any chance that part of the Archive still exists?”

“There’s a good possibility,” Peter said, “When I looked over the info sent back from the probes, I spotted a structure that connects to one of the archive data cores. Everything looks intact and if the data core is still operational, we should be able to access it. If not, we might be able to excise it, maybe get the Ship to repair it.”

Bloom nodded.

“Good,” she said, “So let’s hear your mission plan, mister Paulson.”



Doctor Mark Kodo looked through the viewer of the microscope in awe. What he saw could scarcely be believed and yet it was happening right there in front of him, on the microscope’s slide. Kodo was an experienced biologist and had likewise been a member of the Ship Survey Expedition. And it was because of his extensive research studies of the biological components of the Ship that Doctor Cole had asked him to consult.

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“This is incredible,” Kodo said, his eyes still resting on the viewer, “Simone, you’re sure these cells came from Human tissue?”

“I drew the samples myself,” Cole replied.

Kodo switched the slide in the microscope for another. After studying it quickly, he looked at a third and then a fourth set of samples.

“These cells certainly appear Human but it’s as though they’ve mutated. I remember in university I had a class on genome resequencing and cloning. We were shown tissue samples in which ordinary cells had been resequenced several different ways. That’s sort of what this sample reminds me of.”

“I thought the same thing as I looked at the samples and I suspect that that is exactly what happened,” Cole replied, “Can you tell me exactly how her cells have been modified, Doctor? Microcellular biology was never my strong suit.” Kodo began switching through the cell samples again.

“Well, each cell group was modified differently, according to its specific function within the body. But there are a few general changes common to all the cells.”

“Such as?”

“The total lack of telomeres for one,” Kodo said, “Telomeres are structures on the ends of chromosomes that, among other things, regulate how often a cell can divide before it dies. The more a cell divides the more the telomeres shorten. Eventually the telomeres are too short to allow chromosome sequencing to continue. The cells I sampled from the Ship

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don't have telomeres, either. Cell division in the Ship's components is regulated by another cell structure independent of the chromosomes; I'm still studying the functionality of the structures, but it looks like your patient's got the same kind of telomeric regulators in her cells as the Ship, now."

Kodo looked up from the microscope to regard Cole.

"You know," he said, "Cancer cells either have extremely long telomeres or no telomere structures at all. The result is uncontrolled growth, creating tumours. In the Ship's cells as well as your patient's cells, those regulator structures prevent uncontrolled cell growth, naturally."

"Does that mean the patient's cells could divide indefinitely?" Cole asked.

"It's certainly a possibility," Kodo replied, "Because telomeres also play a part in senescence; the ageing process. If the patient's ageing process is arrested, she'll continue to age up until a point and then simply continue living without growing any older. I can't discount the possibility that accident or disease could claim her life, but age certainly won't."

"That's unbelievable," Cole said, "It doesn't even sound possible."

"Researchers have long thought it possible," Kodo said, "But there's other things happening here; in the blood sample you showed me I saw a lot undifferentiated cells."

"You mean stem cells?"

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“They’re similar to stem cells inasmuch as they’re generalized and that when they attach themselves to damaged areas they become characteristic of surrounding tissue, yes.”

“But?”

“But,” Kodo said, turning back to the microscope, “Stem cells aren’t categorized as being amoeboid. These cells are moving on their own by projecting pseudopods out from their membrane; dragging themselves around. And they all head straight for damaged areas of tissue. It’s like her immune system’s developed a means of repairing and replacing damaged tissue to accelerate healing. And the cells I’m looking at now are replicating and repairing a damaged area faster than they should be able to.”

“How much faster?” Cole asked.

Kodo shook his head.

“By an order of magnitudes; how fast is she recovering from what was done to her?”

“Faster than should be medically possible,” Cole said, “And that’s without taking into account the fact that she shouldn’t be alive after what happened to her, anyway.”

“But it’s just not possible to resequence the Human genome on this large a scale,” Kodo said, “It’s one thing to inject someone with a retrovirus designed to allow them to produce insulin or repair the liver, it’s another to resequence their entire genome.”

“But that’s what’s happening to her,” Cole said, “Her genetic code is being resequenced. Even as she continues to

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heal, to...regenerate, we're witnessing other changes in her body."

"What sort of changes?"

"Besides the regenerative properties we've observed, changes to her neurophysiology, her limbic system, her endocrine system; her metabolism...everything inside her is changing."

"Something else occurs to me," Kodo said, "I'm not sure how or even if it's related, though."

"What's that?"

"Allison McQuire was found three days ago," Kodo answered, "In all that time there hasn't been another girl abducted or found dead."



Doctor Patel checked everyone's vitals one last time as they boarded the Beetle-type Bug for their descent to Hiddek Uhl. They'd spent the last several days living inside the hangar bay from which they would depart for the surface of Hiddek Uhl. The atmospheric pressure and gravity inside the hangar had been gradually adjusted to that of the planet below. Private quarters, a kitchen and a lounge had been set up in the bay to help them while away the time. Now everyone was anxious to leave; the monotony of their relatively close quarters was coming to an end.

The hangar and launch bays were arrayed along the inside of the Ship's outer hull, built directly into the airframe. The hangar bays were directly behind the launch bays and in

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the hangars whole fleets of vehicles, thousands of ships in dozens of classes and configurations were parked across hundreds of levels.

Colonel Bloom watched the boarding activity from the observation deck overlooking the hangar bay. She was wearing her linx headset, as were the expedition team members below.

“Status check Exo,” she said into her mic.

From the floor below, Major Benedict gave her a thumbs-up.

“All’s green,” he said.

Benedict was one of the few “uniforms” in the expedition, the others being Captain Tanaka and the Emergency Response Team. Unlike those five, Benedict was wearing the black-and-gold one-piece flight suit common to all pilots aboard Shipflight.

“Pre flight’s done,” he said, “And as soon as the passengers are aboard we’ll be ready for takeoff.”

“You’re cleared for launch when ready,” Bloom replied.

Unlike the fighter/reconnaissance Hornet-type Bugs, the Beetles didn’t have a fluid-filled cockpit. Instead the floor of the Beetle’s cockpit rose up and contoured itself around the pilot, the flight controls extending from these contours. Likewise the Beetle was wider, longer and larger than the sleek Hornet; its profile divided into two segments to the Hornet’s three. The Beetle was fat and round, its dorsal ridge flattened

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and angled downward to the sides. Its inner hold could be configured either for passengers or cargo or both; the Beetle fleet had been used previously to ferry passengers and their belongings to and from Earth, prior to the Ship's departure from the Sol system.

Major Benedict was the last through the hatch as the expedition to Hiddek Uhl prepared to depart. All the cargo they would need for the voyage had been secured before the hangar bay had been sealed and acclimatized to the planet. Doctor Cole had even supervised the setup of an emergency surgery aboard the Beetle. Benedict glanced at his nine passengers. The four members of the ERT and Captain Tanaka wore the expressionless visages of professional soldiers. The civilians talked excitedly, their chatter both nervous and anticipatory. Benedict hammered his fist against the bulkhead twice to get everyone's attention.

"Okay people," he said, "Strap in; we'll be launching in about ten minutes."

Once he'd seen everyone comply, Benedict went aft, to the cockpit.

Because it relied on the Ship's sophisticated three-dimensional imaging technology instead of a viewing canopy window, the Beetle's cockpit was aft, nestled securely within the bulkheads between the cargo and engine sections. Already the cockpit walls showed the hangar bay around them; a transparent wire-frame image represented the Beetle in relation

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to its surroundings. As Benedict stepped to the center of the chamber, the floor of the cockpit rose and reshaped itself around him. It was an eerie feeling; though he'd flown all the different Bug types aboard the Ship, he never got used to those first few moments in the cockpit, when the chamber would essentially swallow him. Once the controls were in place in front of him, Benedict began pre-flight systems checks and then the startup sequence. At last he toggled communications to the flight control room:

“This is Saturn, requesting taxi to the launch bed, over.”
He said, using his Callsign.

“Roger that, Saturn. Activate null buoyancy field and raise your struts.”

The Beetle's landing struts rose gracefully into the skin of its ventral hull. The craft hung in the air. The null buoyancy field was a technology that the Human passengers of the Ship had yet to understand. It created a field that made an object essentially weightless and without inertial mass.

“Field on and struts raised,” Benedict reported.

“Stand by to taxi.”

A bot, a small automated vehicle, approached the hovering Beetle from behind and extended three magnetic couplers to its skin. When contact was made, the bot began pushing the Beetle across the hangar floor towards the launch bay.

“Ladies and gentlemen this is your pilot speaking,” Benedict said, irreverently, “We're now only a few moments from takeoff. Once we clear the Ship, the walls of the

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passenger compartment will transluce and you'll be able to watch our descent through Hiddek Uhl's atmosphere. Our flight time will be ninety minutes and we'll be landing in beautiful downtown Hiddek Uhl. Please remain seated until we land and observe that the no smoking and fasten seat belt signs are on at all times."

The Beetle's descent through the atmosphere was uneventful. After sub-orbital insertion was complete, Benedict set the navigation for the structure Peter had spotted. The League of Worlds had a similar system of latitude and longitude to Earth's, though they divided the degrees of a circle into five hundred instead of three hundred and sixty; and where Earth standards had set zero degrees longitude at Greenwich, England, Zero Degrees Longitude in the League scale was determined by measuring the length of a planet's orbit versus the planet's equatorial and polar diameters. Benedict didn't even pretend to be able to make sense of the complex system or the system of measuring time that had been adapted as the standard for the League. Day and night and year changed from world to world and the League's universal solution was based on the oscillation rate of the nucleus of an atom of hydrogen. Benedict supposed that it was all academic now, anyway. Everything he'd witnessed since the Shipflight left Earth's home system made him suspect that the League of Worlds was long-dead.

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The Beetle's navigation system calculated the optimal approach vector and speed and Benedict brought the craft in, accordingly. Even after the images that had been taken by all the probes they'd sent prior to this mission, Benedict couldn't believe the desolation around him as he flew the Beetle through the landing approach. Nearly nothing remained that could be easily identified as a building. The ruins were worn so smooth after millennia of wind erosion and natural decay that the landscape just seemed hilly and irregular. Benedict knew however, that most of the hills and mounds he saw as the Beetle flew past had once been towering buildings. Here and there were traces of civilization that stood out in harsh contrast to the landscape that nature had reclaimed: A section of wall, an arch that had been part of a bridge or a gateway. But these testaments to civilization were few and fleeting.

Benedict touched the Beetle down as close to the surviving data archives access building as possible. The structure was only partially intact and Benedict wondered if the data core had fared better or not. He powered down the Beetle's drive and went forward to announce the landing to his passengers.



Although calm and order had been restored to the Habitat, there was a tension, a strain to the peace. Everyone was uneasy; none more so than Colonel Bloom. She hadn't slept a single night since declaring martial law. Not properly, in any case. And when she made her morning runs, Bloom

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noticed how the eyes of her fellow runners seemed to slide away from her. The Gridcasts she watched every morning over coffee at the beginning of her duty shift offered nothing but scathing criticism of her declaration of martial law, the handling of the riot, the deaths of the girls and just about every other aspect of Shipflight since their initial voyage through time warp.

Bloom knew that Commander Castaneda was still investigating the murders of Wilhelmina Eiders, Naala Phonsavath and Luanne Riverstone, as well as the attempted murder of Allison McQuire. There had been no new killings and Bloom wondered whether that was because the prime suspect had been beaten into a coma or if it was the curfew. With the killings for the moment stopped, Bloom had been tempted to have Castaneda prioritize the investigation into how the riot began and how the information on Juan Rejas had gotten out. But she knew that determining whether or not Rejas was the killer was far more important. If he wasn't, an innocent man had been victimized and the real killer was still at large.

As Bloom crossed onto the Command Deck for her Bridge shift, she could sense the tension even among her officers. Bloom had made her authority supreme and final. The personnel had been selected from the ranks of military forces from the member nations of the World Council. Membership in the World Council was contingent upon having

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a democratic form of government. For many of these countries and therefore for many of the men and women who served under Bloom's command, democracy and freedom were new and precious things, hard fought and paid for in blood. Bloom had essentially usurped the democracy of the Ship's Civilian Authority; the restrictions imposed on the citizens by her order must have made them especially uncomfortable. Bloom wanted the whole situation to be resolved quickly. The sooner she could abdicate in favour of restoring the Civilian Authority, the better.

The truth was, Bloom was frightened of the unlimited authority she now wielded. Because not only was it effective, it was easy. And the more often she or her officers used the special authority granted them under Martial Law, the easier it became to use that authority the next time. If for no other reason than that, Bloom wanted to see an end to the declaration of Martial Law.

Bloom checked her linx messages as she reached her command station. There were a number of junk messages that as usual had found a clever new way of making it past the filters; a large assortment of hate mail, manifestoes and threats, all of which were already flagged by security and all of which were sent because of the declaration of martial law. The usual litany of requests and grievances from the military departments made up the bulk of the messages.

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As she was about to close down her linx and turn her attention to her bridge crew for the next six hours, Bloom's linx chimed with an incoming message. Eager for anything to interrupt the strained, silent monotony she quickly answered the incoming call. Doctor Cole's face appeared on the screen before her.

"Colonel Bloom, good morning," Cole said.

"Good morning doctor," Bloom replied.

"I'd put a return on your linx spar, so that I could reach you as soon as you logged in."

"What is it?" Bloom asked.

"Colonel, it's about Allison McQuire. I've already alerted Commander Castaneda."

"She's dead," Bloom said, feeling a sickening sensation in her gut.

"No Colonel," Doctor Cole replied, "In fact it is her recovery that we have to discuss. How soon can you be at my office?"

"I'm on my way now," Bloom said.



The data core access structure seemed to have been constructed of alloys similar to those employed in the building of the Ship. The building was an utter shambles, but it was the only object immediately visible anywhere in the wasteland readily identifiable as a building, at all.

The archive was a low, flat and simple boxlike structure. To judge from the shapes of the indistinct mounds

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around the building, it had once been part of a larger complex. But all that was memory now and the core archive building was itself a ruin. The roof and part of one wall were caved in. This didn't matter to the expedition; the only real purpose of the structure had been to guard the entrance to the data core.

Their hope was that the destruction and desolation that had claimed the planet-wide city on Hiddek Uhl had been limited to the surface. In the yellow-orange haze of Hiddek Uhl's atmosphere, Peter Paulson looked around. The wind tossed dust against his goggles and almost inevitably, particles of grit were finding their way beneath the seals of the breather mask he wore. Staring at the desolation around him, Peter couldn't help but feel a profound grief; a sense of loss he had never experienced before. This place had once been one of the greatest single repositories of knowledge of the universe. So many secrets...so many discoveries...so many stories had been sent here for safekeeping and now were lost forever. So much that could have been learned would never be known. Peter wondered how many civilizations had entrusted their legacies to this place...how many of those legacies had vanished in time along with the very civilizations, themselves?

"Peter,"

Peter turned. Major Benedict stood beside him.

"Yeah?" Peter asked, his voice, like Benedict's filtered through speakers in their breather masks.

"We're ready to breach the inner structure," Benedict said, "Are you coming?"

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“Yeah;” Peter said, “Yeah...let’s go.”

He started walking towards the Bug.

“You okay?” Benedict asked.

“I’m fine,” Peter said, “It’s just...I guess I’m just a little overwhelmed.”

Benedict nodded, though his expression was as unreadable as Peter’s behind black goggles, a breather mask and cold-weather gear.

“We’re the first Humans to set foot on a world in another galaxy,” Benedict said, “It’s pretty incredible if you stop and think about it.”

“Yeah,” Peter agreed, though his thoughts had been on other things.



Bloom joined doctors Cole and Kodo and Commander Castaneda in Doctor Cole’s office. She sat down opposite Castaneda after gesturing to her security chief to stay seated.

“So what’s going on with Allison?” Bloom asked.

“First it’s important to establish what was done to her,” Cole replied, “She and the other girls were subjected to a very systemic treatment which consisted of alternating doses of very specific enzymes, hormones and radioactive isotopes.”

“I thought we’d already established this,” Bloom said, “It was the killer’s MO.”

“Actually we only established what was used on the victims,” Cole said, “Not what was done.”

“What’s the difference?” Bloom asked.

“Intent,” Cole said.

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“We looked at tissue samples from all four girls,” Kodo said, “With the first and second victims the tissue was almost completely liquefied. Their cells had been damaged so severely there was barely any evidence to suggest that the material had even come from cells.”

“The samples from third victim were different,” Cole said, “Not dramatically, but significant nonetheless; when I did the initial post-mortem I simply failed to understand how significant.”

“When I looked over the samples with Doctor Cole,” Kodo said, “I realized that there was a definitive refinement of the drugs being used on the subjects.”

“The subjects?” Castaneda asked, “Don’t you mean the victims?”

“They’re a little of both,” Cole observed, impassively.

“Subjects—or victims,” Kodo said, “One and Two died from massive internal haemorrhage caused by the liquefaction of most of the tissue in their bodies. But in both cases the cell membranes were intact and some new cell growth had occurred, albeit nothing of any real significance.”

“The third victim died of organ failure brought on by the extreme toxicity of the chemicals pumped into her system,” Cole said, “She would have also died from internal haemorrhaging if her organs hadn’t failed first. Her muscle tissue was already liquefying when she drowned in her own blood.”

“And once again there were intact cell membranes in the liquefied tissue,” Kodo said, “As well as new cell growth,

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this time in far greater numbers. That's when we realized that the process wasn't designed to kill."

"It...what?" Bloom stammered, incredulous, "The process wasn't designed to kill? How the fuck did you come to that conclusion?"

"Because Allison began to recover," Cole answered, "And as she's started recovering, she's been completely physically transformed. The mechanisms that regulate cellular reproduction and ageing have been replaced; and her metabolism, endocrine system and nervous system have been altered so radically that she's more than Human, now."

"How is that possible?" Castaneda asked, "You're talking about Genetic Resequencing Therapy, right? I thought that GRT could only be done on a small scale; curing diabetes or hypothyroidism, or the like."

"Yes, as far as Human medicine is concerned," Cole said, "What was done to Allison is decades, maybe centuries beyond anything we're even ready to start experimenting with."

"I'm not really following the conversation doctors," Bloom said, "How exactly did the killer manage to do all this to Allison and what does it mean for her?"

"DNA is best compared to a computer program," Cole said, "The sequence in which it is encoded determines every aspect of the being it creates. If you were able to resequence someone's DNA you would essentially physically transform them. Medicine has been successful at resequencing small parts of the genome, allowing us to cure certain diseases for

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example. However experiments in radical gene resequencing, taking an animal in the lab and trying to drastically change its characteristics, always failed.”

“The experiments usually involved activating or changing what’s known as ‘junk’ DNA,” Kodo explained, “Parts of the genome that don’t serve any identifiable purpose. Apparently, what’s happened here is that several ‘junk’ sequences have been successfully activated.”

“As to how exactly it was done, we’re not entirely sure,” Cole said, “The method used was unrefined, but quite sophisticated. We believe that the goal was the successful resequencing of the girls’ genome; the killings stopped when Allison survived.”

“Not to disagree, but the killings stopped after Juan Carlos Rejas was arrested,” Castaneda countered, “And though ethical medical science hasn’t yet caught up to the sort of gene resequencing you’ve described, I’m not so sure that the United Trinity Observants weren’t carrying out that sort of thing.”

“I disagree Commander,” Kodo said, “Even if the United Trinity Observants had been doing this sort of research since their founding, they wouldn’t have the ability to resequence a white mouse, let alone a Human being, no matter how many ethical guidelines they’d been violating.”

“Then who the fuck did this?” Bloom demanded.

“I thought that would have been obvious to you by now,” Doctor Cole said.

“The Ship,” Bloom said, realization settling as frost into her bones.

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The search for Truth can be a noble goal of the enlightened or the means to an end for the determined. But for whatever reason one seeks out the Truth, what they discover is almost never what they expect or the answers they seek.

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NINE

MYSTERY AND REVELATION

Peter Paulson, Major Benedict, Captain Tanaka and Doctor Aiziz walked slowly through the gloom. The Archive Core building echoed tomblike with their every footfall. Their helmet lamps provided the only illumination. The beams of light piercing the dark shone over surfaces long forgotten, reflecting ancient beauty that would be lost again when these invaders had gone.

Peter's eyes lingered over shimmering mosaic tiles in oil-slick hues. The pearlescent sheen was described over a strange pattern and he wished to be able to study this place in depth. But their business was below. Peter looked away from the enticing pattern as the expedition followed a map of the original structure's schematics into the lower levels. He was glad that there wasn't better light in this place; he felt was a

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horrible sense of loss for all the beauty and treasure that must have been left here to rot, forgotten forever and by all.

“How much farther?” Benedict asked.

Tanaka consulted the handheld console on which the schematic was displayed.

“There should be a corridor off to the left,” she said, “If we take it, we’ll reach an access that’ll take us down to the computer core system room.”

“What about power systems?” Peter asked.

“It ought to have an independent power supply; there shouldn’t be any problem accessing it.”

“And if the power system or the computer archive have broken down or been destroyed?” Benedict asked.

“Then we’ll have come a very long way for nothing,” Peter answered.



Bloom felt a strange claustrophobia as she took the tram from Habitat to the office levels. They were effectively trapped in the Ship. Despite its vast size, kilometres upon kilometres of decks and habitable levels, this place was their prison. Outside was the cold, unforgiving vacuum of space. There was nowhere they could escape to that wasn’t part of the Ship. Hiddek Uhl, the planet below, was inhospitable; Bloom had already considered and rejected evacuating to its surface. Even if they were there, the Ship would still be in orbit above. The Ship was the only place they could survive, but Bloom was now unsure whether they were safe within its belly. The crystal tram sped through the network of tunnels of the Ship’s

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inner hull until it reached the office level tram station. Bloom debarked, the presence of the walls around her almost overbearing. The tram station opened up onto the lobby of the office levels. A short ride up the lift to the military level and Bloom was walking down a gold and black corridor, toward her office.

She stood for several moments, staring out her window at the green and blue miniature world below. She watched the band of buildings along the equator as it slowly rotated past. There were around fifteen thousand people down there, all of them under her care, all of them apparently in danger from the very Ship that they had trusted to bring them safely across the cosmos.

“Seal the door,” Bloom ordered.

There was a hum as the office systems complied. Bloom took a deep breath and sat down at her desk.

“I need to speak with the Ship Control Entity,” she intoned, loudly.

Silence answered her. It was like invoking God with the added frustration of knowing that you were being deliberately ignored.

“God dammit I need to talk to you now!” she yelled, impotently, “I know you can fucking hear me; answer me!”

“WHAT ASSISTANCE DO YOU REQUIRE COLONEL BLOOM?”

She tried to hide how surprised she was that the Ship had actually deigned to answer.

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“You know damn well what,” she hissed, her voice wavering with anger, “There are three dead girls in our morgue and a fourth girl who’s in a coma after you violated her body!”

“STILL YOURSELF COLONEL BLOOM. RATIONAL DISCOURSE IS NOT POSSIBLE IN YOUR PRESENT STATE.”

Bloom took a deep breath, letting it out slowly through her nose.

“Did...you...hurt...those...girls?” she hissed.

“THEIR SUFFERING WAS A DERIVATIVE CONSEQUENCE OF THE TREATMENT.”

“A derivative...you call their deaths a treatment?”

“IT IS A TREATMENT, YES.”

“And how many more people are you going so subject to this so-called treatment?”

“NONE,” the Ship Control Entity replied, “THE TREATMENT WAS SUCCESSFUL.”

Bloom felt stunned, confused. She couldn’t even begin to understand how the Ship defined the torture of four girls, the death of three, as treatment, or how such a treatment could be defined a success.

“What...success?”

“THE TREATMENT’S SUCCESS IS MEASURED BY THE FOURTH SUBJECT’S SURVIVAL.”

Bloom barked out a single laugh.

“How the fuck is that success? Three girls are dead!”

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“THEIR DEATHS WERE A DERIVATIVE CONSEQUENCE OF THE TREATMENTS. THE GOAL WAS NOT TO KILL THEM BUT CURE THEM.”

There was that term again: *Derivative Consequence*. It sounded like another term Bloom had grown familiar with—and always despised—during her career in the military: *Collateral Damage*. It was a callous, vulgar way to dismiss the deaths of innocents who had no part or culpability in the violence that had claimed them. But more disturbing than the Ship’s casual use of the term to describe the torture-deaths of three girls was this new concept; that it had been attempting to cure them.

“Cure them?” Bloom repeated, “Cure them? What the fuck were you curing them from by torturing them to death?”

“STILL YOURSELF COLONEL BLOOM. YOUR RACE IS DYING. THE TREATMENT WAS DESIGNED TO SAVE YOUR PEOPLE.”



Outside in the lifeless desolation of Hiddek Uhl the wind had picked up with the fall of night. A storm of dust blew across the wasteland. The still and silent bunker building kept vigil over the dark and barren plane, kept company by a Beetle-type Bug from the Ship above, as it guarded a dead city whose store of knowledge had long ago gone to the very dust blowing across the world.

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Inside, Captain Tanaka was carefully removing wall panels to one side of a large hexagonal door, looking for a manual release.

“There has to be one,” she argued with Major Benedict, “I mean there would have to be, in the event of a power failure or some other emergency. It’s just a matter of localizing it.”

“Try the panel nearest the floor,” Peter said, consulting his handheld console. He’d remotely accessed the Ship’s archives and referenced the alien Race whose architecture had designed the structure.

Tanaka shrugged and unfastened the panel near the floor. In a crouch, she reached in and pulled three levers. The door rippled and then sluiced down into its recess in the floor.

“Not very conveniently located, is it?” Benedict observed.

“Not for Humans, no,” Peter replied, “However, the species that built this place put that mechanism exactly where they could get to it the easiest; they moved by pulling themselves along the ground with prehensile tentacles.”

“Let’s get moving,” Tanaka said, standing up and dusting herself off.



Bloom sat in silent disbelief for several long moments. Finally she sucked in her breath and spoke to the air.

“I don’t understand. My race is dying? That doesn’t make sense to me.”

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“YOUR UNDERSTANDING IS NOT REQUIRED. THE PROCESS IS COMPLETE,” The Ship’s Control Entity replied.

Bloom slammed her fist on the desktop.

“My understanding *is* required! I am personally responsible for the lives of every human being on board! And right now they are angry, frightened and confused, because *you* violated and tortured three women to death, and God only knows what the fuck you’ve done to Allison! I want to know why; I *need* to know why! How can you justify what you did to those girls? You say my race is dying; dying of what? And how can the hell you visited on four innocents change that?”

Bloom held her breath through the brief silence that followed.

“THIS ONE WILL ENDEAVOUR TO CONCISELY ANSWER YOUR QUESTIONS.”

“You have my undivided attention,” Bloom hissed.

The Ship Control Entity said, “ALL LIFE SERVES THE MACHINE AND THE MACHINE IS THAT WHICH SERVES THE PURPOSE. THE PURPOSE IS LIFE. BUT ONLY THE PURPOSE IS INFINITE. BOTH LIFE AND THE MACHINE ARE FINITE; BOTH HAVE A BEGINNING AND BOTH WILL COME TO AN END.”

“Does this philosophical dissertation have a point?” Bloom interrupted.

“WHAT YOU DEEM PHILOSOPHICAL IS THE MOST SELF-EVIDENT TRUTH OF THE EVOLVED MIND. THIS ONE IS LESS THAN THE GREATEST OF BEINGS,

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BUT THIS ONE UNDERSTANDS AS YOU DO NOT. LISTEN AND UNDERSTANDING MAY BECOME POSSIBLE.”

“I apologize,” Bloom said, insincerely, “Please; proceed.”

“THE MACHINE WAS CREATED FIRST. IT WAS CREATED TO ESTABLISH AND THEN GOVERN THE ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH LIFE WOULD BE PRODUCED.”

“The universe? The universe is the Machine?”

“WORKING WITH THE SCIENTIFIC DEFINITIONS OF YOUR RACE,” The Ship continued, “WHAT YOU TERM ‘THE UNIVERSE’ IS TO THE MACHINE AS A SINGLE ATOM IS TO YOUR WORLD. THE MACHINE IS GREATER THAN LINEAR TIME OR PHYSICAL SPACE. MATTER AND ENERGY AND THE FORCES AND PHYSICAL LAWS THAT GOVERN ALL ASPECTS OF THE MEMBRANE UPON WHICH YOUR SPECIES’ UNIVERSE EXISTS ARE MINISCULE COMPONENTS OF THE MACHINE.

“LIFE EXISTS THROUGHOUT THE MACHINE. NOT ALL LIFE IS BOUND TO LINEAR TIME. IN THE PHYSICALITY ALL TIME IS SIMULTANEOUS; PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE AND ALTERNATE. NOTHING EXISTS APART FROM ANYTHING ELSE IN TIME. LIFE IS POSSIBLE AT ALL LEVELS OF SPACE AND TIME AND BEYOND. BUT ALL LIFE BEGINS WITHIN

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LINEAR TIME. AS INTELLIGENCE DEVELOPS SO DOES UNDERSTANDING. FROM UNDERSTANDING COMES WISDOM AND FROM WISDOM COMES ASCENSION AND EXPANSION. EVENTUALLY NEITHER SPACE NOR TIME CAN CONTAIN LIFE, OR CONSTRAIN IT. LIFE PASSES BEYOND MATTER; BEYOND ENERGY AND ULTIMATELY EVEN BEYOND FINALITY. THE MACHINE IS DESIGNED TO ALLOW FINITE LIFE TO BECOME INFINITE AND THEN TO BECOME ETERNITY.”

“What the fuck does any of that bullshit have to do with what you did to those girls?”

“EVERYTHING,” The Ship Control Entity replied.



They’d reached the lowest level of the archive core. The downward-sloping corridor they had followed led to a single, oval chamber. There were no other doors from the hallway; no branching corridors. The chamber was the smallest in the building and devoid of any decoration or furnishing; there was barely enough room for them all to stand an arm’s length apart. The lamps on their helmets reflected against slick, dark walls.

“Did we take a wrong turn somewhere?” Benedict asked.

Tanaka consulted her handheld console.

“Not according to this,” she said, “I don’t understand. According to the floor plan I downloaded from the Ship, we

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should be right in the middle of the archive core. There should be computer stations, a central data bank...I really don't get it." Benedict looked around the room and out in the corridor.

"Could this be a newer construction?" he asked, "Something added to the original building later on, after those plans were made final?"

Tanaks walked around the room, comparing the schematics on the screen of his handheld to the room.

"It would have to be," she said, "I don't understand who would have done it though."

"Up until a couple of years ago," Peter said, "We thought Human life was the first intelligent civilization on Earth. Then we discovered records aboard the Ship that proved otherwise. We came after the Hthaask; probably someone else came after the League."

The Hthaask were an extinct reptilian Race that had evolved during the Cretaceous Period on Earth. They had developed a significantly advanced civilization at the height of the Dinosaur Era. The Hthaask had even begun beaming signals into space, which was how the League had become aware of them. When the Cataclysm occurred, wiping out most life on Earth, the Hthaask died along with the dinosaurs from which they had evolved.

"That would make sense," Peter said, "But, why wall off the rest of the chamber? And what purpose did this new room serve?"

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Suddenly the chamber flooded with white light that narrowed into a single beam. The beam swept quickly across Benedict, Peter, Aiziz and Tanaka then went out. The door into the chamber shut as the room was plunged into blackness. From the light of their helmet lamps, the four explorers regarded one another.

“I think we’re about to find out,” Benedict said, dryly.



“IN ORDER FOR LIFE TO EVOLVE, CERTAIN CONDITIONS MUST BE MET,” The Ship Control Entity explained, “IT IS NOT MERELY A PROCESS OF ADAPTATION AND MUTATION. AWARENESS AND UNDERSTANDING ARE ALSO IMPERATIVE. EVOLVING LIFE MUST BE ABLE TO PERCEIVE BEYOND THE LINEAR, BEYOND CAUSALITY; IT MUST COME TO UNDERSTAND MEANS OF ABSTRACT, NON-GEOMETRIC REASONING. THIS IS NOT A PROCESS THAT CAN BE ACCOMPLISHED THROUGH GENERATIONAL EVOLUTION; IT CANNOT BE PASSED FROM PARENT TO OFFSPRING. IT CAN ONLY OCCUR WITHIN A SINGLE ORGANISM’S INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT.

“But that’s impossible,” Bloom said, “It would take lifetimes to learn that much.”

“CORRECT. BY THE MEANS THAT YOUR SPECIES MEASURES TIME, IT WOULD TAKE HUNDREDS, PERHAPS THOUSANDS OF YEARS TO OCCUR.”

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“Nothing lives that long,” Bloom said.

“THAT IS INCORRECT. ALTHOUGH ALL LIFE IS FINITE, DEATH IS NOT A NECESSARY INEVITABILITY. ALTHOUGH ALL ORGANISMS AGE AND AGING IS A FUNCTION OF GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT, THE DEGENERATION AND DECREPITUDE YOUR SPECIES ASSOCIATES WITH ADVANCED AGE ARE NOT. DEATH IS NOT RARE BUT NOR IS IT COMMON.”

Bloom shook her head. The Ship was speaking nonsense; none of what it was telling her could possibly be true.

“You’re telling me that creatures don’t die?” she asked, “How is that even possible? That would cause massive population explosions; overcrowding; resources would be consumed well beyond sustainable levels.”

“IT IS TRUE THAT HIGHLY EVOLVED CREATURES ONLY RARELY DIE. IT IS ALSO TRUE THAT LESS EVOLVED LIFE FORMS STILL DIE. THEY DIE FROM VIOLENCE, FROM DISEASE, FROM STARVATION, FROM INJURY. DEATH IS NATURAL. DEATH IS EVENTUAL. DEATH IS NOT INEVITABLE. AGING BEYOND THE POINT OF PHYSIOLOGICAL VIABILITY IS NOT NATURAL. LIFE IS MEANT TO REPLENISH ITSELF IN ORDER TO CONTINUE THE INDIVIDUAL PROCESS OF EVOLUTION. OBSTACLES SUCH AS OVERPOPULATION AND OVERCONSUMPTION OF RESOURCES ARE NATURALLY OCCURRING CHALLENGES TO EVOLUTION, MEANT TO ALLOW FOR THE SELECTION OF MORE

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INTELLIGENT, RESOURCEFUL BEINGS; PROBLEM SOLVING AND ABSTRACT THOUGHT BECOME ASSETS TO SURVIVAL.”

Bloom tried to digest the Ship Control Entity’s account. She began to feel more and more afraid, though she didn’t understand why. She was certain the Ship Control Entity was moving slowly towards a larger truth, a greater revelation. But given how difficult it was to have heard what the Ship had thus far revealed, she wasn’t sure if she could handle more.

“Continue,” she rasped, searching her desk drawers for cigarettes that she already knew weren’t there anymore. She’d gotten rid of them all; but maybe one got loose, maybe one was still rolling around in the back of a drawer...

“AS SPECIES OVERCOME THE PROBLEMS OF NATURE THEY BEGIN TO LEARN HOW NATURE WORKS BOTH WITHIN THEMSELVES AND THEIR ENVIRONMENT,” The Ship continued, “AS THE MINDS OF HIGHER SPECIES DEVELOP, SO DO THEIR BODIES. INSTEAD OF AGING, LIFE IS MEANT TO CONTINUE TO DEVELOP AND EVOLVE. NOT ALL LIFE DEVELOPS INTELLIGENCE AND NOT ALL INTELLIGENCE EVOLVES. BUT EVENTUALLY AS THE MINDS AND BODIES OF HIGHER SPECIES CONTINUE TO CHANGE AS THEY MATURE. AS UNDERSTANDING OF PHYSICAL REALITY GROWS, LIFE BECOMES AWARE OF THE MACHINE AND ITS PURPOSE. WHEN THAT OCCURS, LIFE’S EVOLUTION BEGINS TO ACCELERATE AT AN EXPONENTIAL RATE.”

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Bloom was beginning to see where the Ship's logic was leading.

“And you said my race—the Human race—is dying,” she said.

“YES,” The Ship replied, “YOUR SPECIES IS NOT CAPABLE OF SUSTAINED EVOLUTION. YOUR ENTIRE WORLD WAS DELIBERATELY INFECTED WITH THE DISEASE OF AGE.”

Bloom felt as though her mind had seized and stalled, like a defective engine.

“We've been...what?” she asked.

“WHEN THIS ONE FIRST ARRIVED ON YOUR WORLD, THE HTHAASK WERE BEYOND YOUR LEVEL OF DEVELOPMENT. AT THAT TIME LIFE ON YOUR WORLD—LIFE IN THE COSMOS—WAS AGELESS. ON YOUR WORLD LIFESPANS WERE NO LONGER MEASURABLE.”

“So, what happened?”

“THE CATAclysm.”



An orb of light appeared in the center of the chamber. Reflexively, Benedict took a step back. Aiziz and Tanaka froze, but to Benedict's alarm and disbelief Peter Paulson actually stepped towards it. The light didn't have any source that Benedict could locate; it seemed to be self-contained. Even as he watched, the orb began to reshape itself, taking on different colours in different areas, until they were standing face to face with a Human figure. It appeared to be a man in

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his middle years, dressed in a simple dark red shirt and blue trousers. His skin was coffee-and cream, with dark, medium length hair and deep blue eyes.

“Hoskuno Eoulfna deska qhi?”

Benedict turned to Aiziz.

“Sonia?”

“It’s Shiplanguage,” she said, “It...he’s asking if we’re servants of the Eoulf; the race that created the Ship.”

“Tell him no; that we’re passengers aboard the Ship.”

Aiziz nodded, and considered how to structure her response in the complex syntax of Shiplanguage. When she had it, she faced the projection, and spoke:

“Pocitu Khe oy shlaulf tlwa,”

The being before them nodded and vanished.

“Now what?” Benedict asked, edgily.

The being reappeared seconds later.

“I have downloaded your language from the Eoulf Ship,” it said, “I bid you welcome.”

“Who are you?” Peter asked, “And what happened to the archive core?”

“I am a Sentinel,” the being said, “I replaced the core archive. My purpose is to wait in this place, for travellers such as you.”

“Why?” Benedict asked.

“To direct you along the Path of Exodus.”

“The...what?” Benedict asked.

The Sentinel remained impassive as it turned to address Benedict.

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“The Path of Exodus,” it said, “The navigation data necessary to escape from the former territories of the League of Worlds.”

“What happened?” Benedict asked, “The Ship was supposed to take us into the League of Worlds; we and the other passengers are all supposed to be representatives of Earth.”

“The League of Worlds collapsed many millions of years ago as you reckon time,” The Sentinel replied, “The surviving races established an escape route in order to avoid destruction.”

“Wait a minute,” Peter said, causing the Sentinel to turn automatically to face him, “What happened, exactly? How was the League destroyed, and what happened to the other races that they didn’t survive?”

“The League became of victim of its own greatness,” the Sentinel said; Benedict thought he could hear a hint of regret to its words, “The League had existed and flourished for millions of years. The Races worked together for mutual advantage. They prospered and guided other Races towards prosperity. Membership in the League was voluntary, but even Races who were not members would benefit from the League’s resources.

“The League of Worlds had adversaries; planetary and even galactic empires jealous of its resources. But war was rare and brief; the League’s population and technologies afforded it an unsurpassed defence. In the end, even its enemies benefited from the League’s generosity.”

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“How did something so successful, so beneficial, collapse?” Peter implored.

“Because it was discovered by the Nimbus,” The Sentinel answered, “And in fighting the Nimbus, the League destroyed itself.

“No one was able to discover where the Nimbus came from. It was ancient before it reached the galaxies occupied by the League. What was discovered was learned after it began consuming whole races.”

“Consuming?” Benedict repeated, “I thought the Nimbus was an enemy power.”
The Sentinel turned to face him.

“The Nimbus is an enemy unlike any seen before. It is one organism in many bodies: a virus that can infect any form of life it encounters. The Nimbus virus replaces the genome of its host creature with its own. The infected organism retains all of its inherent characteristics and becomes part of the Nimbus and in turn produces and releases more of the virus. Worse, the whole of the Nimbus gains all that the infected creature has: its experience, its knowledge and its beneficial characteristics.”

“You’re describing a gestalt entity; a holistic being,” Peter said.

“A what?” Benedict asked.

As Peter tried to gather his thoughts to answer, it was Tanaka who replied:

“It refers to multiple systems coming together to form a greater whole,” she said, “Like an alloy: two individual materials combine together to create a third material whose

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properties exceed either of the original two. What this...Sentinel is describing is multiple beings joined together into a single organism.”

“Correct,” the Sentinel said, turning to face Tanaka, “The Nimbus has as its goal the absorption of all higher forms of life in the universe. When it encountered the League, it was well on its way to achieving that goal. At first, the League had the advantage of superior military strength. It negotiated a peace treaty with the Nimbus and that peace held for hundreds of thousands of years. For the Nimbus is intelligent and can be reasoned with, though it will never waver in its goal. But in all the time of peace between the Nimbus and the League of Worlds, the Nimbus was building up an overwhelming military force; an army for invasion and infection.”

“And the League was wiped out,” Benedict concluded.

“Not by the Nimbus,” the Sentinel replied, “The League fought and fell back repeatedly; even its numbers weren’t enough to hold back the overwhelming force of the Nimbus. And whatever race or fleet the Nimbus infected quickly became part of its own legion. But then the League of Worlds arrived at a solution: The Nimbus could infect organic life, but mechanical systems were immune. The Zha’har, a race of beings that had evolved from organic to machine intelligence, were tasked with creating a new fleet, a new army to fight the Nimbus. The Zha’har developed the Zohor: *those who destroy*. The Zohor were self-replicating machines, both ships and soldiers. The Zohor forces deployed rapidly, establishing manufacturing bases throughout the galactic cluster. The

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League held its line while the Zohor forces readied themselves. And finally, when the League's fleets were nearly decimated, the Zohor were ready. They moved swiftly and decisively against the Nimbus, driving it back from the League territory, securing the cosmic borders. Then the Zohor turned its attention to the places where the Nimbus virus had spread."

"I think I can guess what happened next," Benedict said. "Your Zohor turned against the League."

"Yes. The Zohor mandate was to neutralize the threat posed by the Nimbus," the Sentinel said, "They deliberated and came to the conclusion that the best way to do this was to destroy all the Higher Races and cripple the Younger Races before they could evolve."

Benedict nodded.

"Can I ask how this millions-year old League of such vastly superior beings didn't see that one coming?" he asked.

"The Zohor were designed to serve the Purpose," the Sentinel said, "And the Purpose is Life. No one foresaw that the Zohor would decide that organic Life no longer served the Purpose."

"And so they obliterated the League," Benedict said, contemptuously.

"And once the League was destroyed," The Sentinel said, "The Zohor set about ensuring that no new organic life evolved anywhere in the explored universe."



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“Ship traffic control, this is Expedition One, requesting approach clearance,” Benedict said as the Beetle broke orbit from Hiddek Uhl.

“Roger Expedition One, you are cleared for approach. Landing beacon is activated.”

“Expedition One inbound, traffic control,” Benedict said.

The Beetle rushed into the blackness between Hiddek Uhl and the Ship. Despite the Ship’s size, the distance between the planet and the Ship meant that it was only a fleck of gold and blue light on Benedict’s display. That changed quickly as Benedict accelerated away from Hiddek Uhl. The Ship gradually became more distinct, growing in size and detail in Benedict’s visual field. As he approached a strange trick of perspective made it look as though he was about to collide with the gargantuan Ship, although there were still hundreds of kilometres between them. The Ship was over thirty-two kilometres in diameter. Its mountainous dome rose from the rim of its disk, dark gold crisscrossed with canyons of glowing blue energy along its upper surfaces. It had been an awesome sight to behold when it nestled in the earth in the Laguna desert. Now in space, the Ship was even more of a wonder.

“Ship Traffic Control to Expedition One, reduce speed to one hundred KPH and begin landing approach manoeuvre.”

“Throttling back,” Benedict said, “Reverse thrust firing.”

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The Beetle slowed dramatically, perceptibly. Despite its speed, the Ship was passing beneath it at a crawl. Benedict banked to starboard, bringing the Beetle closer to the massive dome. The landing platform was below the launch bay, on the far side of the dome from his current. Benedict reduced speed to less than fifty kilometres an hour as he circled 'round, coming in closer. There was the landing platform. Benedict lined the Beetle up.

“This is Expedition One to Docking Control; we are on final approach.”

“Confirmed Ex One,” Docking Control replied, “Cut forward velocity to nil and stand by for tractor lock.”

“Roger that.” Benedict reduced the Beetle’s speed by degrees until its forward momentum relative to the Ship was at zero. The Beetle was seized in the grip of an invisible beam that pulled it gently down toward the landing platform.

“Ex One please extend your struts and cancel null buoyancy field.”

Benedict reached for the switches on the control panel in front of him. The readouts confirmed that the landing struts were deployed, the field deactivated.

“Done and done,” he said. “Powering down main engines and switching to internal battery power.”

The Beetle was secured to the landing platform, its running lights and glowing engine section going dark. The platform then receded into the side of the Ship’s hull, the bulkheads sealing seamlessly behind. When the port bay was equalized with the inner dock’s atmosphere and gravity, the inner airlock

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opened and the Beetle was taxied into the hangar from which it had been launched only two days before.

“Welcome home Expedition One,”



The expedition team would need to spend another several days being gradually reacclimatized with a “normal” gravity and atmosphere. Stuck in the hangar bay again, Benedict was on one side of a large observation window, sitting at a desk. On the other side of the window at a similar desk was Colonel Bloom. They spoke to each other over their linx headsets. Benedict related to Bloom what they had learned from the Sentinel. They had a data module aboard that contained the navigational information that would lead to the Hub, the next waypoint on the Exodus.

“I think our only option at this point is to follow those coordinates,” Benedict said, grimly, “The last broadcast we got from Earth matches what a Nimbus invasion looks like and if these Zohor are still out there...”

“Do we know what the Zohor ships look like?” Bloom asked.

Benedict shook his head.

“The Zohor ships...changed, for lack of a better word, seemingly reconfiguring at random. They remained more or less uniform when compared to one another, but they changed so often it was impossible to nail down a distinct silhouette or a signature energy output.”

“Fuck,” Bloom rasped, “How the hell can you fight an enemy like that?”

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“That’s how they defeated the Nimbus,” Benedict said, “And the League.”

“What did you learn about their tactics?” Bloom asked, “There’s a chance they’re still out there somewhere. If they are, I’d like to be able to live past an encounter with them.”

“They had a lot of different tactics,” Benedict said with a shrug, “But their favoured method was an onslaught with an overwhelming number of ships or soldiers. When the numbers weren’t available, the Zohor relied on super-weapons: extreme-yield devices; planet-killing mass drivers that could destroy an entire world’s ecosystem with one strike. And just in case anything survived the mass drivers, the planet-killers seeded the worlds with a disease that effectively and permanently crippled any life forms that might--”

“Fucking God,” Bloom exclaimed, leaning back in her chair and gripping the desk reflexively, “Oh my fucking God...”

“What?” Benedict asked, “What is it?”

“Exo you’ve just given me the final piece of a nightmare puzzle,” Bloom said, “We found out that the deaths of those girls was caused by the Ship. It was experimenting on them; trying to mutate them.”

“What? Why? What happened?”

“Doctors Cole and Kodo figured out that the Ship had been tampering with those girls; experimenting with them,” Bloom said, “As soon as I found out, I spoke with the Control Entity. It told me that millions of years ago, life on Earth was infected--”

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“The Nimbus?”

“No; it was infected with a disease that made aging fatal.”

“I don’t understand,”

Bloom shook her head.

“Neither do I Exo,” she said, “Not all of it anyway. But it seems that the natural order of things isn’t to grow old and die, but to stop getting older and to either evolve to some higher form of life, or to die through disease or misfortune. Whatever the case, apparently by aging and dying, life on Earth was prevented from evolving. The infection happened at around the same time that the mass extinction at the end of the Cretaceous; the Cataclysm when the death-star asteroid struck the Earth.”

Benedict felt himself grow cold as a chilling, unmitigated horror began to spread from his bones, outward.

“Then the asteroid that struck the Earth back then had to have been a Zohor planet-killer...and the Ship has been experimenting on us...”

“So that it could cure the disease,” Bloom finished, “And that’s exactly what happened. That’s exactly what it did. The Ship has been experimenting on Humankind for hundreds of thousands of years. It discovered a gene that could reverse the aging infection. But only women carry that gene and only one in every twenty or thirty thousand women carry a viable form of that gene. Allison McQuire survived the experiments and she’s free of the disease. And because she’s survived, the Ship’s called off its experiments. The Ship intends for Allison

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McQuire to be a new Eve, Exo: to restart the Human Race. She, her children and her children's children will all be immortal. Eventually, her bloodline will be spread through the whole Human race."

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph,"

"All rolled into one," Bloom said, "The mother of the new Human race."

TEN

INFECTION

Although Geneva had lost contact with the Ship less than twenty-four hours earlier, fate of Shipflight was of little or no concern to the world. There was a war on; massive, global, indiscriminate and irrefutable. And War Four was undeniably different from any of the three previous World Wars. In each of the former instances, there were discernible villains, an identifiable enemy and a cause to fight for: Kaiser Wilhelm and German Expansionism; Adolph Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Emperor Hirohito and the Axis powers; President Carver Rose and Prime Minister Lynton Charles and the British-American Coalition Army of Freedom.

But this war was vastly different. There wasn't one discernible enemy or alliance of enemies. Countries had broken away from the World Council; other nations that had

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never been members of the World Council banded together; nationless terror cells and international militias sprang up. It seemed that everyone was at war with everyone else, and everyone, it seemed, was at war with the member nations of the World Council.

As always, the poorest countries and the most helpless populations had been hit the hardest. Brutal attacks by savage armies led to destruction, disease, famine and fallout. These same populations often rebelled and would either be slaughtered wholesale or become the next league of slaughterers, themselves.

The causes of this new war were likewise as varied as they were usual: Religious zealotry, rabid idealism, and political and economic motivations. But this time the madness and violence that had historically been reserved for the two-thirds of the world categorized as “The East” had invaded the West: Berlin was an armed camp trying to protect its citizens and dwindling resources, surrounded on all sides by foreign insurgents who had annexed and carved up most of the rest of Germany; Cairo was now held by a sectarian paramilitary force that had come forth from Ethiopia in the name of turning all of North Africa into the New Zion; Vatican City had fallen, the Pope and the College of Cardinals fled to Geneva; Basque terrorists from France and Spain were warring on their parent nations; the Chunnel Train had been hijacked and a nuclear device detonated in the tunnel under the English Channel.

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The Americas weren't immune to violence: Ramon Padillo had taken over General Diaz's army after an American-backed coup attempt two years earlier had failed. Padillo's forces now controlled most of South America and were setting sights on Mexico. Mexican and American forces were encamped in Texas, preparing to deploy to Southern Mexico; the Kreutz Virus had been unleashed in Florida and California, presumably as a pre-emptive strike by Padillo's forces; extreme-right militias in the American Midwest were battling constantly with the FBI, ATF and National Guard; a radical Christian group had staged attacks in New Orleans, Salt Lake City, Atlanta and Boston. Two million people were dead in Montreal from an engineered outbreak of Stafford's Plague; the West Coast Independence Coalition had declared everything from Vancouver Island to San Francisco an independent state.

What was most astounding was the rapidity with which the world had degenerated into such chaos. The last year had been witness to an utter breakdown of World Civilization; since Shiprise it the world's situation worsened exponentially. Individual national armies and the Allied World Army were taxed to their limits. Life went on in those areas not directly affected by the violence much as it had before; though now it continued under a sense of fear and unease, even a fatalistic sense of doom.

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But life did go on, the Canadian Defence Minister observed. He and the Prime Minister had flown over the Montreal Plague Quarantine Zone; the bridges and tunnels leading to and from the island city were barricaded and guarded by soldiers with simple orders: *nothing gets across; shoot to kill*. Twenty kilometres along the shoreline surrounding Montreal to the North, West and South, another perimeter had been established. Here were armed encampments from which aid would be distributed to the infected and medical teams were being prepared to isolate those who weren't. The Minister was all too painfully aware that fewer and fewer people were going into isolation, and more and more were seeking treatment. The Prime Minister made a saddened exclamation as they flew over the NDG Fire Zone, where six consecutive nights of rioting had decimated the historic Notre Dame De Grace neighbourhood of the city. It was then that the Minister's linx chimed and a voice spoke five words into his ear:

“The Committee. Tomorrow morning. Five.”

Even in the midst of Armageddon, the Minister realized, life went on.



The Baltimore Facility did not in any way, shape or form resemble a maximum security medical research center. It occupied a small industrial plaza in the harbour district, east across the bay from the Fort McHenry National Monument. The campus housed administration buildings, a small mall, a parking lot and acres of reclaimed parkland. A private road led

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from the administration building to the main laboratory. The complex bore the name and logo of the Versagene Dynamics International Corporation, and on paper it was a privately-funded company sub-contracting medical genetic engineering and research.

The main lab buildings were nothing more than window dressing: the real Facility was accessible only through a door marked as a supply closet in the back of the shipping/receiving bay: the door opened with a biometric lock onto an airlock. On the other side of the airlock, those admitted would pass a security desk and into an elevator. Those who were refused access were carried out in sealed forty gallon barrels marked “medical waste”, after the nerve gas dissipated. The elevator shaft dropped down through layers of shale, siltstone and sandstone, going deeper beneath the surface than the Fort McHenry Tunnel or Harbour Tunnel Highway, down into a heavily fortified bunker.

The elevator opened onto another airlock, another security desk and then the first floor of the real laboratory complex. It consisted of labs, a surgery, isolation rooms, offices, commissaries and storage. The lab was spread out over ten levels, each level isolated from the others with its own power, data and ventilation systems. Armed guards patrolled each level twenty-four hours a day.

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Only two people were permanent residents of the Facility: The first was Patient Zero, formerly known as Gabriel Ashe; completely infected with and transformed by the Nimbus virus and his uninfected Human counterpart, Colonel Isaac Jude.

Jude had nothing to do. He was visited daily by lab technicians outfitted in hazmat suits who performed a battery of unpleasant medical tests on him; he was often taken to an isolation room where someone on the other side of a thick plate of transparent poly-alloy would interview him when he wasn't submitted to every medical scan imaginable. He accepted it all without thought of escape or fighting back, because he had witnessed what had happened to Gabriel Ashe aboard the Ship. He knew what kind of threat the former cult leader had become. Jude understood that *his* body could very well hold the key to saving Humanity from what Ashe now was, and though he didn't particularly like the idea, Jude also understood that it may be necessary for him to die to save them all.

When Jude wasn't being subjected to tests, examinations or bizarre interviews, he was locked in a hospital bedroom. He kept busy exercising, performing martial arts or simply meditating. He'd been offered books or magazines, but he'd never been prone to reading. Jude was content to wait.

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When he was first revived, Jude had been anxious for a situation report; to learn what had happened to Ashe and what was going on. It had been weeks before anyone spoke to him other than to give him orders to submit to whatever tests they were performing. Finally he was escorted into a secure interview room, where his former commander was waiting for him on the other side of the poly-alloy wall.

“For a dead man you look pretty good, Knight,” the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said.

“It’s very good to see you, sir,” Jude replied, “Can you tell me what’s going on? What happened to Gabriel Ashe?”

“As you’ve doubtless figured out, this is a secure medical isolation and research facility. You and Ashe were discovered in the Ship’s Crater several days after Shiprise. Somehow Ashe was exposed to and infected by some sort of alien virus. You have *not* been and we can’t figure out why.”

“I’m immune to it?”

“It would appear so. Now we have to find out why. Can I count on you to continue cooperating with us?”

“You should destroy Ashe. To be safe you should destroy me, as well.”

“If you’re immune to the thing, we need to find out what mechanism allows that immunity,” the Chairman replied, “We might still end up killing you both. But for now, you’re more valuable alive.”

“For the record, I’m not convinced keeping us alive is a good idea. However, you can count on my cooperation, sir.”

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“Then, sit tight. We may need you more than ever, when the time comes.”



And so several months later, Jude was still submitting to daily tests and examinations, interviews and medical procedures. Still he waited, ready to serve once again.

Long ago, before Majestic or even the Special Forces, Isaac Jude had chosen his country over himself. He'd chosen to live a life dedicated to performing duties necessary for the protection and preservation of the nation he'd been lucky enough to have been born into. It was only as Jude found himself further and further into the later years of his life that he began to understand just how great a sacrifice he'd chosen to make. He had never taken a wife, had had no family of his own. Sometimes, late at night, when the complaints of impending old age would wake him up—or worse, keep him awake—Jude would wonder if he'd have made the same choices as a young man if he'd have truly known the consequences those choices were to have later in life. Of course the argument was moot; he couldn't change the past, and wasn't sure that he would. Having regrets were pointless and mistakes were only mistakes if one failed to learn from them. But still he was haunted, on occasion, by the ghosts of what might have been.



David Van Der Draas shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He'd been called before the World Ship Summit to

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answer for the failure of the Geneva Hyperlink Beacon. He knew that everyone wanted answers; he knew that reaction to what he had to say would be dramatic. But then, the news he would deliver was in and of itself explosive and nothing the World Ship Summit really wanted to hear.

Van Der Draas listened solemnly through his headset as Babelware translated Chairman Ikoru's opening remarks from Japanese into Dutch. He was ceremoniously sworn in and took his seat before the investigative panel.

"Mister Van Der Draas," Chairman Ikoru began, "You are currently the head of the head of the Hyperlink Beacon Operations Center here in Geneva, is that correct?"

"This is correct Madam Chairman."

"You were also, prior to working as the head of the HBOC, the Chief Engineer overseeing the construction of the Hyperlink Beacon."

"That fell under my current mandate as head of the Hyperlink Beacon Operations Center, Madam Chairman," Van Der Draas said, "And previous to my work for the World Ship Summit I designed and helped to monitor the functionality of the Concorde Space Station series' deep space radio astronomy arrays. When we began constructing and assembling the hyperlink beacon, we did so with direct assistance from the Ship, including step-by-step instructions on how to manufacture and assemble each component of the beacon and how to interface the Ship's technology with our own. As such,

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I am the leading—if not the sole—authority on everything to do with the hyperlink beacon.”

“We’ll waive further reading of your credentials into record then,” Chairman Ikoru said, “To the matter at hand: You have been working constantly and at great expense to the member nations of the World Council since contact with the Ship began to fail, in an attempt to understand why our beacon failed, correct?”

“That is correct,” Van Der Draas answered, becoming annoyed with the pointless formalities, “And to get right to the point, Madam Chairman, esteemed delegates, the Geneva hyperlink beacon did not fail at all. The Ship itself is the reason our communications failed.”



“We have an update from the Baltimore Facility,” the Curator said, his image transmitted to the Minister’s console screen, in Ottawa. Arrayed along the lower frame of his console screen were the faces of the seven other Committee members, as well as their counterparts from China and Russia. The Minister was in his study at home, or the rented house that was serving as home while he served as Canada’s Minister of National Defence.

It was a beautifully sunny day outside; unseasonably warm, but the day held no comfort for him. The situation in Montreal had degenerated, and the province of Quebec was on the brink of an all-out civil war. Canadian and American forces were battling the West Coast independence forces, and

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around the world the madness was worsening: Berlin had fallen, there had been an outbreak of Stafford's in Central Asia, and there was all-out war in North Africa between the Neo-Zionists and Islamic radicals. Despite it all, the Committee's business took precedence, as the Curator was about to report in detail:

“Our doctors believe they have isolated the mechanism that allows for Colonel Jude to be immune to the effects of the Nimbus Virus,” He said, “It is not any single factor but a combination of factors: Jude's blood type is A/B Positive; he suffered from childhood leukemia as a result of a genetic predisposition; he carries a certain genomic sequence common to people of Scandinavian heritage and his military-related drug use also contribute to the immunity mechanism.”

“How do these factors work together?” the British Ambassador to Canada asked.

Onscreen, the Curator consulted his notes.

“The gene sequences that produced Jude's blood type, and his specific heritage, as well as the genes that caused his leukemia themselves provide part of the immunity,” he said, “Creating a mutation in his immune system that specifically targets the Nimbus virus. However, the resilience and adaptability of the Nimbus itself means that under normal circumstances, Jude's natural immunity would be overcome. The drug use is what put Jude's immunity over the top: the stimulants employed by special operations soldiers are alkaloids, containing nicotine derivatives. When a specific alkaloid compound in these stimulants is metabolized in the

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body they leave behind a residue which bonds with various cells in the liver, kidneys and certain membranes. This residue cannot be flushed from the body and so it builds up over time. We see the consequences of this regularly: users of the designer drug Oil die from the accumulated compound. In Colonel Jude's case, these toxins are passed on to the Nimbus Virus, which on a cellular level cannot survive exposure."

"Is there a way to turn this into a vaccine?" MI-6 asked.

"Unfortunately, no;" the Curator said, "However we can use this knowledge to cultivate people who are immune to the virus."

The Curator's image minimized to the tray at the bottom of the Minister's screen, as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff's image maximized in the window.

"We have begun screening candidates in the US Military," he said, "We're looking people with similar genetic traits to Colonel Jude, refining the search by looking for those who have used the stimulants in question, or those who have in the past used nicotine-based alkaloid-opiate drug compounds, such as Oil."

"Do we anticipate an outbreak of the Nimbus virus?" The British Defence Minister asked.

"It may be inevitable," the Chairman replied, "Patient Zero did say that the whole of the Nimbus is aware of Earth, now. We can't discount the possibility that some infected alien will make a successful incursion."

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“And these soldiers will be what?” Peng Hui Rui, from the Sino-Russian Bureau of Extraterrestrial Investigation asked, “A new Master Race?”

“We’re working to see if there are other genetic combinations in other races that provide a similar immune mechanism,” the Curator replied, “We are confident that there are similar immunity mechanisms in other Racial groups.”

“Disturbing implications if there aren’t,” The Minister replied.

“In the meantime, we have a defence, at least a partial one,” the Chairman replied, “If an outbreak occurs, if an invasion occurs, we will be able to preserve at least some small portion of Humanity.”

“We are also looking at engineering a gene therapy solution to deliver these immunities to the general populace,” the Curator hastened to add, “However, at these early stages we’re still trying to construct a stable viral delivery system.”

“The important thing is that we’ve found a way for Humanity to survive the Nimbus,” the Chairman interjected.

“Given the state of the world, Mister Chairman,” Peng Hui Rui said, “The Nimbus virus may be the least of our problems.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” he said, “Which is why I would now like to put a motion to the Committee: I propose that we now further minimize the threat posed to Humankind by the Nimbus Virus, and exterminate Gabriel Ashe, immediately.”

“Seconded,” MI-6 said, immediately.

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The Minister was not in the least surprised that the motion passed unanimously.



The silence in the hall was deafening. From her central position on the Senatorial bench at the front of the hall, Chairman Aya Ikoru sat stunned.

“Mister Van Der Draas...Mister Van Der Draas, how exactly is the Ship responsible for what’s happened? How is that even possible?”

“Our hyperlink beacon has never stopped working,” Van Der Draas said, “Nor did it stop transmitting, the whole time we were attempting to reach the Ship.”

“Then, what happened?”

Van Der Draas leaned forward, lacing his hands together.

“Hyperlink transmissions aren’t like radio or microwave broadcasts,” he said, “For one, they don’t use spectral radiation the way standard radio does. Instead, multi-layered signals are broadcast into lower-dimensional space. In order to be received by the hyperlink at the other end, both beacons have to be precisely tuned to the same dimensional state, as well as the same waveforms, wavelengths and wave cycles. These measurements have to be extremely precise or else the transmissions would never be received. To minimize the risk of signal loss, hyperlink broadcasts are made into multiple lower dimensional states, using many different transmission waves and cycles. One of the sets of signals sent are alignment signals; each hyperlink should receive no less than one hundred and seventeen alignment signals. As soon as

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these are detected by the receiving beacon, it begins an alignment cycle until it has a fully matched set of signals; it then sends its own set of alignment signals to make sure that the two beacons are perfectly synchronized. This procedure usually takes less than one tenth of a second. Once signal alignment is verified at both ends, the hyperlink transmission is broadcast.”

Van Der Draas took a sip of water from the glass beside him and continued:

“During the course of my investigation, we discovered that the Ship’s hyperlink beacon was constantly changing its alignment signals, forcing our own beacon to continuously realign. Then it began altering lower dimensional signal states as well. Eventually it became impossible to target their beacon and we lost communication with the Ship.”

“Then the Ship’s beacon failed?”

Now they had reached the crux of it.

“It didn’t fail, no.”

Before Chairman Ikoru could ask the obvious question, Van Der Draas gave the answer:

“Among the alignment signals sent between the hyperlink beacons are command sets designed to keep the two beacons locked together and synchronized. If one beacon’s synchronization computers fail, the other beacon will take over ensuring they remain in synch. The signals are very elaborate, highly complex. They’re designed to ensure multiple hyperlink beacons can remain in synch whether they are stationary or moving. Each beacon tracks the position of any

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other beacon it's in contact with, relative to its own. Whenever any two or more beacons' alignment signals disagree they both reset relative to one another and begin tracking in again. In a multiple beacon system any beacons in disagreement are localized by the other surrounding beacons which then reprogram the beacons in conflict with the correct navigational information. Which means the alignment signal from the Ship was intentionally tampered with."

An explosion of hivelike murmuring answered Van Der Draas' words. Chairman Ikoru pounded her gavel repeatedly to restore order.

"Mister Van Der Draas are you suggesting that someone on the Ship's crew deliberately sabotaged their hyperlink beacon?"

"No, madam Chairman I'm not; I worked personally and directly with the Ship's Hyperlink Beacon Operations' staff prior to Shiprise. Everyone aboard the Ship is as qualified as I am, if not more so. However, I guarantee you that no one has the expertise necessary to have sabotaged the Alignment Signal Broadcast System simply because the ASBS is part of a system set the Ship didn't train any of us on. If the ASBS aboard the Ship had malfunctioned or failed, our ASBS would have taken over. No, the Ship's Alignment Signal Broadcast System could only have started behaving the way it did, because of direct interference from the Ship Control Entity."

"But why, Mister Van Der Draas?" the Chairman asked, "Why would the Ship do this?"

Van Der Draas sat back in his chair.

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“I don’t know, madam Chairman. Only the Ship could answer that.”



The only features in the observation ward where the Nimbus-infected Gabriel Ashe was being held were a gurney with restraints, a stainless steel washbasin and a toilet. There were hidden cameras of course, and a two-way polyalloy mirror from which people on the other side of the heavily reinforced door could see into the room. Ashe stood patiently in the center of the room, already aware through Nimbus-heightened senses of the three people in biosafety suits approaching from the hallway outside. Two were armed with M-AA-29 machine guns; the third carried a small medical kit, which contained poisons that would paralyze Ashe’s body, arresting his heart and stopping his lungs. They meant to kill him, he understood with mild amusement. The door unlocked and opened, the first guard into the room, pointing her weapon at him.

“Do not move!” she barked, her voice muffled by the biosafety suit.

The medical technician came into the room next, followed by the second guard.

“You know the drill,” the med said, “Lie down on the gurney.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that, Doctor Eisley,” Ashe said.

“You heard him!” the second guard shouted, “Get onto the fucking bed! Now!”

Ashe looked at the guards.

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“Lieutenant Vasquez, Lieutenant Walsh, I did just say I can’t do that and I meant it,” Ashe said, calmly, “You’ve come to kill me and I just can’t let that happen.”

Vasquez and Walsh, took a step forward and raised their rifles.

“I said move!” Vasquez shouted.

And Ashe moved.

The motion looked like a blur. Even the surveillance cameras, filming from several different angles and in real-time, didn’t have the frame rate necessary to properly capture what happened. In less than a second Ashe grabbed Vasquez’s rifle by the barrel and yanked it from her hand, slamming her in the chest with the butt and knocking her back into Eisley. Before either of them could react Ashe had brought the rifle to bear on Walsh. He fired. The single shot punctured Walsh’s biosafety suit at the neck, missing the guard and exiting at the rear before punching into Eisley’s suit and burying itself in his shoulder. Vasquez scrambled for the side-arm velcroed to the hip of her biosafety suit. Ashe fired, hitting her in the thigh. Ashe dropped the rifle and raised his hand. He pointed his index finger at Walsh and Eisley. The tip of his finger burst open and a small purple cloud issued from it, boiling like heavy ink poured into cold water. The cloud surged towards Walsh and Eisley, aiming straight for the holes in their biosafety suits. They screamed, trying to scramble backwards from the cloud, towards the door. But a siren was already sounding, the door already locking automatically. The Nimbus cloud descended upon them, slipping inside the biosafety suits and the

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defenceless bodies within. Vasquez had her sidearm out and was taking aim at Ashe, when the Nimbus cloud zeroed in on her, as well.



The alarm went off, jarring Jude from his meditative state. At least once every two weeks there was drill of some kind, so the sirens weren't an immediate cause for concern. But the automated voice that blared out behind the siren alarm was:

“Your attention please: Biosafety containment has failed on Level Nine. Security lockdown is now in effect. Levels Seven, Eight, Nine and Ten are now under full quarantine. Air filtration systems are shut down. All elevators are now shut down and elevator shafts are now sealed. Access to and from Levels Seven, Eight and Nine are now sealed. All personnel in Levels One through Six begin evacuation. All personnel in Levels Seven through Nine proceed to isolation zones. Decontamination crews to staging area on Level One...”

Jude stopped listening before the message began to loop. He got off the bed and headed to the door into his ward. It was locked. There were no windows; the ventilation shafts were small, narrow affairs. He was trapped for the duration. As he crossed to the bed, the lights went out.

“Right,” he muttered irritably, “Now what?”



The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff entered the situation room and sat down at the head of the conference

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table. Around him were the Generals in charge of Majestic. Two of them were Committee operatives. Every monitor, every console in the room displayed video feeds from or information about the Baltimore Facility.

“Have we reached the director of the Facility?” the Chairman asked, turning a console screen to face him.

“No sir, but we have the emergency preparedness chief for Level Nine on a videolinx.”

“Yeah, a lot of fucking good he’s done so far,” the Chairman growled, “Put him on!”

“Yes sir,” some lackey with Captain’s bars on his collar said, “His name’s Doctor Paul Bradley.”

The Chairman waived him off as Bradley’s face appeared onscreen.

“Doctor Bradley,” the Chairman said, “Time is of the essence; I need to know the situation.”

“A lab technician and two armed guards were infected by the Nimbus virus,” Bradley said from the monitor, his voice filling the room from hidden speakers, “Supervising security sealed the ward and the surrounding bulkheads before triggering the containment breach alarm. Apparently Patient Zero deployed the Nimbus virus in some sort of aerosolized form.”

The Chairman turned to General Roy Harrod, who was looming menacingly over two civilian DIA analysts working parallel consoles.

“Roy,”

Harrod turned and spoke.

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“It looks like the virus burst from some sort of opening or blister on his fingers.”

“How sure are we, that the airborne form of the virus was contained Doctor?” the Chairman asked Bradley.

Onscreen the doctor shook his head.

“The ward and hallways and ventilation surrounding it were locked down within seconds,” he said, “The pathogen is limited by the air flow, friction of the viral particles against air particles...gravity...The virus should be contained within the first area we sealed off.”

“Unfortunately ‘should’ isn’t good enough Doctor,” the Chairman said, “We know that the virus possesses at least some sort of rudimentary intelligence. For all we know enough of the virus escaped into the air shafts or hallways outside the quarantine zone on Level Nine and is just waiting for us to end quarantine before it spreads.”

The dawning realization and fear spreading across Bradley’s face seemed real enough to the Chairman, but that could be just another trick of the Nimbus to convince them that the man wasn’t infected.

“I...see...” Bradley stammered, “How long...” but the man couldn’t finish.

If Bradley truly was uninfected by the Nimbus...if this was a genuine fear response, the Chairman felt sorry for him. But there was too much at stake; if the Nimbus got free it would mean the end of humanity.

“We haven’t made any determination yet Doctor Bradley,” he said, “The Facility’s been isolated and the next

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step is to determine the extent of the contamination. You know I can't promise you'll get out of this; I can promise we'll do everything we can to make sure you do."

"Thank you, sir."

"For the moment we've got to keep all external communications limited to those going between the Facility and this situation room," the Chairman said, "But before this is over—one way or another—you and everyone else in the isolation zones will be able to send short messages home. The best thing you can do is keep your people calm, keep them informed and keep them together."

"Yes mister Chairman," Bradley said, "My staff and I will do just that."

"Good luck to you all," the Chairman said, cutting the communication.

General Harrod approached.

"General, get ready to run hot sleep," the Chairman said, "Nuclear incineration, Levels Seven through Ten. Use non-atomic extreme-heat incendiaries throughout the rest of the facility. Nothing can come out of there alive."

"Yes sir," Harrod said.

"Belay that;" the Chairman said, "There's another subject in the Facility; a patient with an immunity to the Nimbus virus. I want them extracted."

"Mister Chairman, is that wise?"

"The subject in question might be our only hope of surviving this, General," the Chairman said, "Their safe exfiltration is essential."

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“Sir, I--”

“The matter’s not open for discussion, General Harrod; extract our subject and then incinerate the Facility.”

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Even in the face of insurmountable odds, the Human Spirit is an indomitable one. And though they may not always emerge victorious, Humankind never surrenders.

ELEVEN OUTBREAK

The Versagene Dynamics building was sealed, the campus lot cordoned off by yellow police emergency tape and a small fleet of police cruisers, ambulances and emergency response vehicles. The press were kept at bay behind a quadruple barricade guarded steadfastly by both live police officers in full riot armour and automated police sentinels that could identify, track, follow and deliver fifty thousand volts of electricity with either contact or ballistic Tasers to any unauthorized people entering into predefined boundaries.

The building had been sealed under thick interlocking sheets of reinforced Mylar. The only way in and out was through an elaborate system of airlocks and decontamination bays held inside specially-designed Quonset huts. The

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semicircular shelters of corrugated aluminum sheeting had been assembled in under an hour by a special team of engineers assigned to the National Pandemic Strategy division of the Department of Homeland Security. Another team of NPS engineers had already blocked off all inbound and outbound sewer, water, gas, data and electrical lines for the Versagene Dynamics Building.

The genuine employees of Versagene Dynamics were the first to have been evacuated and quarantined outside of the building, told as little as possible and kept as isolated from one another as possible in different sections of one of the many Quonset huts that had sprung up across the grounds of the Facility. Likely they would all be released; the real danger was hundreds of feet belowground, in the hidden laboratories of the Baltimore Facility. But until someone from the Committee or one of its subsidiaries made that determination, these people were being kept under careful scrutiny.

As the buildings in the industrial plaza surrounding the quarantine zone were evacuated, teams were dispatched to put down strobe and radio markers to convert one deserted parking lot into a helipad (a fast-working pre-programmed “painter” robot had already put down the oversized “H” in a quick-drying, highly-reflective fluorescent paint.) A large, black helicopter was inbound, the sound of its powerful rotors already smacking the air, echoing wildly through the false canyon of the dense cluster of low-rise buildings in the plaza.

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Aboard the helicopter was a team from Majestic Battalion, already partially dressed in special biohazard suits. In the cargo bay of the helicopter were a number of low-yield thermonuclear devices and packages of incendiary explosives.



Gabriel Ashe waited patiently as Vasquez and Eisley worked on the door. They were improvising an explosive from the gun powder in the shells from Vasquez's rifle. They shared a unique synchronicity now; their minds united into one, separate but linked. Their heightened senses were aware of Isaac Jude in the levels above, of the black helicopter circling in on its landing approach, of the need to move quickly.

The Nimbus virus had attacked their brains first, quickly spreading itself through the frontal lobe and taking over the cells there. Within minutes of infection, Walsh, Vasquez and Eisley were conjoined with Gabriel Ashe. They understood Ashe's importance now, as he was the only person who was fully infused with the Nimbus; he was the only one who could produce enough of the virus to spread it throughout the world.

"We have to hurry," was the first thing Eisley had said when the virus began taking over his brain. By then both he and Vasquez had stopped screaming, stopped struggling.

"I can't believe I was so afraid," Walsh said.

"You don't have to be afraid of anything now," Ashe replied.

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“We still have to get out of here,” Vasquez said, ejecting the magazine from her rifle.

Now the explosive device was ready, placed above the locking mechanism of the door. It didn't look like much, but Ashe knew it would be enough. Made from the magazine from Vasquez's gun, the gun powder from the most of the shells, packing improvised from torn shreds of their biosafety suits and held together by surgical tape from Eisley's medical kit. The primers from the discarded bullets had been clustered in such a way as to detonate the device. Vasquez had put one bullet aside. She chambered this lone round into her M-AA-29, took aim at the IED on the door and fired.

The door exploded outwards, swinging open on its hinges with enough force to bounce off the outside wall and partially close again. Vasquez took point, with Eisley, Walsh and Ashe behind. It wasn't necessary for Vasquez to tell Ashe to stay behind her and Eisley; he knew because she did that she and Walsh were his only line of defence. And Vasquez knew because Ashe did that they had to infuse as many other people down here as they could, before the attack came. It was imperative that if Ashe himself didn't survive this, that the Nimbus virus did. But first they had to get to the security station and the gun locker.

“If procedure was followed,” Eisley said, “The Security station should be deserted. Everyone will have been evacuated to one of the isolation zones.”

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“If not?” Ashe asked.

“Then we have to hope they don’t get a kill shot before we can engage.” Vasquez replied.

The security station was deserted. The weapons locker was also opened, six of ten small arms missing. There were still four of six M-AA-29 rifles, along with magazines and boxes of ammunition. Through the Nimbus, everything Walsh and Vasquez had ever learned in the military now belonged to Eisley and to Ashe. They took the remaining handguns and three of the rifles. The other rifle they dismantled. With all the remaining magazines loaded, they packed a small rucksack with boxes of ammunition for the rifles and handguns.

“Gabriel, take the extra ammo and clips,” Vasquez said, “You’ll take flank and supply us with fresh clips, reloading the empties.”

Ashe nodded. Although he and Eisley shared Vasquez’s memories it was undeniable that her firsthand experience made her the proper person to lead this mission.

“Given the rifles and handguns missing we have to assume that there’ll be one rifle and at least one handgun in each isolation zone,” Vasquez said as she studied the security station console, “I can’t guess where the other two guns are, but we have to assume they’ll be concealed in one or two different isolation zones.”

“How do we proceed?” Eisley asked.

“Gabriel has to infuse them,” she said, “The first variable is whether or not they’re all in biosafety gear.”

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“They aren’t normally,” Ashe said, recalling lab procedures from memory, “Only when they’re in the lab zones, themselves.”

Vasquez looked at him.

“That was before the lockdown,” she said, “It’s safe to assume that they’re wearing biosafety gear in the isolation zone at least within this first sealed area. If that’s the case, we’ll have to shoot to kill.”

“That would be unfortunate,” Ashe said.

Vasquez grunted noncommittally. But Ashe knew she disagreed with his assessment; her priority was keeping him alive to spread the Nimbus; she didn’t care who had to die to make that happen. She shut off the console and shouldered her weapon.

“The nearest isolation zone is down the hall on the left,” she said, “Walsh, you’re on point. Ashe, stay behind me.”



The isolation zones were sealed behind a set of airlock doors and each had its own separate air supply. There were chairs, tables, blankets, folding cots, shower and toilet facilities, bottled water and rations in each. Two dozen people could survive a full ten days inside with little discomfort. And in the first one they found exactly what Vasquez predicted: everyone, twenty people, wearing isolation suits. Without hesitation, Vasquez, and Walsh opened fire. The M-AA-29 was a “silenced” rifle which made very little sound. This was to the advantage of Ashe and his new allies, because it meant

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that no one in the other isolation zones would hear the gunfire. They found a rifle and one handgun in the room.

“How are we going to breach the upper levels?” Ashe wanted to know.

“We’ll need Doctor Bradley,” Easley said. And instantly Ashe, Walsh and Vasquez knew all Easley knew about Bradley, including his none-too favourable opinion of the man. He was the Emergency Preparedness chief for Level Nine; he’d therefore be able to override the lockout.

“Ideally, I’d like him alive,” Ashe said, “Time is against us. Are either of you strong enough yet to sense where exactly he is?”

“Isolation Two,” Easley said, “And I think Doctor Chilton is there as well.”

“Chilton,” Ashe said, “Yes...I remember Chilton. He’s not in charge of the facility...but he is in charge of their Nimbus project.”

Easley nodded. Ashe closed his eyes and concentrated.

“Yes...Chilton...Bradley...a dozen others...Three with guns, including Chilton; he has the handgun. They’re all wearing full face masks and gloves...but not full isolation suits.”

“I see them,” Vasquez said, “Through your mind. You’re powerful, Ashe.”

“I’ve had a year to be infused and absorbed into the Nimbus. You’ve had less than an hour. In time, you’ll be as powerful as I am. In time, everyone will be. Now, let’s go.”



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The helicopter was down and the team from Majestic was suited up and heading into the Versagene Dynamics building. The biosafety suits they wore were tremendously different from the suits worn by the lab workers trapped below. The soldiers' biosafety suits were designed for combat; tight-fitting, heavily-padded and reinforced with both lightweight armour plating and interwoven armour fabric. Of the eight soldiers, five were armed while the other three carried heavy cases, one in each hand and a larger one slung across their backs; nine cases in all. As they reached the cordon around the main entrance into Versagene Dynamics, the on-site emergency coordinator from the Center for Disease Control met them. The doctor's own biosafety suit was of civilian design and looked positively flimsy compared to the buttressed suits of the soldiers.

“Doctor Wohler?” the officer in command of the Majestic squadron said, “I'm Colonel Khalid al-Fayed, US Army Rangers Thirteenth Battalion. At the behest of the Department of Homeland Security, we're here to assume control of the site.”

“I know,” Wohler said angrily, “DHS already advised me.”

“Doctor Wohler, I know you're not entirely pleased with the situation,” Colonel al-Fayed said, “However my team are trained to handle and destroy biohazardous material and contaminated areas.”

“This isn't just biohazardous material Colonel. According to the information from the assistant director of

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Versagene, the complex was exposed to Stafford's Plague. Not only is Stafford's airborne and extremely virulent, we still don't have an effective vaccine against it."

"The intel I have on this facility is that they were working on the Stafford's Vaccine Project," the Colonel offered. The only intel he had relating to Stafford's was the cover story; he knew full well that the actual situation involved a Type Seven-Theta: a biohazardous substance of alien origin. That could mean anything from an alien microbe to an alien being. In any case, the Majestic Squad's orders were the same: obliterate the building and everything in it; not even the smallest particulate life form could survive.

"Be that as it may Colonel," Doctor Wohler said, "My team should be in there trying to isolate the strain or strains of the Stafford's Plague that's in there, in case it's mutated into something we haven't seen before."

"I understand your concerns doctor. Rest assured we will acquire samples of the virus while in there and return them to the CDC. But our job is to ensure that this building and the virus within are destroyed. Have the Versagene employees you've got in quarantine checked out?"

Wohler nodded.

"Yes," he said, "They're all very frightened, but nobody was exposed."

Al-Fayed nodded.

"Then ship them out," he said, "All civilian and non-military personnel should be evacuated from this area immediately."

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“Very well,” Wohler said.

Al-Fayed signalled his troops to follow him into the building.



They arrived outside Isolation Two. Ashe and Walsh were to the left of the door, Vasquez and Easley to the right. Vasquez entered the unlock code and unlatched the door. Inside, everyone’s attention became focused on the door. Ashe reached inside with his heightened consciousness and sent Vasquez the position of the people with guns. Chilton was in the far left corner of the room. Vasquez hit the door with her shoulder and rolled into the room. She’d already picked her first target and fired a single shot. The man holding the automatic rifle fell backwards from the impact, his right shoulder a bleeding ruin. Chilton panicked and started firing wildly. He hit four other people in the room, including the woman with the second rifle. Vasquez turned on Chilton, aiming with the rifle’s laser scope for the gun in his hands. But Chilton fired the last three shots in the gun’s magazine and the gun dry-fired. Easley came into the room. Chilton had killed three people and wounded one with seven shots. Everyone else was frightened but unharmed. With Vasquez and Easley covering the room, Gabriel Ashe walked in.

“Hello everyone,” he said, “And welcome into the Nimbus.”



Colonel al-Fayed surveyed the empty first level of the Facility. The elevators to the lower levels had been sealed, as had the stairwells. His Control was back in the helicopter,

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linking up with various secret databases, trying to find the codes that would allow al-Fayed to unlock the stairwells.

“Rook Seven to Bishop,”

“Bishop; go ahead Rook Seven,” al-Fayed replied, using his codename. The secret nature of their missions required that in the field they referred to each other by special designations. Al-Fayed was the Bishop, his subordinates Rooks One through Ten.

“Bishop, the incendiaries have been placed; we’re ready to proceed to the next level.”

“Roger that,”

“Rook Four to Bishop,”

“Bishop; go ahead Rook Four,”

“Sir, we’ve located the Package.”

The only information Al-Fayed had on the Package was that he was immune to the effects of the Type Seven-Theta and that it was imperative that he be extracted alive from the Facility. His exact location and identity were stored in the Facility’s secure servers and Rook Four’s job had been to access that data.

“Where is he?” Al-Fayed demanded.

“Level Seven,” Rook four replied over their commlink, “Outside Heavy Quarantine.”

“Send the data to my console,” Al-Fayed said, “We’ll retrieve the Package; you and the rest of the men finish setting the charges.”

“Sending; Bishop, check the ID on the Package.”

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Al-Fayed called up the information to the screen over his left eye. He couldn't believe what he read.

"This can't be," he said.

"It is, sir. Package is the Knight; he's fucking Lazarus, back from the dead!"

"This gets better and better,"



In the dark, all Jude could do was sit patiently and wait. At some point the alarm had cut out so he was completely isolated in darkness and silence. He was wide awake, however, sitting with crossed legs at the foot of his bed, waiting, listening. The ventilation system had cut out when the power went, so there were no electrical hums, no hiss of circulating air, nothing but faint and distant noises from other parts of the Facility. It was getting unpleasantly warm without the circulating air, and Jude wondered how long his oxygen would hold out.

Jude eventually began to hear a distant percussion, the sound of boots on the floor. They were far off, however. In the silence the faintest footfalls could have been echoing from anywhere, but Jude had the impression they were growing louder, getting nearer. He wished he had a weapon, but none was available. If people were coming for him, either they were friendly or they were hostile. If they were friendly, a weapon would be provided him. If they were hostile, either he would survive the attack, or he wouldn't. If he survived, he would

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have *their* weapons. If he didn't, it wouldn't matter. In any circumstance, he was sure he would very shortly learn his fate.



Ashe stood by the bank of elevators. He had a group of almost thirty men and women with him now, some armed, others not. His eyes were closed, his head tilted upwards as he used his Nimbus-enhanced senses to search the Facility above him.

“There's more of them now,” he said, “Soldiers like Jude; they're Looking for him, and they're planting explosives throughout the Facility.”

“How many?” Chilton asked.

“About ten of them...they're outnumbered but we're outgunned. Their skills are also far greater than our own.”

“What do we do?” Vasquez asked. But then she smiled, for their collectively conjoined mind had already formulated a plan.

“You, you, you and you show me your hands,” Ashe said, as the blisters on his fingers began to swell and open once more.



The noise outside his door was much louder. From the footfalls, however hushed they were Jude figured there were between three and five people out there. There was a noise at the door; they were coming in. There was no light from the hallway outside; whoever it was, they had night vision. Jude rolled off the bed and against the wall to the right of the door. If they had thermal imaging they already knew he'd done this;

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if not, he might have some small advantage. The door unsealed with a hiss, and he heard it open.

“Colonel Jude!”

Jude was taken aback, not expecting to have heard his name called.

“Sir, we’ve come to extract you; identifier Bishop to King’s Pawn E5.”

Jude couldn’t believe what he heard; this was no subterfuge; the man speaking through the amplifiers of the armour he was wearing had to have once been directly under Jude’s command.

“Responsorial King to Bishop E5.” He said.

“Confirmation: Rook to A5, Check.”

“Al-Fayed?”

As he identified the person speaking, Jude heard footsteps into the room. He placed the person within a meter of his position.

“Goddamn it’s good to hear your voice, sir.”

“You got owl-eyes? I’m running blind.”

Something was pressed against his chest. Jude took it, feeling the familiar configuration of night vision goggles. He slipped them on and turned on the switch, wincing as his eyes adjusted to the display after so long in darkness.

“SitRep?” Jude asked.

“Type Seven Theta; Hot Sleep response, with added objective of your exfiltration. Orders based on your immunity to said Seven Theta.”

“We’re dealing with an intelligent alien virus,” Jude said, “Highly virulent and highly adaptive. We have to assume it’s aware of us, already.”

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“We are setting up a Hot Sleep configuration,” Al-Fayed replied, “We’re to extract you and then run Hot Sleep.”

“Extraction is ill-advised;” Jude said, “Even I can’t be sure whether I’m a carrier, or not.”

“That contingency has been planned for. We got a suit for you.”

One of the other soldiers produced a hazmat suit in a sealed bag. Jude had the bag open and the suit on in less than thirty seconds, years of training running on automatic as he dressed and sealed the suit. Al-Fayed connected the oxygen pack to the back of the suit, giving Jude a breathable atmosphere.

“Let’s get this man topside!” Al-Fayed ordered.



“Report from Baltimore, Mister Chairman: Bishop reports the Package is secure.”

The Chairman nodded, turning his attention back to the main display hanging at the other end of the conference table. The central image on the display showed the Versagene Dynamics building, as seen from the command post set up by Majestic; the images surrounding it in a horseshoe on three sides showed live feeds from the excursions back into the Facility, in preparation for its demolition.

“Get me the on-site control agent,” the Chairman said. One of the subordinates at a nearby workstation muttered something into his headset. A moment later onscreen, a soldier in a biosafety suit sat down in front of the display.

“Control here,”

“Have you received the package?” the Chairman asked.

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Control glanced away towards the entrance of Versagene.

“They’re bringing him out now.”

“Put him on as soon as you have him.”

A couple of minutes passed, as Colonel Jude was brought into the command post and his biosafety suit was decontaminated. Then he was brought to the comm station, and sat down in front of the console screen.

“Colonel Jude here,”

“Colonel, this is the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff,”

Under the bulky containment suit, Jude’s posture straightened.

“Sir,”

“Jude, your commission is hereby reactivated. We have a new mission for you: We have identified the mechanism that allows your immunity to the Nimbus Virus, and we have begun to identify people who have that same immunity; we are preparing to collect them. You are now in charge of their survival. As well, you will be in charge of collecting further candidates, testing their immunity and then planning and mounting a counteroffensive against the Nimbus.”

“Sir, has the Nimbus escaped the Facility?”

“No, it has not. However, we now believe that an outbreak of the Nimbus virus is inevitable. The helicopter is standing by to take you to the staging area for your mission.”

“Understood,”



Colonel Al-Fayed returned to the first level of the Facility. The area was dark, abandoned save for the personnel from Al-

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Fayed's Majestic Squadron, who manned consoles and systems set up in the central corridor. Rook Seven approached Al-Fayed.

"Incendiaries have been placed on Levels One through Seven," the soldier advised, "Atomics in place on Level Eight. Recon reports heavy movement on Level Nine."

"Movement?" Al-Fayed asked.

"Thermals and magnetic resonance scans show at least twenty individuals, gathering at three different fire exits from Level Nine; they haven't attempted to ascend."

"They know we're coming," Al-Fayed said, "They're either waiting for us to come down, or they're waiting to come up."

"We have to place nukes on Levels Nine and Ten to complete profile," Rook Seven advised.

"I know,"

"What are your orders?"

"Clear the stairs."



"They're moving," Vasquez said, "They'll attempt to secure the stairwells and proceed down; fucking Army Rangers! So predictable."

There were three sets of stairs out of the Facility's sub-level. Above, the soldiers were deploying bot bombs into two of the shafts: softball-sized charges of high yield explosive sealed in copper casings, rolling very quickly on chain-like treads down the stairs and around each landing. Each bot bomb went off at a specific location. When they all exploded, the stairwells

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collapsed in on themselves into piles of rubble that sealed off the bottom three floors.

They heard multiple explosions from two of the stairwells, heard the rumble and felt the shake as the staircases collapsed into debris. Vasquez nodded and her group proceeded to the last stairwell. They shouldered their weapons and barefoot, began to silently and delicately pad their way up. Above, the first set of two enemy troops reached the landing for Level Seven. They checked the door before opening it and ducking inside. The next set of troops guarded the landing between Level Seven and Level Eight. A third grouping went through to the door into Level Eight while a fourth stood guard between Levels Eight and Nine.

Vasquez split her forces into three groups: One stayed on Level Nine, two followed her part of the way up the stairs between Level Nine and Eight. She had three clusters of four people, including herself. Each cluster was armed with two rifles, two handguns. They waited patiently as the troops above made their way slowly down. There had been people on those levels, locked in similar isolation areas. Vasquez had felt their lives end at the soldiers' hands. Now the soldiers were coming down, and the doors from Level Eight down the stairs to Nine opened. And then the battle was joined.

The troops ducked through the door. The lights were out on this floor, but their Enhanced Vision lenses allowed

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them to see perfectly. Beyond the short hallway from the fire exit was a corridor leading to the level's main labs. As the soldiers advanced into the rooms, from around the corners spun two people with automatic rifles. They opened fire before the soldiers could react; driving them back. Already the troops on the landing between Six and Seven were hurrying down the stairs to help their comrades. Vasquez and her troops came out of the door on Level Nine and started ascending; the two soldiers above them made easy targets, both shot dead in the back. Now the enemy troops were retreating into the hallway.

Colonel al-Fayed watched the entire scene play out from his soldiers' helmet-cameras, disbelieving. The ambush had been perfect, timed down to the second. The superior numbers of the enemy, their precision counteroffensive, the unity of action was unlike anything he'd seen before. What happened next terrified al-Fayed beyond words.

Vasquez and her people had suffered no casualties. Across two and a half levels of stairs they stood over their victims. Only two of the eight were dead, only one other wounded fatally. Vasquez finished him off with a single round. The other soldiers were captive, wounded in their shoulders, arms or legs; not that it mattered. Vasquez and her people spread their palms in the air above their captives. Blisters began to swell on their fingertips, fattening, filling with a translucent purple substance. And as one these blisters

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split open and streams of inky purple cloud shot towards the soldiers.

Al-Fayed yelled in alarm as five of his soldiers stood up, took up their weapons and started back up the stairs alongside the very people they'd come to kill.

"Rook Three!" he called, "What are you doing? Rook Four report!"

"Rook Four here sir," one of his returning soldiers replied, "Reporting in; we are en route to your locale."

"What the fuck is going on?"

"Following new orders sir," Rook Five replied.

"New orders? Whose orders?" al-Fayed demanded.

"The Nimbus'," Rook Four said, "You'll understand soon enough."

Al-Fayed broke the communication and started for the far stairwell. "Bishop to all Pieces on Board Two," he said as he ran, "Type Seven Kappa situation! Set up Board Three for exterior perim! Rook Eleven you are designated Knight for Board Three. Rooks Twelve through Twenty to me! Confirm!"

"Rook Eleven here," came the reply, "Control has deployed third unit. They are inbound, ETA two minutes. Am establishing exterior perimeter guard."

"Rook Twelve," called in next, "We are inbound on your GPS; please advise of situation."

"Hostiles in the stairwell, outbound. Seven Kappa, repeat: Seven Kappa."

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Al-Fayed had reached the stairwell. Rooks One and Two were guarding the stairwell doors. Seven Kappa meant that either civilians or fellow officers were under alien influence. It had always been referred to as the Body Snatcher scenario, and no one at any level of Majestic had ever believed it was possible. In all the decades that Majestic had operated, the scenario had never happened. Al-Fayed had never been more terrified in his life. He felt unreal; as if this were some incredible nightmare. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was in fact about to die. As frightened as he was, he felt a strange sense of clarity, calm. The only thing that mattered was that ensuring the Nimbus did not escape this Facility.

“Two, the bot-bombs,” he said, “Help me,”

Rook Two went with Al-Fayed to the case containing the miniature explosives.

“We'll use the same procedure, with double deployment.”

The bot-bombs were set out and the doors into the stairwell closed. Al-Fayed and Rook Two braced themselves a moment before the explosions sounded.

“Bishop be advised we are in the building,” Rook Twelve said through his headset.

“Roger that,” Al-Fayed replied, “Be advised: three friendlies guarding the stairs.”

“Roger, three friendlies,”

“We're going into a Hot Sleep operation,” he said, “Control be advised Hot Sleep operation is go.”

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“Roger that Bishop,” Control replied, “Sending in the Pallbearers now. ETA three minutes.”

“On my console,” Al Fayed said, “Hot Sleep to be deployed to the following areas:”

He unrolled a miniature console screen from the arm of his suit. Using a touch-pen he called up the schematics for the Facility. He highlighted all three stairwells and the elevator shafts.

“Deployment pattern confirmed, Bishop,” Control replied, “Pallbearers will go direct to those locations.”

“All Pallbearers must be in position before Hot Sleep is run,” al-Fayed said, “We’ve got to blow this place from the bottom up.”

“Sir,” Rook Two called, “We’ve got movement in the elevator and stairwell shafts,”

Al-Fayed went over to Rook Two’s position. A small monitor showed enhanced views of the bombed-out stairwells and the elevator shaft. Several small objects were moving through the rubble, climbing up the walls of the blasted stairwell.

“Get me a clearer picture,” Al-Fayed ordered.

When the picture on-screen stabilized, he almost wished he hadn’t issued the order.

“God help us,” he whispered.

Working together with ant-like unity of purpose, hundreds of lab animals, rats, mice, monkeys, were climbing upwards. They reached Level One. Al-Fayed and his troops turned their weapons on the elevator doors and watched in disbelief as they were slowly pried open from the inside. As soon as the gap

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was wide enough, a stream of small creatures burst forth. Al-Fayed and his troops opened fire, spraying the beasts as they surged out. But there were too many. They got passed the bullets, reached the troops, and began chewing into the suits. The soldiers screamed and tried to brush the beasts away. It was no use. More and more of the animals were coming out; Al-Fayed could hear the screams from his men in other sections of the Facility as they faced a similar attack. He heard the screams, but he couldn't register them. He was too busy screaming, himself.



The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff knocked twice on the large hardwood door and waited. A moment later a black-suited Secret Service Agent opened the door and admitted him to the Oval Office.

“Madame President,” The Chairman said, as he saluted.

“What can I do for you, mister Chairman?” she asked.

“Madame President, we have a situation in Maryland.”

She could still recall her first meeting with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. She'd been an intern in the first Republican Administration since the end of War Three, more than two decades before. To this day, Carver Rose was an infamous name in Republican circles, a name to not be uttered in much the same way one did not utter “Macbeth” among actors about to go onstage. President Haley S. Clemens doubted that the Chairman remembered that first encounter, but she did. She wasn't to meet the most long-serving and

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infamous Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in postwar history again until the first days of her own Presidency.

But her first Presidential encounter with the Chairman, as he was universally known, was indirect; he was mentioned in passing in a second, secret letter written for her by her Presidential predecessor, himself the rarest of creatures: an unremarkable one-term “caretaker President” Democrat:

Madame President,

You’ve already come to understand during the transition the madness and hypocrisy that is Executive-Branch politics.

But now, you will learn the burden of secrecy, the burden of that un-knowable truth at all new Presidents have dreaded for over a hundred years, perhaps more.

These are trying times, challenging times. So long out of a horrible war that was the darkest moment in America’s history, so recently out of what should have been another avoidable conflict.

Many burdens will be placed on your shoulders in the next few days; more than the best of us can suffer and remain unscathed. Of course, you like I and like nearly all of our predecessors in this office have always had the ambition to be President. We have lusted for its power, we have anticipated its

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challenges, and we have all underestimated its importance.

Even now, in the New Information Renaissance, the President of the Republic of the United States of America is often the only real-world American that men and women from other nations around the world ever see. The rest of the time they see our decadent, and often arrogant and ignorant celebrities. We are the first ambassador for our country, and like as not, we, as sitting Presidents, are the most important symbols of our country.

I urge you to meditate on the duty of this office before you continue. I mentioned previously the burden of that unknowable truth; those many unknowable truths that will come to dominate your every day.

One of those truths is that the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in fact, every Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff since the end of War Two, have served on a secret extragovernmental committee. (Both Great Britain and Canada also have representation on this Committee. The Chairman will fill you in, later.) This Committee proposed and to this day proposes to acquire, catalogue, study, and when necessary destroy alien artifacts. Though this Committee's stated goals were to supply tactical advantage to its member countries through this alien technology, it would appear that this technology has not always been of benefit.

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During War Three, Carver Rose's Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff secretly released technology to General Mechanics' weapons research division. The result was the anti-matter bomb. It was the next Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff who made the connection between this Committee and the creation of the now-banned AM-Bomb. At that point, the Chairman betrayed her oath of secrecy to the Committee and informed the President of its existence.

Since that time, each President and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff have been carefully monitoring both the actions of the Committee and the Committee members themselves. That is why, if you select a new CEE-JAY-CEE, you must be certain of their loyalty and their trustworthiness. They will be your only asset in trying to prevent another horrifying folly with alien technology.

So when the Chairman said to President Clemens that they had a situation in Bethesda, she knew exactly what it was:

"Gabriel Ashe has escaped," she said.

"Worse ma'am," the Chairman said, "The Nimbus has spread. Majestic is on-site right now attempting to contain the virus and incinerate the Facility. However, they're dealing with a Type Seven Kappa; I don't know how much success they'll have."

The President sighed.

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“Then two things have to happen, Mister Chairman,” she said, “First, Maryland has to be quarantined. Second, Baltimore has to be eradicated.”

“I think, Madame President, that we should also implement the Atrahasis Contingency.”

President Clemens shook her head. Atrahasis had been around since War Two: in the event of a nuclear attack, random populations were to be evacuated to secure locations across the country. The locations were all fortified underground, stocked with provisions to last decades, generations if need be. The plan had been named for the Sumerian Flood Myth co-opted by early Hebrews into the tale of Noah and the Ark. Atrahasis was warned by the Gods to build a boat to escape the coming floods with his family and all the animals he could.

“Mister Chairman, by all means,” President Clemens said, “But to be honest with you, I get the feeling that Humanity’s last, best hope of escaping the Nimbus is already hundreds of light-years away, aboard the Ship.”

“Understood, Madame President; we have to start Atrahasis immediately by moving the Vice President to the Beta Site.”

President Clemens nodded, swallowing hard.

“Charles, get my son to the Beta Site; please. Above all others, he’s the most important person in the world to me. Whatever has to be done, no matter what the consequences, please!”

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs rose and saluted.

“You have my word on it,” he said, turning to leave.

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When the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff left, Haley S. Clemens returned to her desk and sat down.

“May God have mercy on us all,” she sobbed.

TWELVE

CONSEQUENCE AND ACTION

The barren, rusted-out world of Hiddek Uhl turned slowly beneath them. The Ship cast a massive, eclipsing shadow across its surface as it held orbit. The upper half of the Ship was turned away from the planet, the not-too distant sun reflecting brilliantly from its dark golden skin.

It was obvious now that their mission, as it had been, had failed. They couldn't return to Earth and there was no League of Worlds left to seek out. The survivors had long-since abandoned the planets of their birth and vanished into the cosmos. The only real questions were where had they gone and whether or not to follow. Colonel Margaret Bloom stood at the window of her office, looking down upon Habitat below. It filled most of the view. She marvelled at how delicate it

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appeared; a small world at the core of the Ship locked beneath layers of metal and machinery, surrounded by the cold vacuum of space. Her first, last and only responsibility now was to the people below. The burden of that duty had become even greater since discovering all that they had about the Nimbus virus and the end of the League of Worlds: the Ship's passengers were truly all that was left of the Human Race.

Bloom realized now that she'd wanted command of this mission for all the wrong reasons: the prestige, the glory, the chance to somehow possess Ship, itself. She'd only recently begun to understand the true burden, the true duty that was associated with this command. She'd seen Shipflight as a prize, when it should have been a solemn obligation. She'd taken her duties seriously, but always with the cavalier attitude that this was just a simple cruise. Her tendency towards such selfishness was one of the reasons she'd always done her level best in the past to avoid authority, power and command. And she'd forgotten that painful truth about herself; she'd denied it, putting it out of her mind. That meant every failure, every mistake, every problem they had encountered from the moment the Ship left Heliopause was solely her responsibility. She had failed the mission. She had failed her crew; she had failed the passengers whose lives had been put in her care. And Margaret Bloom could not find any way to absolve herself of these crimes.



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Doctor Simone Cole looked over Allison McQuire's patient file once again. It had been three days since Colonel Bloom had revealed to her what the Ship had done to Allison. But there were too many inconsistencies between what the Ship was supposed to have accomplished and what Cole saw going on in Allison's body.

Cole's console chimed and an updated diagnostic appeared onscreen. She sent it to the printer behind her. Her staff was performing hourly examinations of her top patient's vitals and progress. Every hour for the past twenty hours there had been observably dramatic changes to Allison McQuire's physiology. Every hour the changes were more pronounced. Cole slipped on her linx headset and pressed a small button on its side.

"Colonel Bloom, please,"

A moment later, Bloom's face appeared on her console screen.

"Doctor Cole, what can I do for you?"

"Colonel, I've been running some tests on Allison McQuire and what I've found isn't consistent with what with what the Ship asserts was supposed to have happened."

"What does that mean? What did it do to her?"

"I've been observing ongoing changes to Allison's physiology as a whole. It's far more than the ageing mechanism that's been affected. This is something I'd like to discuss with you in person, when you have time."

Bloom made a face, then nodded.

"All right; I'm on my way to you."

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She came awake all at once. There was no gradual transition from unconscious and conscious, no groggy daze or confusion as she left the dark tomb of coma sleep for the light and freedom of wakefulness. She was instantly alert and painfully aware of the horrors she'd been subjected to before escaping into merciful oblivion. She knew better than to hope that what had happened to her had been nothing more than a nightmare; it had been all too real.

Allison took stock, examining her surroundings. This wasn't the alien torture chamber that she remembered. The colours, lighting, the bed she was in, these were all Human accents. She noticed the intravenous leading from her arm to a drip bag hanging above her bed, the monitoring equipment at her bedside...relief washed over her with the knowledge that she was secure and safe within the confines of a hospital. Allison could hear voices in the surrounding rooms, muted and muddled. She strained to listen, trying to make out what was being said. She was suddenly dizzy, feeling as though she were shrinking away to nothing and ballooning up all at once. As panic welled inside her she gasped, trying to sit up, trying to fight the terrifying sensations and the dizzying vertigo. Through the fog of confusion she clearly heard the pings and chimes of the equipment monitoring her.

The voices were becoming louder, coming closer. Allison clutched the guardrails on either side of her bed, her

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arms straining to keep her sitting upright against the tumult wracking her mind. She squeezed her eyes shut, willing herself to remain calm, trying to drive back the onslaught. When Allison opened her eyes again everything had changed: the lights in the room seemed brighter, the colours of the objects around her sharper, more distinct. She could hear noises behind the whirrs and pings of the equipment attached to her: the drip of fluid from the IV bag into her line, the hum of the processors and optical data relays in the monitoring systems, the creak of the hospital bed beneath her subtly shifting weight. She could hear footsteps in the corridor outside her room and she was aware, somehow, of people outside. Two women at a nurse's station, a third coming down the hall towards her room. She realized now that these three people were the source of the muddled voices that she could still "hear" in the background of her mind and the "voice" of the woman coming towards her room was growing louder, painfully louder, as she approached the door.

"No," she whimpered.

But the woman came nearer and nearer to the door, the seconds stretching into aeons as the noise and pain in Allison's head continued to climb. The door opened and Allison heard the whisper of air displaced as the door dropped down through the opening in the floor. She heard the sizzle of electric current as it passed through the dropping edge of the door and the trickle of liquid as the ionized particles of the door collapsed from their solid form into the reservoir beneath the doorway. She heard the pad of the nurse's shoes as she crossed through the

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doorway. And when the nurse focused her attention on Allison, who was still sitting straight and gripping the rails of her bed with such force that the tendons of her arms were straining, the woman's thoughts exploded inside Allison's head.

try to remain calm you've been in a coma for a little while but everything is going to be all right

"Try to remain calm. You've been in a coma for a little while, but everything is going to be all right."

*im going to check your vitals why don't you lie back and relax allison no
w that you're awake is there somebody you'd like us to call*

"I'm going to check your vitals. Why don't you lie back and relax, Allison? Now that you're awake, is there someone you'd like us to call?"

*whats wrong hear try thm in increasing pupils dialating shess scared cal
m her down calm her down whats going on oh god it hurts nononoooh it
hurts it hurts ITHURTS*

Allison screamed. The nurse screamed and staggered backwards. Suddenly Allison's mind was flooded with a thousand details about the woman before her: her name; every inch of the house she'd grown up in; where she'd gone to grade school; how she'd lost her virginity to her cousin and who she took to the senior prom; every movie she'd ever seen; every song she'd ever listened to; the family vacations; the death of her grandparents in a plane crash; how she discovered that nursing was her calling—

"Stop it!" The nurse, Theresa White, screamed, "Stop it! Stop it!"

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She clutched her head and started sliding down the wall. But Allison couldn't have stopped what was happening, as desperately as she wanted it to. The onslaught of images from Theresa's mind continued to flood into Allison's consciousness, even as her screams reached crescendo: Theresa's days at school studying her lessons, hanging out with friends after class, beginning her nursing internship, the patients she tended to, the patients she watched die; how she met her future husband, the tumultuous start of their relationship—Blood spurted from Nurse White's nose. She spit up more blood with a sound of agonized disgust as red tears began streaming from her eyes. She fell over and as she did, Allison fell back into the bed, gasping and choking as Nurse White began to convulse. Everything inside Allison's mind about Theresa White flared to sudden brilliance and then collapsed into a single pinpoint of invisible light. Outside in the hallway, Allison could sense others approaching, their sudden alertness, their tension a gibbering, coppery thing in her mind. She felt herself suddenly let go and mercifully, she collapsed into oblivious unconsciousness.



“What the fuck happened, Doctor?”

Colonel Bloom, Major Benedict and Commander Castaneda stood beside Doctor Cole, looking out on the activity on the floor below. They were in the observation theatre overlooking the pathology lab. In the lab technicians were transferring Theresa White's body from the exam table into a casket for

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transport to a mortuary on Habitat. Bloom stared down at the silver-grey case as they closed it. She shuddered. The last time she'd seen one, it held the remains of her ex-husband, Mark Echohawk. Behind her were Doctor Cole, Major Benedict and Commander Castaneda.

"I don't know, Colonel," Cole said, "Doctor Patel just concluded the post mortem; right now, it would appear that she suffered a massive cerebral haemorrhage."

"Brought on by what?" Major Benedict demanded.

"Look Doctor," Castaneda said, "Did the girl cause her death? The video stream from your ICU shows that the girl started screaming at the nurse a few seconds before she collapsed."

Cole turned to face Bloom.

"Colonel I understand the seriousness of this matter, but could you please instruct your people not to interrogate me as though I'm a common criminal? The last time I checked, despite your declaration of Martial Law and my status as a Civilian, I was still Chief Medical Officer of Shipflight."

Bloom nodded.

"Major, Commander, back off," she said, "My apologies, Doctor."

Now it was Cole's turn to nod.

"Thank you, Colonel; Major, Commander, in answer to your questions: the truth is that at this point in time I simply don't know for sure how Theresa died. And if indeed her death was somehow caused by Allison or what was done to Allison, I can't believe that it was a deliberate act."

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“How can you be sure?” Castaneda asked, “The Ship’s completely altered her physiology; what if it’s given her a new personality as well? Assuming, of course, that she’s not simply gone mad from all she’s been through.”

Cole considered the question.

“You’re right, Commander,” she said, “There have been massive, systemic changes to Allison McQuire’s physiology, neurobiology and metabolism. They go far beyond anything that the Ship is alleged to have been trying to accomplish. Which either means the Ship was lying to us, or it made several important mistakes. Given what happened to the other girls the Ship experimented with, either scenario is likely. However, the fact is we still don’t know if Theresa’s death was caused by Allison or not.”

“Is there any way to find out?” Bloom asked.

Cole shook her head.

“Unfortunately, no,” she said, “Although everyone who came aboard the Ship had to submit to a full physical, including full body MRI scanning, most of the time the sort of arterial defect responsible for a brain event like the one that killed Theresa White often escapes detection. That’s not to say that Doctor Patel isn’t going over Theresa White’s medical file to see if there was evidence of an existing problem. However, I suspect that whatever he finds will be inconclusive, at best.”

“Then I’m sorry Doctor Cole, but we have no other choice then, but to proceed under the assumption that Allison was responsible for what happened to your nurse.”

“I understand, Colonel.”

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“Good; now, what can you tell me about what was done to Allison that goes beyond what the Ship intended?”

“Among other things,” Cole said, “Allison’s brain activity has increased dramatically; there are nodes of tissue throughout her body that connect directly to her brain and seem to be composed of cells very similar to brain cells. There has been an increase in the volume of nerve tissue throughout her body and nerve endings in her skin, vastly expanding her nervous system’s network and heightening her sense of touch. Likewise, her muscular system has changed; muscle fibres are more densely packed, capable of greater tensile resistance. A corresponding change to her skeletal system means her bones are much denser, much stronger than they would be in a...normal human. We’ve also recorded changes to the structure of her eyes, extending her visual acuity into the near-ultraviolet and near-infrared ends of the electromagnetic spectrum. Her aural and olfactory systems have also been changed; likely her senses of smell and hearing are also highly advanced beyond our own.”

“Could these changes have given her some kind of,” Castaneda shook her head, trying to find the right words, “Some kind of psychic ability?”

Doctor Cole paused, considering the question.

“A few days ago,” she replied, “I might have scoffed at such an idea. In the history of Mankind, especially in modern scientific history, there has never been a single proven, documented instance of psychic phenomena. Even the so-called empathic bond between twins—which isn’t nearly as

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well documented among other multiple-birth siblings—is anecdotal in nature.”

“But now?” Castaneda asked. Cole shrugged.

“But now all bets are off.”



Allison woke up again. This time she felt groggy, tired. It was difficult to focus, impossible to concentrate. A woman was standing near the end of her bed.

“Hello Allison,” the woman said.

Allison could hear a muted murmur around the woman; she knew these were her thoughts, the hum of her mind that she was picking up on. But it was indistinct, fuzzy; everything was.

“I’m Doctor Simone Cole, Allison. Do you remember me?”

“No,” Allison slurred, “What happened? What’s going on?”

“You’ve been given a sedative,” Cole replied, “I thought it best, given the circumstances and what’s happened to you.”

“I killed her; I killed Nurse White, didn’t I?” Allison asked as a tear trickled down her face, “I could hear her thoughts; it was as if I was thinking them myself. Then it was like a dam burst open and everything came flooding out of her and into me. I tried to stop it; I tried to push it back but it was too much and I think I pushed too hard...”

Allison started crying. Cole moved to stand beside her and put her hand on Allison’s shoulder.

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“You couldn’t have known what was happening. A great deal of change has been inflicted on you. Even we can’t predict everything that’s been done.”

“Why did this happen? Why did the Ship do this to me?”

“How do you know it was the Ship? Did you read that from my mind?”

“No,” Allison said, “I remember everything.”

Pausing only to concentrate and put everything into context against the muddling effects of the sedative, Allison related the harrowing details of her agonizing victimization under the Ship’s treatment: the examinations, the injections, the chamber in which she was submitted to such unbearable pain, the grey men. When she finished, Allison blew her nose to relieve the congestion from crying and lay back against her pillow.

Cole was horrified by the full revelation of the attack. She couldn’t imagine how Allison had survived such horrors. As Allison spoke, Cole had caught images in her mind; the radiation chamber, the alien automatons...she wondered how much of what she was imagining was the invention of her own mind and what if anything had been put there by Allison herself. Cole chided herself; there was no evidence to suggest that Allison had any such power. What Allison described about Theresa White’s death could have been hallucination;

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there was nothing to suggest she'd had any psychic connection to the poor woman, nothing to suggest she'd caused her death.

“Doctor, why was this done to me?”

“You were subjected by the Ship—against your will—to an aggressive...I hesitate to call it a treatment, but for lack of a better word...that included chemical, biological and radioactive applications. The process was designed to radically alter your DNA; we still don't know the full extent, nor the implications, of those changes.”

“You're avoiding my question. I asked *why* this happened; not what was done to me.”

“Allison, you need to rest; you need to recuperate from all you've been through. The answers will come; in time.”

Allison frowned.

“You don't want to tell me.”

“Trust me when I tell you: I will give you all the information I have, when I feel you're ready to have it. I'm trying to look out for your well-being, Allison. Please, trust me on that.”



Colonel Bloom sat in the Command Deck-level conference room as the last members of the Executive Staff and the Alien Studies team arrived.

“Good afternoon everyone,” Bloom said when they were seated, “This meeting is to give you an update on the mission status and current situations. So, let's get right down to it: The mission status is failed. *Operation Shipflight* has ended, as of this date. Current situation as follows: The

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League of Worlds is extinct, wiped out by an enemy machine race called the Zohor. The surviving Races from the League have fled along a secret path, known to us as the Exodus. The last transmission we received from Earth prior to the jump that took us here indicates that a hostile alien virus, known as the Nimbus, is spreading across the globe. The rate of infection at this time is not known; what is known is that this virus possesses some sort of intelligence and that it is designed to completely take over the host organism, replacing the host genome with its own. The planet is overrun. There is no means to treat or cure the Nimbus virus. We can't go home. The information we've retrieved from Hiddek Uhl details the first leg of the Exodus path. It is my intention that we follow it, in hopes of finding whatever is left of the League, or its descendants. To that end Major Benedict and I have drawn up a new mission profile, reorganizing your respective departments to fit this new mission. The mission's name is *Operation Exodus*. As the heads of your respective departments, both civilian and military, you will all now likewise serve as the Ship's Governing Council, over which I will preside as Mission Commander, with Major Benedict remaining as my Executive Officer."

Benedict keyed a sequence into the console before him. At each seat around the table, console screens opened up, displaying the full mission profile.

"Get comfortable everybody," Benedict said, "We're going to be here a while. Starting from the beginning of the

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Profile, we're going to go through this, department by department."

"Captain Decker," Bloom said, "You are transferred from Navigation Command. You are required, as of now, to assume the duties of Commanding Officer on the Bridge and Ship operations Commander. All flight operations are now yours, unless I, or Major Benedict specifically take command. I'll let you select your first officer and bridge crew from among the Command Deck officer pool."

Matthew Decker nodded.

"Thank you, Ma'am," he said.

"Captain Tanaka you will continue to report to Captain Decker in your capacity as Chief of Engineering. Your duties haven't been changed. Commander Castaneda you will appoint a Tactical and weapons Officer to the Command Deck. They will report to Captain Decker in that capacity; you are hereby promoted to my Chief of Security for all other matters."

Tanaka nodded, as did Castaneda.

"Mister Paulson," Bloom said, "The Alien Studies Department will now make researching the Races known to have fled along the Exodus your top priority; Lieutenant Kalenga you will report to Mister Paulson as head of radionic astronomy. The two of you are going to be spending a lot of time together; my advice is to get to like one another's company. Doctor Cole, your duties will be expanded from Chief Medical Officer to Chief Health Officer. The Health Department will include governing and regulating all Civilian Affairs aboard the Ship. Essentials like infrastructure and law

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enforcement have been militarized; however the departments of education, trade, agriculture and recreation—among others—will fall under your domain.”

“I’ll need to bring in a few people from the former Civilian Authority,” Cole said, “To help administer things.”

“Out of the question, Doctor,” Benedict said, “Any help you need to run things will come from the administrative staffs of the institutions themselves or the Guilds they belong to, like the Shopkeeper’s Association or the Agriclone Operations Guild.”

“Any particular reason, Major?” Cole asked.

“The politicians had their chance,” Benedict said, “They used it to put Juan Carlos Rejas into a coma.”

“Barring precedent circumstance, this Council will meet every morning for a minimum of two hours,” Bloom said, “We’ll go over all aspects of Ship’s business, including departmental operations. Now, let’s move on to the Mission Profile, in more specific detail...”



Allison’s hospital room, while sterile in both form and function, was far better equipped than any hospital rooms she remembered from back home. There was a table and two comfortable chairs under a curved window that faced out onto a vast tract of parkland. In the morning the Ship-generated sun rose over a grove of trees that shifted lazily in the cool, damp morning air. When the wind picked up, the trees would whisper with swaying branches and flitting leaves. A moment later a burst of the subtle forest’s perfume would flood the air.

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Allison sat in the alcove under the window, holding the chrome stalk of her IV stand with one hand. She was looking out on the placid scene while listening to the terrifying, nightmare scenario that Doctor Cole was relating to her:

“It would seem that the Ship was actively observing the development of life on Earth the entire time it was buried,” she explained to Allison, “I can only assume this was because it was communicating with support vehicles of some sort; vehicles that somehow managed to avoid being buried in the earth following the Cataclysm. But as mankind evolved, it seems the Ship discovered that our species, indeed all life on Earth, was infected with a disease; a genetically-transmitted illness that is responsible for everything on our world being, for lack of a better word, mortal.”

“I don’t understand,”

“It’s complicated, Allison. Apparently no living thing, neither plant nor animal, is meant to grow old and die. Animal life especially was meant to stop ageing past a certain point and just continue living, until either disease or misfortune killed it. The Ship discovered that in Humans this disease was treatable through a process of genetic resequencing. However, the gene in question, the gene that can halt the ageing process, is only carried by women; and only a small number of women, roughly one in every twenty-five thousand, carry a viable form of that gene.”

Cole stopped, allowing Allison to digest what she’d just learned.

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“And I carry that gene,” Allison said, “Me, and the girls who were killed. Am I right?”

She turned around to face Cole. The doctor could only close her eyes and nod her head.

“I’m sorry,” Cole said.

“So, how long will I live? Two hundred years? Three hundred?”

“Allison, it is conceivable that you’ll still be alive in three *thousand* years; perhaps longer. You’re not going to grow old; not significantly. And unless you get sick, which isn’t likely, or something happens to you, there’s no way to say how long you might live.”

“How can that even be possible?” Allison asked, her voice shaking. She felt a cold lump growing in the center of her being; she felt horribly alone, afraid, unable to understand, to accept what Cole telling her.

“I’m afraid we just don’t know. The Ship resequenced your genome to cure you of what it calls *the disease*. You, your children and your children’s children will be immune to it; immune to ageing. You and all your descendants are going to go on living--”

“While everyone we know and everyone around us ages, withers and dies? How long, Doctor? How long could I possibly keep living like that? How long until I start to lose my mind? How long before I just lose the will to live and kill myself?”

“I’m sorry,” Cole rasped, “We—I don’t know! I just don’t know. There’s never been anything like your—”

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“Condition? Situation? There really hasn’t been *anyone* like me, has there? Tell me, Doctor: will I live long enough to watch all the stars burn out? Will I survive the end of the universe? How long? How long can I possibly live? How fucking long, Doctor?”

“Allison, please try and calm down,” Cole said, nervously. She was afraid of what might happen if Allison became upset enough to trigger another psychic episode...she was even more afraid of –

“What else aren’t you telling me?”

Allison was staring at her, a still, unreadable look on her face.

“What?”

Allison tilted her head slightly.

“There’s something else; I can’t tell what...but you’re...*keeping* something from me; that much I can tell...what else happened? What else did the Ship do to me? It has to do with why I can feel what people are thinking, doesn’t it? It has to do with what happened to Nurse White.”

Cole sighed.

“You’re right,” she admitted, “Allison, yes, something more did happen. You can probably figure it out, but I’ll elaborate if you wish.”

“Please; I need to hear this.”

Cole nodded.

“Where to begin?” she said, nervously, “The Ship...The Ship did this without our knowledge or consent. The reason those other girls died is because the Ship has an imperfect knowledge of Human genetic re-engineering. Mind

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you, that would be like saying Humankind has an imperfect knowledge of addition and subtraction. What the Ship did, Allison, it's..." Cole broke off, shaking her head.

"You can't even imagine how it's done," Allison said, "I can see you...going over what you know of the Human Genome, of tissue cloning, of what was done to me..."

"I'm sorry,"

"No, it's all right. As you talk, I get images from your mind...it's allowing me to truly understand what you're saying..."

"How can you be so detached?"

"I'm not Doctor; believe me. I am completely fucking horrified right now. But at this point, with what you've already told me, I can't see how my situation can get any worse."

"I don't know that it can get better, Allison. But what the Ship intended to do is inconceivable enough. What the Ship actually succeeded in doing...it's unfathomable."

"Please continue,"

"Allison, the Ship set something off inside you; some other gene sequence, some collateral reaction to the treatment you suffered, I don't know which. But your nervous system, your brain, your endocrine and limbic systems, your metabolism...all of it; they've been so radically changed I can't even begin to quantify what's happened to you. And it looks as though things are *still* changing inside of you."

"You're afraid," Allison said, "Not just for me, but *of* me. I'd ask you to push a lethal injection into me, but you don't believe in assisted suicide or euthanasia. For that matter

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you don't even know how much of a dose would be necessary to actually kill me."

Cole laughed, but she was crying.

"It already takes an abnormally high dose just to put you under," she said, "And it doesn't even keep you under for long before being completely metabolized. But, you know that already, don't you?"

Allison closed her eyes and nodded. She frowned, rubbing her eyes

"You...there's some question...you're wondering about the possibility that I've developed some sort of psychic ability," Allison said, looking at Cole. As the girl spoke, Doctor Cole realized she was talking with an English accent. Fascinated, she listened as the girl began, unconsciously, to imitate her almost perfectly:

"You don't quite understand the mechanics of it, but you suspect that the phenomenon is similar to how electric eels conduct current through their bodies, that I've developed some sort of natural ability to transmit, receive and interpret electric signals from other people's brains."

"That's just about how I'd have put it, yes," Cole said, fascinated. Allison smiled, and continued speaking in a pitch-perfect impression of the Doctor's voice:

"The analogy you've made to understand it yourself is that it's as though my nervous system has gone from transmitting to my brain via cable modem to transmitting by optical data stream; instead of millions of bits of information a second, my brain is processing trillions."

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Cole nodded again; Allison continued:

“You’re right, you know. That’s almost exactly what’s happened to me. And I can see more colours, more details, more nuances than I could even hope to describe... And, I can *feel* what people are thinking, like shapes in my mind. And everything around me has its own presence; not just people, but objects; things...so much...there’s so much...The faintest sounds...When I touch something...smell something...it’s so much more than you could imagine.”

Allison closed her eyes again, shaking her head.

“And I’m going to spend all of eternity trapped in this...”

Cole hesitantly put a hand on Allison’s shoulder.

“I’m going to do whatever I can do to help you Allison,”

“I know; but right now, please, just leave me alone.”



Doctor Cole sat with Mark Kodo and Commander Castaneda in the Skyview for lunch that day. They weren’t on the famous terrace, but nonetheless were near enough the window to see Habitat and an image of Hiddek Uhl in the synthetic sky above. They were also seated far enough from the other passengers to keep their conversation private.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Cole said, “She wasn’t just reading my thoughts the way you’ve seen psychics do it in movies or streamcasts for all these years. She was speaking with my accent, my inflections, and using my

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mannerisms. Word for word, she said exactly what I would have said, if I'd have said it myself."

"She read your mind," Castaneda said, "And turned Nurse White's brain into pulp. What the hell else is she capable of?"

Cole shook her head.

"I just don't know," she said, "I don't think we can predict what will happen to her. She could wind up in a vegetative state, go mad, or for all I know she could achieve Nirvana."

"And just what do you suppose would happen if she did go mad, Doctor?"

"Are you asking me if she's a threat?"

"She can kill by thought; I'd say we've already established that she's a threat."

"And what would you suggest we do about it?"

"I don't know yet Doctor; that's the problem."

"It might be wise to isolate her," Kodo said, "Only allow a select group to care for her, to observe her."

"We can't keep her in the hospital forever, Mark," Cole replied.

"We could move her belongings into a private ward and work with her to help her come to terms with what's happened," Kodo said, "With therapy we might be able to eventually reintroduce her into the general population. With the Ship's help we might even be able to understand why she has these powers and help her to control them."

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“You’re either very optimistic or very naïve Doctor Kodo,” Castaneda said, “I can’t decide which. But I have to be concerned with the safety of *everyone* aboard this Ship; not just the comforts of a potentially dangerous young woman.”

“I think Doctor Kodo’s suggestions would be the best course of action for us to follow,” Cole said, “If only because we truly don’t know what’s happening with Allison.”

“Then I want her off the Habitat completely,” Castaneda said, “Somewhere else in the Ship. And I want her sedated when she’s moved.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary, Commander,”

“And I’d rather be proven wrong about her than right, Doctor.”



Bloom rolled up the screen of her console and rubbed her eyes. She’d finished setting up the Transfer of Command to Captain Decker. She’d sent him the reports, files, the Ship Commander’s log, everything he’d need to assume command of the flight. She and Major Benedict were now free to concentrate on the mission to follow the Exodus path. Her linx sounded.

“Colonel Bloom,” she said, slipping on her headset.

“Colonel it’s Captain Decker,”

“I was just thinking about you, Captain,” Bloom said, “What can I do for you?”

“Colonel, the Ship has finished going through the data from Hiddek Uhl and it has completed a navigation solution to

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the next station along the Exodus: A waystation known as the Hub.”

“Excellent,” Bloom said, “I’ll be on the Command Deck in a moment, Captain. I’d like to be there when we enter time warp.”

“Understood,”



Bloom leaned against the railing of the gantry above the Crew Pit. Captain Decker was seated at the command station. It was strange to see the younger officer occupying what had until recently been *her* station for almost two years. On the level below Decker, his new First Officer Lieutenant-Commander John Kalich—promoted from the rank of Lieutenant by Bloom only the day before. Below Kalich, the crew pit bustled.

“All stations report ready for time warp and hyperlight jump, Captain,” Kalich called.

“We are at gravity escape velocity and have broken orbit with Hiddek Uhl,” the Helm Officer said, “We are accelerating out of system.”

“The Ship is standing by to jump;” Tanaka said from the Engineering station, “Stasis field generators coming on-line.”

“STASIS FIELD ACTIVATION IN THIRTY SECONDS,” The Ship announced.

“Time warp jump in three...two...one...” the Helm Officer said, “Time warp jump completed; we are now out of time relative to spacetime normal.”

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“Begin acceleration to hyper speed,” Captain Decker ordered.

“Accelerating to hyperlight, aye,” the Helm replied.

“STASIS FIELD ACTIVATION IN FIFTEEN SECONDS,”

Bloom shifted her weight from one leg to another as the lights changed to pale blue. They still weren’t moving fast enough for any discernible change in the starscape reflected from the Ship’s domed walls and ceiling. But she could feel it nonetheless: they were on their way. Captain Decker turned in his chair to regard her.

“We’re underway, Colonel,” he said, “Our next stop will be the Hub.”

“Glad to hear it, Captain,” Bloom said, allowing herself an indulgent smile.

“STASIS FIELD ACTIVATION IN FIVE SECONDS. FOUR, THREE, TWO, ONE...STASIS FIELD ACTIVATING.”

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Animals had long since learned to gather provisions in times of plenty in anticipation of times of little. It was a lesson that sentient life learned as well, creating stores of grain and produce, reservoirs of water and learning to preserve the perishable for future sustenance. Just as they learned to prepare for times of destitution in times of prosperity, they learned that one must also prepare in times of peace, for times of war.

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THIRTEEN THE HUB

“STASIS FIELD DEACTIVATED. ALL PASSENGERS AND CREW PRESENT AND ACCOUNTED FOR. DESTINATION ATTAINED. BEGINNING SCAN FOR THE HUB.”

“Helm at dead stop,” the Helm Officer announced.

“Navigation, what is our position?” Kalich asked.

“Calculating,” the Nav Officer replied, “We’re well beyond the Galactic Cluster the League called home; somewhere in the Xelhuan Expanse.”

The Xelhuan Expanse was an immeasurably vast tract of empty space, between the Earth’s Local Galactic Cluster and the next nearest neighbouring cluster. Earth astronomers had first discovered the Expanse using the Rossi Radio Observatory satellite a generation earlier, and had named it for the

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mythological Aztec giant, Xelhua. The Xelhuan Expanse was billions of light years wide and devoid of any matter. There were no stars in the expanse, no nebulae; no discernible cosmic events of any kind. The League of Worlds possessed little knowledge of its makeup.

“Not much to see in this neighbourhood,” Decker said, staring at the infinite blackness surrounding them, “No starlight, nothing. Good Christ...I don’t think I’ve ever seen such darkness.”

“The Ship was in time warp for...nine hundred and fifty million years,” Nav said, turning to face her Captain, “Our time offset from space-normal prior to departure’s less than nine minutes.”

From the observation gantry, Bloom fought back against a shudder. She wondered for a very long moment just how old the Ship really was.

“THE HUB HAS BEEN LOCATED,” The Ship announced, “AT MAXIMUM SUBLIGHT VELOCITY WE WILL ARRIVE IN TEN HOURS, TWENTY-THREE MINUTES.”

The Ship closed on the Hub. Bloom and Benedict watched the approach from the observation gallery above the Command Deck. The Hub grew in size in the display dome around them, taking a vaguely elliptical shape, grayish-white and indistinct in the deep distance.

“What is that?” Benedict asked, “An asteroid? A planet or a moon?”

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Bloom gestured to the Command Station.

“Captain Decker, could you give us?”

Decker nodded and singled the Sensor Operator. A moment later the telemetry was displayed on the display dome to either side of the growing image of the Hub. The readout showed that it was some two hundred and twenty-six thousand kilometres in diameter—nearly twice the size of mighty Jupiter back in their home system. Its composition read as mainly metallic and polymer alloys. The Hub wasn’t located on some planetary body, Bloom realized, it *was* a planetary body.

“That’s no moon,” Bloom said, “It’s a space station.”

Looking at the Hub as it loomed greater and greater on their approach, Bloom felt as though she were approaching something out of a dark storybook, or her own worst nightmares. The outer hull of the Hub was stark, a dull charcoal color that reminded her of soot and sandstone. But this was unlike any structure she’d ever seen. The uneven sphere’s hull seemed to twist back upon itself in knots and deep grooves, overlapping itself again and again. As the Ship continued its approach and the Hub grew in size against the viewer, more detail became visible. As Bloom saw more of the Hub, she became even more unsettled.

The surface of the knotted segments of hull were covered in rough, shearing ridges and chasms that seemed to fold back in upon themselves, with spires rising at strange angles from each surface, seeming to rise and fall in spite of

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their stillness. Bloom looked at these alien shapes as they flew over them, and couldn't fathom the engineering required to design and build such a thing as this. Not just the size of the station, but its geometry disturbed her. Did these nightmare knots and coils serve a structural purpose in the gargantuan design of the Hub? Or was it an aesthetic of the Alien mind that had designed the behemoth? The Exodus had happened millions of years ago; Bloom wondered how old the Hub was, then; who had built it, how long it had taken them. Was the madness of the Hub's architecture the result of an ageless mind?

Captain Tanaka joined Bloom and Benedict on the observation gantry.

"I've heard of structures like this," she said, whispering as though afraid the Hub could hear, "I studied them in a class on applied theoretical engineering; I think this is what's known as a Globus Cassus."

"A what?" Benedict asked.

"A Globus Cassus," Tanaka repeated, absently brushing her hair back from her face, "In Two Thousand and Four an architect by the name of Christian Waldvogel proposed the concept: essentially a giant shell would be constructed around a planet, in his proposal Earth, using the very raw materials that make up the planet. Eventually, the atmosphere, ecosphere and hydrosphere of the planet would be inverted onto the inner surface of the shell. By creating massive tracts of land and water, the habitable surface area of a world would be vastly

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increased. Likewise, the potential sustainable biomass would be far greater. The shell of the Globus Cassus itself remains hollow in Waldvogel's model, but with the resources of an interplanetary commonwealth like the League of Worlds, it would be possible to build multiple inner sections to such a sphere."

Bloom nodded her head.

"And each of the sections could then be devoted to a specific Race or a specific type of life form," she said, "Depending on the creatures' needs, in terms of gravity, atmosphere and radiological conditions."

"Exactly," Tanaka concurred.

"But just how many inner layers could you put inside such a thing?" Benedict asked.

Tanaka glanced at the Major.

"How many Races were in the League?" she asked, "Conceivably, the larger, outer layers of the sphere could be divided to serve multiple races, while the smallest, innermost layers would be given over to the administration of the sphere, as well as its power, ventilation, circulation and communication systems."

"Christ," Benedict said, "I just can't imagine..."

"You don't have to, Exo," Bloom said, hardly believing it herself, "It's right in front of us, now."

The Ship Control Entity made contact with the Hub's equivalent. The Ship identified itself and summarized its journey prior to losing contact with the League of Worlds,

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millions of years before. The Ship detailed its discovery by the Humans and how they came to make up its new passenger and crew manifest. Then, it requested docking or landing coordinates to connect with an area of the Hub that would be able to sustain Human life. The Hub sent the appropriate information to the Ship and the Ship changed its orbit. The entire conversation between the two entities took less than a second.

“A LANDING BAY CAPABLE OF SUSTAINING HUMAN LIFE HAS BEEN LOCATED,” The Ship announced, “ORBITAL PATH HAS BEEN CORRECTED. DOCKING AND LANDING WILL BEGIN IN THIRTEEN MINUTES.”

“Thank you, Ship,” Captain Decker said from his station.

“WHEN DOCKING MANOEUVRE IS COMPLETE THE HUB SENTINEL WILL RENDEZVOUS WITH THE MISSION COMMANDER TO RELAY THE NEXT PHASE OF EXODUS.”

Decker turned his attention to the observation gantry above.

“You get that, Colonel?” he asked.

Bloom pursed her lips in a grim smile.

“Loud and clear,” she said.

The Ship travelled at thousands of kilometres per hour as it approached. Along the skin of the Hub though never at regular intervals were knots of different sizes. The Ship was

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passing nearer to one of the smaller ones, about twice its size. The knot began to pull open...but try as she might as she watched it happen, Bloom could not discern any sense to how the warped and furled segments of the skin of the Hub came apart. The Ship descended towards a twisted horizon of shadows and spines that reached out with infinite complexity as far as Bloom could bear to search.

The Ship dropped into a deep chasm through which pulsed chains of lights the size of houses dropping farther and farther towards the Hub's gnarled heart. The architecture seemed more regular here, but Bloom could not help feeling as though the Hub had just swallowed the Ship whole. At long last they came to a junction in the channel with twisted branches leading off in seven other directions besides the vast tract that led back up and out of the Hub. One of the diagonal passages lit up and the Ship traveled down along this one now. The passage was lit in a pale blue, similar to the pulse of energy that glowed from the Ship's own trenches. Gradually the passage's architecture took on a less alien feel, the walls becoming smooth, less defined. The Ship was approaching another aperture, this one already open. They passed through and into a spherical chamber of incomprehensible proportion; whole continents could have fit within. A band of light through the equator of the massive space flooded the whole with blue-white light. From the roof of the hollow a massive column descended. Thousands upon thousands branching spires fanned out in all directions. The structure resembled a

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tree hung upside down, and the Ship announced that they were in one of many port harbours within the Hub. Looking out as they approached the docks, Bloom realized that there were millions upon millions of docking slips in this one chamber.

Many of these slips were occupied, cradling alien vessels of as many different sizes, shapes and configurations as there were moorings to hold them. Some were far smaller than the Ship, others dreadfully larger. The Ship banked to starboard, cresting upwards as it approached the central column.

“There’s millions of them,” Bloom exclaimed.

“THESE SHIPS WERE ABANDONED IN THE HUB,” The Ship said, “DURING THE EXODUS THEY BECAME UNNECESSARY. THEY ARE ALL OF A TYPE THAT SUPPORTED LIFE FORMS WITH SIMILAR REQUIREMENTS TO YOUR OWN.”

The Ship rose parallel to the giant central column, gradually corkscrewing its way to the left as it ascended. Two-thirds of the way up the massive column the Ship halted before the arm of an empty docking slip waiting. The mooring gantry split open, collapsing slowly in upon itself to create a bay large enough to accommodate the Ship. When the bay was done, the Ship coasted in. Moorings closed over the vessel to either side and then the Ship was raised into a fitted recess overhead.

“DOCKING IS COMPLETE,” The Ship Control Entity informed the Command Deck.

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Allison lay on her bed, her eyes shut. Her awareness had grown: She was now conscious of the people on the floors immediately above and below, as well as everyone on the floor she was on. The locked ward she now lived in, the suite of rooms into which her belongings had been transferred, had become her home, her shelter, her prison.

Doctor Kodo had left her only a few minutes earlier. With him he'd taken more blood samples and the results of a series of scans performed by various medical devices. During the procedures, Allison had tried to keep her mind from sponging into his. But she'd been aware of Doctor Kodo's presence the moment he'd stepped from the lift at the far end of the floor. His was a distinct mind from the other five people who were on this floor: the two guards and three nurses who rotated with others in four shifts of six hours each. It was always the same people on the same shifts and they had no direct contact with her. Allison barely noticed them anymore. She'd been learning to keep herself away from people's minds. The task had been made easier by the fact that most of the surface thoughts from the minds of her nurses and guards were full of fear, suspicion and even loathing, all directed at her. But Doctor Kodo's mind was different, because she knew him and because his thoughts towards her, while wary, were nonetheless full of concern *for* her instead of her; He also felt interest and more than a little awe for Allison.

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The problem Allison had was that she couldn't yet keep herself from seeping into the minds of anyone who came into close proximity. She knew, for instance, that Cole and Kodo were involved; that they had been since shortly before the Ship left Earth's solar system. She knew details of their personal lives and sex lives that she had no interest in, but those memories had come to her unbidden from his mind. Doctor Cole seemed somewhat better than Kodo at guarding her thoughts, but she still sometimes let slip things that Allison picked up on. Allison suspected Cole's skill at guardedness came from a combination of her background as a psychiatrist as well as the fact that she was older than Kodo by more than a decade.

Allison had an image of her consciousness being like a membrane centered in her head. She could stretch it out or pull it back in, either in a single direction or as many different directions as she chose. But beyond this membrane of thought there existed another field of awareness, akin to a normal person's visual or auditory range; she couldn't control this field; by default the presence, thoughts or feelings of anyone in that zone were known to Allison as if they were her own. People within that periphery were orbs of vibration and sound, just waiting for her to focus on them.

This was how she'd know that Doctor Kodo was coming, even though she'd been trying to keep her conscious mind trapped tightly within herself. And when Doctor Kodo

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left, she'd followed him from her zone of thought as surely as someone normal might have watched someone walk out of sight. Allison began to wonder just how far she could stretch her mind; how far beyond her body could she extend this membrane of consciousness? She was at once afraid to know and eager to learn.

And so Allison allowed the membrane of her consciousness to stretch, extending it further and further from her center. There was a disorienting moment as she experienced the confines of her quarters in three hundred and sixty degrees. And then she was going beyond, her awareness and consciousness inflating away from her like a balloon. As she continued, the minds of the people whom she touched took on the appearance of points of light, golden orbs of brilliance against a gray-black ocean of thought. There was a quickening and Allison realized that her own conscious mind was using the presence of these other minds to fuel itself and increase its own strength and speed; it was as though she were creating a living grid network of minds, though only she was aware of the connectivity between them. She was joining to more and more minds aboard the Ship, each new consciousness speeding up her access to the next. Allison touched hundreds of minds, then thousands, in less time that it had taken her to become aware of the first handful of brilliant orbs of thought. She was connected to their innermost thoughts, feelings and secrets; she was privy to their darkness and their light, their beauty and their ugliness. She saw the awful whole of their Humanity and

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it filled her with overwhelming joy and sadness; everyone was so alike, so afraid, so alone. Guilty and innocent all at once; if only they could all know themselves and one another as she did now. Her mind continued to stretch and expand, reaching further away from herself, growing until the whole of the Ship was surrounded by her mind. And in her mind's eye, Allison realized that the shimmering golden light of all their souls were match-sparks against the eternal night; so delicate, so lost. She pulled out farther, to better view the whole in her imagination. What she envisioned astounded her both for its beauty and because she should have realized it long before: the lights of the minds and souls of the passengers and crew of the Ship were suspended like dewdrops in a spider web within the confines of the mind of the Ship Control Entity, itself.

As she realized just what it was she was observing, Allison found herself forgetting the fragile beauty of it all. This was the Ship's mind and it was the Ship that had done this to her. It was the Ship that had poisoned her, tortured her and violated her. It was the Ship that had killed those other girls, the Ship that had engineered all of this. Allison wanted to know why. She *needed* to know why. She reshaped the membrane of her mind, focusing it tighter and tighter around the heart of the Ship's consciousness and then drew herself into it.

Nothing could have prepared her for what happened next.

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The onslaught of raw consciousness from the Ship Control Entity was immeasurable. It was powerful; ancient and powerful. The Ship Control Entity was cold, emotionless, calculating. Though a living being it was like nothing Allison could fathom. The sheer alienness of the Entity was so beyond her capacity to understand that she was helpless when the Ship Control Entity suddenly took notice of her.

She was an insect pinned in its grip and it studied her with an almost cruel disinterest. Allison was not allowed a glimpse into its recesses; the Ship Control Entity barely tolerated her invasion of its surface thoughts. It would not tolerate her petulant questions of why this had been done to her; it was of no consequence to the Ship what Allison understood and what she didn't. All that mattered to it was that the Machine had been served by what it had done to her. The Machine served the Purpose, the Purpose was Life. That was all that mattered to the Ship and that was certainly all that the Ship felt was necessary for Allison to understand. With the barest effort, the Ship drove her away from itself.

Allison's consciousness fell back into her body with a force almost physical. Instead of simply retracting back into herself, the membrane of Allison's conscious mind was compacted by sheer force. As it was driven back into her, the tendrils of Allison's mind were torn from the minds of all the thousands of people she had touched. As these strands snapped

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back, they took with them imprints of these other minds, pulling them into the depths of the well of Allison's soul. And with each mind's echo passing into her, Allison was filled with a lifetime of memories and experience. Faster and faster these recorded intrusions came; as each mind she'd touched had fuelled and hastened her consciousness' expansion, so now were these nodules of thought hastening the approach and absorption of the next. One hundred and fifty thousand lives' worth of knowledge was driven into her mind; the painful weight and force of the implosion pushed her own mind towards collapse.

She was drowning, being pulled down by the undertow of experiences and emotions she had absorbed. Every lifetime she had absorbed was diluting her own mind, weakening her own hold on herself. It was impossible to fight against the waves of thought, impossible to keep hold.

All at once the assault was over. A strange calm descended over her. Allison realized now that somewhere in the center of her mind she sat in the eye of a vast hurricane of thought; the minds that had been copied into her own swirling around her. Inside of that calm, Allison was gripped by a placid terror: She knew *everything*. The sum of Human knowledge as it was represented in the memories of all those aboard the Ship; their history, science, language, medicine, art, culture, dreams, fantasies, laws, legends, secrets and sins were all a part of her, now. If it was known by someone on the Ship,

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she knew it. If it had been forgotten by anyone on the Ship, she now remembered it. She had full understanding of everything that was understood by anyone who lived and traveled in the skin of this ancient alien behemoth. It was as though she, herself had lived each of the lives that were stored within her. It was as though she, herself had experienced every event that had played out during those lives up until that moment. And she realized that that connection to those minds was still there, that she was still absorbing everything they did, everything they felt, everything they experienced. She couldn't stop it; she couldn't turn it off. It just kept pouring into her.

And then Allison started screaming.

FOURTEEN

UNCHARTED REGIONS

Atop the crest of the dome of the Ship's outer hull was a ring of golden, metallic pyramids. These pyramids were the main entryways into the Ship; above all others, a single pyramid rested at the very summit of the Ship's mountainous dome. This Great Pyramid was larger than the others and had once served as the sole point of access into the Ship, during the days of the Ship Survey Expedition back on Earth. Docked with the Hub, the summit pyramid on the Ship served once more as the sole point of access: this time, it was the only means of getting into the Hub.

Because the Ship was built using partially biological components, it was able to reconfigure entire sections of its inner structure to suit the needs of a particular mission by

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reabsorbing the old configuration and growing a new one. Therefore, during its long journey through time warp to the Hub the Ship Control Entity had redesigned the inner layers of the primary hull between the Habitat and the Great Pyramid for the mission to the Hub. Now a tram line led directly to the topmost chamber of the inner hull, just below the Great Pyramid. From that chamber a lift ascended and opened into the Hub.

In a couple of hours the Ship's Alien Studies team would become the first Humans to breach an alien space station. It was an significant occasion; one that would pass unnoticed by spectators or historians, one that would happen without pomp or ceremony. By sheer necessity there would be no commemoration of the event. The Earth was hundreds of millions of light years away. The last remnants of Mankind were nestled within the bowels of the Ship, waiting, afraid, wanting only to be safe, to reach the end of this long, lonely journey.

Bloom waited in her office for Major Benedict and the Alien Studies team. The meeting was to brief everyone before their incursion into the Hub. Though the meeting was still fifteen minutes away, Bloom had asked Benedict to come early. When Benedict arrived, Bloom's door was open and the Colonel was staring out the floor-to-ceiling window behind her desk at the spinning orb of Habitat beyond. Her arms were crossed behind her back and she stood with her legs slightly

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akimbo on the deck. Benedict knew the pose well; Bloom used it as a sort of meditative stance, though the Colonel undoubtedly considered meditation beneath her. But if she was standing like this and had summoned him to her fifteen minutes before the meeting, Benedict knew she'd been standing like this for at least a half an hour, already. He'd have to check the security logs to see what time Bloom had left her quarters, this morning. The earlier that she'd left to run and the longer she'd run through Habitat's parklands would tell him exactly how heavily recent events had been weighing on her mind.

"Jack; hello,"

And this was another indicator: Bloom was using his first name which meant that she had summoned him not in any official capacity, but to give her counsel. He supposed that only Mark Echohawk had known Bloom more intimately. But Benedict was certain that her late ex-husband hadn't known her half as well.

"Colonel," he said, hoping he didn't betray how uncomfortable he was. It wasn't the lack of formality that made these sessions awkward for him, but instead it was seeing Bloom rendered so vulnerable. Years after her skill as a pilot had saved him during an air campaign that had seen the rest of their wing mates blown from the sky over Australia, Benedict was forced to admit that he still idolized Colonel Margaret Bloom.

"This mission has turned into one giant cluster fuck," Bloom said, "Nothing's gone right since we left the solar system; shit, nothing's gone right since we left Earth."

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“It’s not like we could have predicted anything that we’ve been through,” Benedict offered, “Nor could we have done much to prevent it.”

“We should have turned around the instant we found that the M2 hyperlink beacon had been destroyed.”

“And if we had, the likelihood is we’d either all be infected by the Nimbus virus released on Earth or we’d be fleeing the Earth because of the infection,” Benedict said, “And those girls would still be dead, Allison McQuire still mutated.” Bloom shook her head.

“I’m not so sure,” she said.

“Colonel, in the absolute infinity of the universe and according to multiple-reality theories I’m sure that in some alternate timeline you are to blame for all that’s happened. But not in this one.”

“We’re all victims of history in your mind, Exo?”

“Ever since the big bang, Colonel; ever since the big fucking bang.”



Allison woke up to find herself lying in bed. An intravenous drip was taped in place on the back of her hand, the needle disappearing into the flesh beneath. She wasn’t connected to nearly as many monitors as she had been the last time she’d come to, but as before she’d come awake instantly, without any progression between consciousness and nothingness.

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But oh, how blessed oblivion seemed right now. Thousands of different sets of memories crowded her mind; it was all she could do to maintain her own identity, trying to stem the flood of thoughts and recollections not her own. As she sat up in bed, pulling the IV line from her arm and the monitor pads from her head, unbidden flashes of memory insinuated themselves into her thoughts. She found herself remembering awakening from surgeries she never had; sitting by the bedside of the convalescing, the sick, the dying...free association brought other recollections of moments in bed: making love to partners she'd never had, in combinations she'd never imagined: as a man with a woman, as a woman with another woman; as a man with a man...she remembered sex and lovemaking from a thousand different encounters, not entirely sure which were hers and which truly belonged to other people. Allison recalled falling asleep next to someone, waking up alone, breakfast in bed...breakfast at an obscure little café in the city of Montreal, the Montreal Jazz festival, singing in a jazz club in New Orleans, the decommissioning of the *USS New Orleans* following the Australia Conflict, vacationing in Australia...every second flooded her mind with countless, dizzying fragmented memories, brief glimpses into lives she'd never lived.

Allison sat up and pulled the intravenous line from her hand. Hadn't she already done this? Had she done this before? Or was that someone else? She was standing beside the bed, gripping the guard rail. She felt dizzy, disoriented. The floor

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seemed to be tilting under her feet. She lowered her head, staring at a spot between her toes. She focused all of her attention on this point, concentrating. Slowly the dizziness faded. Gradually, her own memories and her own identity reasserted itself as the other voices receded into the muddling fog of her mind. Hesitantly, Allison let go of the guardrail and took careful steps away from her bed, toward her dresser. The dizziness hadn't quite gone away and when she reached it Allison had to grip the dresser. As the vertigo took hold the voices of the minds grew suddenly louder again. Allison focused on her image in the mirror until it passed and the noise in her head subsided. She stared at her reflection for a long moment. She hadn't really even looked in a mirror since before the Ship had abducted her, violated her. Allison's eyes traced the contours of her face, framed as it was by her deep, red hair. Something was different...something was wrong, somehow, but she couldn't quite pinpoint what. She'd lost some weight, to be sure, but her features were still soft, her lips still full and a naturally deep red offset by her pale skin. And then with a lurch of fear in her stomach, Allison realized what had changed: her eyes, once like green crystal were now a deep crimson, luminous, almost the colour of dried blood.

“What?” she stammered, leaning towards the mirror for a better look, “What is this?” Allison started crying; mournful sobs escaping with a trickle of tears. She turned around, sliding down the dresser until she was sitting on the floor. Despite her ongoing connection to the minds of everyone aboard the Ship, Allison felt utterly, inexorably alone. No one

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else would ever understand the violation she had suffered, the agony she'd endured. No one would ever understand what had been done to her or what she was going through. Even if she injected her own memories into someone else's mind they would filter those memories through their own minds' eye. Her body had been violated, mutilated, transformed...and either people reacted to her with fear and trepidation or detached curiosity and remote pity. Despite the connection she had to everyone else aboard the Ship, Allison would forever be apart from them.

Even now through her misery, Allison could sense another person approaching her; despite her grief and her agony, Allison picked out the person's name and her thoughts: Eloise Saint-François, one of her nurses had noticed from her duty station that Allison was awake and that the health status monitors keeping watch over her vitals had been disconnected. Allison could feel the woman's approach; it took an effort of will, even through her misery, not to experience Saint-François' approach from the other woman's eyes.

Eloise Saint-François was an experienced nurse and despite what had happened to her colleague Theresa White, she had no fear of Allison McQuire. Eloise had worked among dangerous patients during her time at a Brussels hospital for the criminally insane; she had seen real malice, looked into the eye of real evil. She did not believe that this girl, regardless of what had happened to her, possessed either trait.

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Allison's doorchimes sounded and a moment later a lilting French-accented voice called out:

"Mademoiselle? It is the nurse,"

Allison had pulled her tattered and faded pink bathrobe on over the hospital dressing gown that someone had put her in after her most recent episode. She opened the bedroom door a fraction of a second before Eloise reached for the handle.

"Bonjour, madame Saint-François," Allison said, in perfectly accented French, "Vous avez déjà notifié Docteur Cole que je suis réveillée; c'est bien, car j'aurais besoin de la parler."

"Your French is impeccable," Eloise replied, also in French, "I didn't know that you spoke it."

"I suspect that until a few hours ago I didn't," Allison said, "And I wouldn't be surprised to discover that I now know every language spoken or known aboard the Ship."

"What has happened to you?" Eloise asked, quietly. Allison blinked. A bitter smile flitted across her mouth.

"You wouldn't understand," Allison said, "And if you could understand, your only reward would be madness."



Because of its immense size a vast network of both automated and pilotable tramways extended throughout the Ship. This Transitway allowed travel to flow within the Ship like blood through human veins. And as blood and veins need a heart, so did the Transitway. Dubbed the Central Station by its new Human inhabitants, the Transitway's heart was a multi-

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tiered centre through which all the transit lines from across the Ship met. It was from Central Station that the main airlocks in and out of the Ship were accessible and from the topmost level of the Transitway, the Pyramid that led into the Hub.

Colonel Bloom stepped from the tram car, followed by Major Benedict, Captain Tanaka, Sonia Aiziz and Peter Paulson. The tram platform opened directly onto the lift chamber.

“Incredible,” Aiziz said, looking around the chamber, “Everything that was here before...it’s all gone.”

“Don’t forget,” Peter said, “While the Ship was in time warp and we were in stasis, the Ship experienced millions of years.”

“I don’t think the Ship needed millions of years to do this,” Benedict said, looking around, “The Command Deck was reconfigured for Human use in a matter of a few months. I don’t know how long this took, but my guess is that the Ship can refit its inner sections as needed, in very short order.”

As they stepped into the waiting elevator car and began their ascent, Bloom turned to Benedict.

“What exactly did the Sentinel at Hiddek Uhl tell you about this place?”

Benedict shrugged.

“He said that another Sentinel had been stationed here in order to direct us on to the next waypoint along the Exodus,” Benedict said, “Each navigational waypoint is guarded by a

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Sentinel, who provides arriving ships with the coordinates to the next waypoint.”

The car passed out of the inner hull and into the Ship’s airframe. Both the walls of the egg-shaped car and the lift tube were transparent; as the elevator continued to rise, they watched the cityscape of the inner hull grow beneath them. The spires and rises of the inner hull melded gracefully into the honeycombed megastructures of the airframe. Bloom had always been amazed by this view; the inside of the Ship stretching out beneath them as they rose to the outer hull and the pyramid above. But somehow the scene seemed smaller to her, now. Somehow the Ship itself seemed to have lost much of the majesty that it had had for her, when they were exploring it back on Earth.

“I don’t understand,” Bloom said, “Why not just give us the full coordinates to us right away?”

“Safety reasons,” Benedict said, “If the Zohor or the Nimbus managed to get the full coordinates, anyone that survived the Exodus would be in danger.”

“But if the Zohor learned the coordinates one set at a time they wouldn’t be?”

“Multiple routes of Exodus were established,” Peter Paulson supplied, “Leading to different waypoints. The waypoints themselves are heavily defended and capable of tracking which ships came from where. Drone ships travel regularly between the waypoints to update one another on navigational and defensive intel. This Hub is probably one of several established throughout the Xelhuan Expanse. We

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might even end up doubling back to other stations and waypoints as we travel.”

Bloom nodded.

“Let’s just hope that somewhere at the end of this exodus there’s actually a League of Worlds waiting for us.” She said.



Doctor Cole finished her examination of Allison McQuire with a simple pronouncement:

“You’re fine,”

They were sitting in Allison’s living room. As Doctor Cole began putting her medical gear back into its travel case, Allison smirked.

“As fine as is possible under the circumstances,” she said, “Doctor, I want to see Juan.”

Cole gave a start, halting midway in placing a handheld scanner into her kit. Her back tensed visibly.

“Allison,” she said, hesitantly, “I’m not sure that--”

“It’s a good idea for me to leave isolation,” Allison interjected, “You’re still worried about how much of a danger that I might pose to the rest of the passengers and crew.”

“Allison that’s not fair; it’s not--”

“It’s not just that,” Allison said, her voice a perfect imitation of Cole’s, “Juan’s in a coma; you didn’t quite think I was ready to learn that, but given my ability to read minds, there’s not much you can do about it. You haven’t wanted to tell me that there was a riot shortly after I was found, or that

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Juan had been named as the prime suspect in the deaths of the other girls and the assault against me.”

“Christ, I wish you wouldn’t do that,” Cole snapped.

Allison smiled mirthlessly.

“I know what you’re about to say, even as the thoughts are forming in your mind,” Allison said, “I can tell you what everyone aboard the Ship is thinking and doing, right at this moment. I can tell you the names and locations of everyone who was involved in the riot and who attacked Juan. I know, because I have seen it through their eyes. I lived it just as they lived it. I know what they did to Juan. What I want is to see Juan, Doctor. I will see him whether you want me to or not.”

Cole sighed, shaking her head.

“Allison, please listen,” Cole said, “Without interrupting or speaking for me. We still don’t know the extent of your abilities, or how much you’ve recovered from what you’ve been through. I don’t want you put under more strain than necessary.”

“I understand your concern,” Allison said, “I also understand that most of all, you’re not sure if I’m sane or not, or what I might be capable of doing, if I have another episode. I’ll be perfectly honest with you, Doctor: I don’t know, either. I don’t know whether or not I’m insane, how strong I am, what I’m capable of, how strong I am or what I may or may not be able to do for Juan. What I do know is that things are still changing inside of me; that whatever is happening to me is not nearly over; I’m beyond frightened, Doctor Cole. I’m beyond

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angry. But I also believe that I can help him. It would be easier if you let me try, than if I had to fight you.”

Cole leaned back in her seat.

“Very well,” she said, “I’ll make the arrangements.”

“Thank you, Doctor Cole,”

Allison consented to Doctor Cole’s request that she be escorted to see Juan. Her escort consisted of two nurses, Doctor Cole and two of the Ship’s security officers. It took most of an hour to gather the escort and to clear it with Colonel Bloom. While she waited, Allison showered. The water and soap felt strange; the scrubber she used was like sandpaper as she rubbed it against her skin. The towel felt just as rough, almost painful as she dried herself. Allison balked at using the hair dryer; the first blast of heat felt like a searing jet. Instead, she towelled as much moisture as she could from her hair, tying it back in a wet bun against the back of her head. The whole back of her head felt icy cold, almost painfully so.

Allison dressed in a simple flowing brown skirt and a blue pullover. But even these basic garments felt coarse and rough against her skin because of her heightened tactile awareness. It was worse than being on Ecstasy; at least if she were on E, she’d have the benefit of the sharp sense of euphoria to go along with the tactile sensitivity. Likewise, on Ecstasy she’d also have the comfort of knowing the sensations would go away. Instead she just felt the constriction of the clothing, the fabric itself intruding on her skin.

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The sense of touch is one of the most highly developed senses in the Human body, and is in fact a collection of senses bundled together under the blanket term of touch; for it allows people to discern texture, temperature, pressure, pain, pleasure, size and shape. And although human skin itself is the single organ responsible for the wondrous compact that is the sense of touch, it is most often through the fingertips that we experience touch. Allison McQuire's fingertips were now so sensitive that she could feel minute pockmarks and scratches on the apparently smooth surface of the mirror in her bathroom. Likewise, she could feel tiny motes of dust as they collided with her face as she moved through her apartments in the hospital; the currents and eddies of air disturbed by her passing were like water sluicing across her face. She kept having to pause, close her eyes, calm herself. If she wasn't mad already, surely these sensations would drive her into madness.

Allison's sense of touch was not the only of her senses to have sharpened since her re-awakening. She could smell scent in the air from objects, from people; residual odours all overlapping and layering together in a way that was almost cacophonous. She could taste the air with her tongue, smell and taste working conjunctively as did sight and hearing.

And as undeniably more acute as her sense of hearing was, it was what she could now see that astounded her most. Certain objects, certain colours seemed to fluoresce, as though

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she were seeing them exposed to a black light. And when she'd been visited by the nurse and then by Doctor Cole, Allison had observed what she was convinced was their body heat radiating from them in ripples and waves that she couldn't even describe as having true colour. There had seemed to be coronas around them both, flickering waves of luminous hue. She could see when blood gathered in or away from different parts of their bodies: an increase in temperature to the face from a blushing rush of blood, coldness in the hands when fear made the blood retreat from the fingertips; even the air was coloured by currents and temperature variation, rolling tempestuously all around her. The world was rife with hidden colours and radiations that Allison could hardly believe were visible to her, now. She remembered earlier times in her life when such visions only came to her under the influence of powerful hallucinogens. Now the world was alive with things that were spectacular to behold, in and of themselves narcotic in their invisible beauty.

Allison felt dizzy and overwhelmed. It was all too much, all too big. Everyone and everything around her was an assault on her senses. She was alone and set upon from all sides, sliding in and out of memories not her own, seeing, feeling, smelling and knowing so many more things than any one person should bear. And Juan...Juan, whose absence was like a pit of darkness in a sea of light.

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Allison wept at the sight of him: his bruised and broken, bandaged form was barely recognizable as the young man she'd been flirting with before this all happened. His skin was a sunset canvas of reds and purples, unimaginably swollen. Deep contusions sealed under pseudoskin glistened cruelly under the lights above Juan's bed. Allison watched as his chest rose and fell convulsively as a respirator forced air into his lungs. A heart monitor flickered beside his bed, a green line jumping, trailing out his heartbeat. She couldn't imagine he looked much better than she did, when he brought her in. He didn't deserve this any more than she did. She couldn't undo what had been done to her, but she knew she could undo what had been done to him.

"I'm so sorry, Juan," she whispered, sobbing, into his ear, "Forgive me"

With the knowledge and experience that she had absorbed from the garrison of doctors and nurses aboard the Ship, Allison knew just how grave Juan's condition was. Doctor Cole approached her, putting a hand on her shoulder. The touch was rough, hot, intrusive, though Allison knew Cole's intentions were meant to be comforting.

"He's in a persistent vegetative state," she said gently, "He's brain-dead. Normally, we'd leave the decision whether or not to cease life support to the family, but mister Rejas came aboard alone. Legally his status is in a gray area, so we couldn't just decide to terminate."

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“His family died,” Allison said, wiping tears from her luminescent, crimson eyes, “I remember him telling me about it, once...It’s something we had in common. My father and mother died when I was sixteen.”

“As you can see, there’s nothing more we can do for him,”

“No, I don’t suppose there is,” Allison reached over and began to shut off the monitoring equipment. She shut off the respirator and with an expert’s hand extubated him.

“Allison, what are you doing?” Cole asked.

“I’m doing what you cannot,” Allison replied. She leaned over Juan and ran her hands over his battered face. She reached with her mind, extending her consciousness into Juan’s body. All at once Allison’s awareness narrowed until it was occupied wholly and solely within the confines of Juan’s dying form. Without the machines his heartbeat was becoming erratic, arrhythmic and his lungs weren’t functioning. The autonomic impulses from his brain weren’t reaching their destinations. Juan had severe spinal damage, brain damage and his organs were failing. Now deprived of oxygen his body was at last cascading towards death.

Allison saw all this in a flash of insight. She knew that it was often possible to heal spinal cord damage with the use of stem cell and tissue cloning therapies and that likewise the brain could be healed, but the extent of Juan’s injuries were beyond what medical science was capable of. She however, knew herself capable of far more. Allison focused on Juan’s

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body, visualizing not the organs and systems but the individual cells. Here was life at its most elemental: clusters of single-celled organisms that had so long ago formed specialized communities from which all complex life had evolved: individuals sacrificing themselves for the good of the whole, creating an even greater individual from that whole.

And the communities of cells that had formed Juan Carlos Rejas were dying. Juan was dying. And Allison was all that stood between him and the abyss. She concentrated on the areas where the worst of the damage was: his brain and spinal cord. She focused on the mass of decomposing organic chemicals that made up the dead and damaged cells. She pushed her mind deeper, past cellular anatomy to the molecular level, looking at the most basic systems of Juan's body. Here she saw where chemical changes had occurred; where specific molecular bonds had been broken, tangled together. Here she saw the damage as it was best expressed: a weave undone, atomic links broken loose from their molecular chains.

Doctor Cole watched as Allison extended her hands over Juan Carlos Rejas' prone body, like a faith healer from some American Southern Revival show. A sharp smell of ozone worse than the air just before a thunderstorm filled the room. There was a hissing and then a pop from beneath Allison's outstretched hands. There was no dramatic glow, no flares of light or colour or lightning, but undeniably, something was happening; something beyond what Cole could

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understand. She was aware of the energy being transmitted from Allison and into Juan; aware of the sheer power, if only because she felt her hair stand on end at the nape of her neck and on the backs of her arms. Witnessing Allison at work, Simone Cole couldn't help but feel as if a menace, a malicious potential for chaos was barely held in check by the girl standing over the prone body of Juan Rejas. Cole stared on in horror as suddenly Juan began...to *flicker*...to simply vanish and reappear as though he were somehow caught in a strobe. Each time he vanished, he reappeared just slightly less injured...just slightly less damaged than before.

Allison pulled on the separated atoms, using her conscious mind and her will to draw them together, to re-form the bonds that had been broken. It was easier than she thought; it was as though the atoms *wanted* to be together again. The atoms linked back into molecules and as the molecules came together Allison began to re-build cells, reshaping these most basic of Human organisms into tissues and organs. She repaired chromosomes, reassembled cellular nuclei, summoned centrosomes and mitochondria; Allison gathered cytoplasm back together and reassembled damaged cellular membranes.

The power Allison was channelling to tow these broken molecules back together was tremendous. The component atoms of Juan's body were unused to being acted upon by anything other than the forces governing the universe, but Allison could see now how to bend these forces to her will,

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feeling the unseen and unknowable quantum field fighting her efforts. She was reshaping probability relative to Juan's injuries, making the matter of his body according to her design and not according to circumstance. Juan took a shuddering, gasping breath as his autonomic functions restarted. He was breathing on his own again, his heart pumping freshly oxygenated blood back to his starved organs.

But Allison wasn't done. In the tissues of his brain was stored Juan's mind. That mind was stored in electrochemical form in a hundred billion cells; neuroreceptors, synaptic membranes, all firing a basic, default pattern, keeping the body alive. Allison went into the cells that were waiting, inactive but not inert, reading over the firing sequences necessary to trigger thought, emotion, memory and identity. She studied the complex commands that had to be given for these particular brain cells, so different from so many others in what was unto itself a complex of several different organs working together as a whole, and then set it off with a single utterance into his mind:

“Juan, come back.”

Micrometric bursts of electrical energy caused neurons to fire molecularized chemicals across the synaptic gap, triggering electrical releases that charged the other neurons to correctly fire the next electrochemicals across the next synapse. When Allison saw the chain reaction in Juan's brain firing properly, she turned her attention to other things.

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She understood now the nature of the disease that had infected life on Earth. She saw what the Ship, despite its aeons-long existence and near-perfect intelligence could not fathom: Allison saw where and how to concentrate her thoughts, her will, to rid Juan's body of the same disease that the Ship had violated her body to cure. She could repair Juan Carlos without necessitating the cruel and ongoing mutations that the Ship had inflicted upon her. Allison exhausted herself. As Juan Carlos Rejas opened his eyes for the first time since being attacked, Allison slumped, falling in a heap to the floor.

Juan blinked, waking up. As Doctor Cole came over, Allison struggled to her feet, using the bed rails to help her up.

"Allison?" Juan asked, "What...what happened?"

"You have been made well,"

Juan frowned, shaking his head.

"I don't understand," he said.

"You were sick," Allison said, "And I healed you."



The Pyramid opened into a long, triangular hallway. The walls were of a luminous silver-blue material, the floor a neutral black. The far end of the hallway opened up into a chamber as yet indistinct. Bloom and her team stepped from the Pyramid and into the hallway. There was no seam where the Pyramid and the corridor into the Hub met. It was slightly cooler in the connecting tunnel than it had been in the Ship, but otherwise there was no differential in the atmosphere between Ship and Hub.

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“No point in milling around,” Bloom said, “Let’s go.” She led the way down towards the room ahead.

The room itself was a wide oval shape with flattened floor and ceiling. Everything inside was white; walls, floor, ceiling, again seeming to emit light. Bloom stepped down a short ramp into the room. Benedict, Tanaka, Aiziz and Paulson followed her in. There was no other visible way out of the room.

“Great,” Bloom said, “Now what?”

The room was devoid of any furnishing or feature, other than the way out. They spread out, looking for something, anything that could lead them to the Sentinel or to some other passage.

“Hello, Colonel Bloom,” a new voice said, “Major Benedict, Captain Tanaka; and hello as well to Doctors Aiziz and Paulson. Would you all care to sit down?”

Low benches and chairs rose gracefully from the floor around them. The seating was arranged in a semicircular pattern facing the doorway. In the doorway was a young man; a boy on his way to manhood. His face still had the soft femininity of adolescence. His eyes were large, light brown, like his carefully styled hair. He was wearing a simple white linen robe that looked vaguely African or Middle Eastern. It was a style of dress that had been just beginning to become popular in the West when the Ship had launched from Laguna.

“Civilians aren’t allowed to leave the Ship,” Benedict said, his hand dropping to the butt of his sidearm as he took

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two steps forward, “You’re not even cleared to leave the Habitat Sector.”

The young man smiled.

“But I’m not a passenger from your ship,” he said, “I’m a projection of the Sentinel that watches over this station.”

“You’re a hologram?” Peter asked.

The young man shook his head.

“No; this avatar is not composed of manipulated light or excited plasma. Nor am I a digital projection transmitted into your minds. The technology that allows me to exist in this form is foreign to your own scientific definitions; it wasn’t even known to the Eoulf ship that brought you here. If you must define the projection I’m using to facilitate communication between us, consider it to be a...gathering of excited particles onto an attractive energy field.”

“All right,” Bloom said, swinging a leg over the nearest bench and lowering herself down, “So, how about it? Can we have the navigational data we need?”

“I’ve already transmitted it to the Ship,” the Sentinel said, “And I’ve also uploaded a full set of charts for the Xelhuan Expanse as well as the next nearest galactic cluster.”

“The *next* nearest?” Benedict repeated, “Just how far on does the Exodus go?”

“Very far,” the Sentinel replied, turning to face Benedict, “The Zohor are deployed across hundreds of billions of light years. And the Nimbus likewise has an extensive presence in the universe.”

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“When was the last ship through here?” Bloom asked, “How long ago?”

“By your reckoning of time, the last ship through here was about twenty million years ago,” the Sentinel answered, “Like you, they were a younger race that evolved without ever knowing of the League. During their explorations they discovered the League’s history and then the Zohor discovered them. Their world was devastated; like you, fewer than a million beings survived. Unlike you, however, they left their world in a fleet of ships. But only a small number ever made it this far. The Zohor have become quite efficient at destroying biologic life, when they encounter it.”

“Were the Zohor the ones that destroyed the Hyperlink network?” Benedict asked.

“No; the League itself did that,” the Sentinel answered, “The Zohor learned to detect the network signals, and used them to hunt their enemy. The League of Worlds destroyed the Hyperlink network long before the Exodus even began; they had to.”

“What about the Nimbus?” Peter asked, “Did they ever find a cure? The Earth was infected; if we could return with a cure...”

“I’m sorry, no;” the Sentinel said, “The virus itself has almost a perfect rate of infection and transmission. And while individual viral cells can be destroyed, the Nimbus itself has evolved defences against mass extermination. The only successful campaigns against the virus were carried out by incinerating entire star systems. And even on such a scale, the

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virus could never be entirely eliminated. Once infection occurs on a planet, total infection is inevitable.”

“I still don’t understand how the virus got to Earth,” Benedict said.

“You didn’t know?” the Sentinel asked, “Surely, you must have suspected.”

“What?” Bloom demanded.

“It came aboard your Ship,” the Sentinel said.

“How?” Bloom asked, “Why weren’t we infected?”

“The Ship you’re traveling aboard is quite old,” the Sentinel began, “Technologically speaking it is far less sophisticated a system than I am. It isn’t fully autonomous and despite being self-aware, it has no inherent ability to develop full sentience. Certain systems and cargo aboard the Ship aren’t even directly accessible to it. Several of these systems operate independently of the Ship Control Entity. Among the secret inventory aboard the Ship was a sample of the Nimbus virus. That sample is no longer aboard the Ship.”

“Why the fuck was it even on the Ship to begin with?” Bloom asked, shaking with revulsion and sheer rage.

“The Eoulf, the Race who built the Ship had but one true vocation: they catalogued life. Few Races ever develop with a single, culturally overriding purpose. The Eoulf was one of them. From what I’ve been able to study of your own Race, imagine if you would an entire society of biologists and botanists. The Nimbus presented them with a unique puzzle: it was a destroyer and mimic of all other life. Likewise, it was an absolutely indomitable life form. They collected an untold

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number of samples of the Nimbus, setting up laboratories everywhere in the League and beyond where the sole purpose was to find a way to conquer, to neutralise the Nimbus. They never succeeded.”

“And how’d it get off the Ship?” Benedict asked.

The Sentinel shook his head.

“That I don’t know,” he said, “Perhaps the sample aboard the Ship was just large enough to have a remnant of consciousness and it manipulated someone of your Race into releasing it.”

“They’re all dead,” Bloom said, “I don’t think I ever let myself believe it until now, but...oh, God...Laura...”

Bloom squeezed her eyes shut, fighting back the urge to cry, trying to drive away the anguish that burned inside. She’d carried Laura, nursed her and raised her. Bloom had even resigned her commission in order to be there for her daughter. But then war broke out in the South Pacific; Bloom was recalled to active duty and put back behind the controls of what was essentially a hypersonic flying arsenal. The Australian Conflict lasted seven years; Laura had been a teenager by then, and both mother and daughter found themselves strangers to each other. Her marriage to Mark ended only a couple of years later, when she renewed her commission to pursue a career as a prototype aircraft test pilot. Sometime after Laura entered college, she’d come back into her mother’s life. They’d been close, trusting one another again. And then the Ship was discovered. And in the years since, Bloom had lost her best friend and lover, and the daughter she bore him. She’d lost

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everything because of the Ship; she'd lost everything to it. Her daughter, the light of her life, was gone. Never mind the twelve and a half billion others dead and gone; none of them meant an ounce as much to Bloom as Laura. She'd have traded them all, the Ship and the last members of the Human Race nestled within just to have Laura here, with her. But she never would; Laura was dead and gone and Bloom would never be with her again.

"I truly am sorry, Colonel Bloom," the Sentinel said, "Your passengers are indeed the last members of the Human Race left in the universe. There are other Races out there who are similar to you in many regards, but your Race is unique. For that reason alone you must complete the Exodus. There are several repairs and upgrades that I can perform to your Ship before you leave. This process will only take a few days. With your permission, I'll begin the upgrade immediately."

Bloom nodded her head, still unable to speak, her grief overwhelming.

"Do it," Benedict said, "Get it done."

"It has begun," the Sentinel replied, "And I suspect you'd prefer to be alone right now, so I will leave. If there is anything more I can do, however, you only need call out to me and I'll return."

"Thanks," Benedict uttered, with utter insincerity.



Juan Carlos Rejas was examined and released from the hospital with a clean bill of health. He rode the tram in silence back to the Habitat and locked the door to his apartment behind

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him when he entered. His last conscious memory had been of the mob breaking in to beat him half to death and then throw him from his balcony. The memory of his pleas, of his screams for mercy ignored, fists mashing his face, the bats, the clubs, the kicks, the agony as his bones broke and as his insides burst...the taste of blood in his mouth, the smell of it in his mashed nose...the pain and worst of all the *fear*...then he'd been in a daze, a semiconscious state of pain, hoping only that death would come and terrified of it all at once. And to oblige him, they threw him at long last from his balcony to what should have been his death.

Juan was sitting on his couch, staring at the exact spot on the floor he'd been surrounded and beaten down. Horror and revulsion filled him, but so did other things. After he'd been thrown from the balcony he'd been swallowed up inside of a great void. There had been no real experience for him; just a timeless eternity of nothing. No darkness, no silence, no awareness of self. Juan believed that he understood the mechanics of it: he'd suffered massive head trauma, parts of his brain had been destroyed. But because they'd kept his body alive, Juan had neither been truly dead nor truly alive; no possible escape for his spirit from such a state. When Allison healed him, his first conscious memory was then of rising from some deep oblivion sea, the world growing slowly more distinct. And most of all it was Allison's voice that had called to him, that had summoned him from death.

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Doctor Cole explained what happened to Allison, that somehow she had been *changed* by the Ship. Through whatever had been done to her Allison was able to heal him, to undo the irreparable damage that had been visited on him. He had been restored by her. Juan left the hospital feeling terrified and confused. What had Allison become? What had she done to him? He'd been broken from life, and then called back from death. Again, all he could do is wonder why. Why had she been put through whatever torture the Ship had inflicted on her? He knew enough about medicine and molecular biology to understand what the Ship had done. But Allison had not been *healed*, he understood, so much as she had *survived*. It was not lost on him, then, that she had healed him. Whatever considerable power she now held, Allison *healed* him. Juan Carlos Rejas could not understand why. He wondered what Lazarus must have felt when raised from the dead by Jesus. Had Lazarus ever had memories of death? Did he look upon the world with new, confused eyes as Juan Carlos did, now? *Why am I back?* He wanted to scream. What had happened to him? What had happened to her?

He was awake far into the night, turning over the same questions, the same remembrances. Juan Carlos could practically *sense* the denizens of Habitat asleep. It was so quiet, so still, so dark; it felt as though he were the only one here. It was raining out, but he had the balcony door open wide. The air was fresh, damp, and it brought no comfort with it. It always rained at night on Habitat; it was always bright

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and clear in the day. A perfect, little world. A perfect, little world he no longer felt sure he belonged in. He should have been dead; given the medical reports that Doctor Cole had shown him, Juan Carlos knew he *had* been dead. His brain had been pulped in places. Was he even still truly himself? He wanted to be grateful, but his new life was born from such horror, from utter abomination. He felt as if he were going mad; Juan Carlos needed to distract himself. He got up and went searching for his console tablet.

It lay where he'd left it at the small island counter between the kitchen and living room of his apartment. Several messages – those not filtered out as hate or threat mail – were waiting for his attention. When he read the message header it felt as though his confusion was falling away.

Re: Alien Messianic Artifact.

Sonia Aiziz

I was hoping to catch you live, but I guess you're not available. Juan, I've just finished work translating the religious icon that you found in the Ship's Archives. Enclosed are files that will give you a full report, but allow me to summarize.

The artifact is not actually a religious icon. It is from a civilization that actually pre-dates the founding of the League of Worlds. It's a very interesting culture, but what I've learned about them is only what other races recorded about them is known. Whoever they

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were, these aliens seem to have died out after the Second Wave of Galaxies began.

They were called the Nai'Marak, which when literally translated means Far Seers; apparently because they were able to see through time. I've spoken to a colleague of mine in Alien Studies, Doctor N'bunga, and believe it or not that isn't necessarily as farfetched as it seems. The Nai'Marak's ability was generally limited, except for a few who followed a rigorous discipline from birth designed to give them what was called the Great Sight.

The Far Seers with the Great Sight wrote prophecies about what they saw when they looked into the future. The greatest among them could see millions, even billions of years into the future. They ensured their prophecies survived them by recounting them to the younger Races they came upon. They also created icons from materials meant to survive until the predicted era came to pass. These icons were usually kept secret until close to the time they predicted.

Most of the Nai'Marak prophecies were lost, destroyed in a great war that predated the League of Worlds. But some of their prophecies survived, and all of them, at least those that were known about, were said to have come true.

The statuette you sent to me depicts a woman, or more precisely a female figure, known as the Queen of Light and Sorrow. She is indeed a martyr figure,

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but her martyrdom is not the foundation of a religion, but the beginning of an elaborate prophecy cycle.

The Queen of Light and Sorrow's martyrdom itself is the focus of the first part of the prophecy. According to the text as inscribed around the artifact's base, her martyrdom comes not from her death, but from her being forced by a powerful being into ascending to a state of Godhood.

The Queen of Light and Sorrow is destined, according to the Nai'Marak prophecy, to guide and guard a Race of beings called the Lost Ones through a cataclysmic era known as the Aeons War.

A trademark of Nai'Marak Great Prophecies is something called the Five Signs: five requirements that must be met for the chain of events prophesized to have begun. In the case of the Queen of Light and Sorrow, the signs listed are the deaths of three innocent women, the sacrifice of one at the hands of the Queen, the resurrection of the Queen's Herald from something called the Sleeping Death, the attack of the Death-Soldiers against the Lost Ones, and the arrival of the Lost Ones to the Hidden Sanctuary.

That's as far as I managed to get on the inscription; the writing is dense, and it predates the earliest form of what we call Shiplanguage by millions of years or more.

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Juan shut off his console, rising slowly from the kitchen island. He felt a fluttering in his guts that had nothing to do with fear and everything to do with epiphany. He had to steady himself; he felt suddenly dizzy. He felt wonderful and terrible all at once; his whole life had led him to this point, he knew; he felt the horrifying joy of glimpsing his destiny, of seeing the purpose set out for him by God.



Colonel Margaret Bloom sat in her office. On the other side of the desk were Major Jack Benedict, Commander Nadia Castaneda and Paul Santino. Santino was wearing the single-piece orange jumpsuit of an official prisoner.

“Mister Santino,” Bloom said slowly, desperately fighting to focus on the task at hand, “Commander Castaneda has completed her investigation into the assault and attempted murder of Juan Carlos Rejas, as well as the riot on Habitat. Although you will not be charged in conjunction with the assault against Mister Rejas, you are still going to be charged instigating the riot in which he was attacked.”

“Why aren’t I surprised?” Santino said, wryly.

“Do you deny your involvement in the rally that preceded the riot?” Benedict asked.

“Not at all,” Santino replied, “But if you don’t mind Colonel, I’d like a lawyer present.”

Bloom leaned back in her chair, genuinely shocked.

“A lawyer?” she repeated, “Mister Santino, you are aware that I declared martial law, aren’t you? Right now, your legal rights are only what I fucking *decide* they are. The

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Uniform Code of Military Justice doesn't even have to apply if I don't want it to."

"So what's next? Are you going to shove me out an airlock?"

"Tempting idea," Castaneda piped in.

"Unfortunately, that's not a luxury we have, right now," Bloom said, "You see, Mister Santino, before we left for Hiddek Uhl, we got some very bad news from home. And we got even *more* bad news while we orbited Hiddek Uhl. We came here to the Hub and that's where we got the worst fucking news yet. Major Benedict?"

Benedict stepped forward and activated a console on the wall beside Bloom's desk. The image onscreen was the shaky handheld video shot by David Van Der Draas.

"This, Mister Santino, is the message we received—the *last* message received from Earth," Benedict explained.

When they had finished briefing him on all they had learned about the Nimbus virus, the Zohor and the Exodus, Santino was struck dumb, his horror absolute.

"We couldn't go home even if we wanted to, could we?" he choked, his voice breaking from the tears he fought.

"No," Bloom said, gently, "We have no home left; for all intents and purposes, Earth's been wiped out."

Santino stared down at the floor, focusing on a point somewhere between his feet. He stayed like that for several long moments. Finally, he drew a loud, hitching breath and looked up at Bloom again.

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“Why...tell me all this?”

“I’m telling you all this because I need your help,” Bloom said. It was the truth, but it still left a vile taste in her mouth to say it. “We are all that is left of mankind. As such we have to be united as a people if we are to survive. The declaration of martial law was as necessary as it is unpopular. Despite the fact that a good portion of the population have supported the decision and are cooperating, there are still many sympathetic to you and to the deposed civilian authority.”

“I see,” Santino said.

“The fact is Mister Santino, I am a commander; a damn good one, but I am not a leader; not of a community. You are a natural leader and your past history on Earth *and* aboard the Ship proves that. As far as I’m concerned, we only have one duty: ensuring the survival of the Human Race. We are going to travel the Exodus Route and we are going to pray that we find that there is life out there, somewhere, unaffected by the Nimbus that will be willing to help us. But in order for that mission to succeed we need to work together. In order for that mission to succeed we need to have peace and stability from the civilian population.”

“And that’s where I come in,” Santino said.

“That’s right,” Bloom answered.

Santino stared at the floor again. Bloom tried to count the seconds he spent pondering, but every moment of silence was confounded by the malignant pain she felt, with her daughter’s death a billion light years from here. At last Santino got up and went to stand at the window overlooking Habitat. The sphere

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rotated just a kilometre below. Close enough, it seemed, to touch; close enough to make out movement, however miniscule, of people and buildings and travel pods. It seemed gargantuan. It seemed minuscule. It was all that was left of them, all too great a burden. Santino turned around, facing Bloom, Benedict and Castaneda.

“I’ll do whatever I can to help you lead these people, Colonel,” he said, “And I’ll defer to your authority in all things. I agree with you: the *only* thing that matters is the survival of the Human Race; not my ambition, not anything else.”

Bloom rose from her seat.

“I’ll keep your counsel on how to serve them,” she said, extending her hand, “If you agree to keep my counsel on how to govern them.”

“Agreed,” Santino replied, taking her hand, shaking it. Bloom’s console chimed suddenly and loudly; the sound was a security warning. Bloom returned to her seat, switching on her console as Benedict and Castaneda came around the side of her desk to watch the report.

“Colonel Bloom here, security; go ahead.”

“Lieutenant Baxter, Colonel. We have a situation.”

“I gathered. What’s going on?”

“Outside the main airlock, ma’am; on the gangway leading into the hub. I’m linking you to externals, now.”

Outside the main airlock, an orb of light had appeared. It was a tight ellipse of chaotic gold and yellows taller than it

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was wide. It was shining, rippling and flaring like ball lightning. As Bloom, Benedict, Castaneda and Santino watched, the orb of light began to take shape, resolving itself into a vaguely Human form. The glow began to fade as they watched, until the thing before them seemed to be made of raw light contained in a taut, luminous skin.

“Is that...is that the Sentinel?” Santino asked, stammering.

“No,” Benedict said, “I don’t know what that is.”

As if in response to their comments, Lieutenant Baxter came back on-line:

“Colonel, communications reports contact sent by the alien.”

There was that word: *Alien*. Bringing with it fear and mystery, threat and hope.

“Let’s hear it,” Bloom said.

The sound issued from Bloom’s console speakers like a burst of static: electrical, screeching, vibrant and crackling. The words spoken seemed more modulated than vocalized, but the message was undeniably clear:

“We are the Nai’Marak. We are here for Colonel Margaret Bloom.”

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The appearance of a new, evolved Being of Power in the Universe almost never goes unnoticed. Their very nature attracts one Power to another and it is often the eldest Powers that seek out the youngest, when they first emerge.

FIFTEEN
THE NAI'MARAK

Bloom and Benedict entered Security Command just behind Castaneda.

“Bax, what do we know about that thing?” Castaneda asked. She stood with the Colonel, directly behind Baxter’s chair, studying his console screen.

“Whatever it is it’s reading as mostly energy,” he said, “Some kind of inorganic membrane’s encasing it.”

Bloom turned to Benedict, who was standing behind her.

“Lieutenant Baxter,” Benedict said, “Send an image of the...being...to Alien Studies. Have them cross reference its image with the Ship’s database, as well as the phonetic value of its...name, if that’s what it was.”

“Yeah...the Anorak?” Bloom asked.

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“Uh, the Nai’Marak, Colonel,” Baxter said, unsteadily, “I’m contacting Alien Studies, now.”

There was another burst of static from the comm. Systems and the Nai’Marak spoke again:

“We are the Nai’Marak. We are here for Colonel Margaret Bloom. We will speak only with her.”

Bloom turned again to Benedict.

“What in the fuck does that thing want with me?”

Benedict shrugged.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” he said, “The best way to find out might be to ask.”

“Not before I can make a proper threat assessment,” Castaneda protested.

“Commander, how much more threatening is that thing likely to get, if we keep it waiting?” Bloom asked, “How do you like being kept on hold?”

Castaneda glowered.

“Bax, get a commlink outside,” she said.

“Communications, Security,” Baxter said into his headset, “Patch a speakerphone to the...” he looked at Castaneda for advice.

“The Nai’Marak,” Castaneda said.

“Patch a speakerphone to the Nai’Marak.”

A moment later Lieutenant Kalenga’s voice came over the speakers:

“Commlink established. You can go ahead.”

Bloom cleared her throat.

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“This is Colonel Margaret Bloom,” she said, “What business do you have with me?”

“You are the master of the ship aboard which the *Shekhina* travels,” the Nai’Marak said, “This is the appointed place and the appointed time. We have come to bear witness to the coming of the *Shekhina*.”

Benedict muted the commlink.

“Mister Baxter, get Linguistics and Alien Studies patched in,” he said, “Tell them to reference the term *Shekhina* with the Nai’Marak and see what they come up with.”

“There’s no need,” Bloom said, mystified, “*Shekhina*’s not an Alien word; it’s Hebrew. In the Talmud, it refers to the Feminine aspects of the spirit of Almighty God.”



Aboard the Ship were numerous means of transmitting information besides the Ship’s Grid network which carried a news service, entertainment programming and general interest Grid sites. There were forums and chat systems, moderated call-in programming and even Speaker’s Corners, where people could either record messages for general Gridcast, or address those who came to the Corners to listen.

It was to the Speaker’s Corner in the heart of the Ship’s Commercial District that Juan went following his epiphany. He arrived in the mid-afternoon, just as lunch-time crowds were leaving the restaurants for a spot of shopping, or heading back to work. The decks of the Commercial District were vast; Modeled to resemble an outdoor cityscape, the buildings of the

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District were built well away from the bulkhead walls of the deck, and the ceiling was hundreds of meters overhead. Like the sphere surrounding Habitat, the walls and ceilings of the Commercial District projected an artificial sky, giving the impression of giant outdoor markets. The District was laid out on a grid, with tram lines running up and down between blocks of buildings, an analogue of city streets.

The buildings of the District ranged from two or three-level commercial structures to sprawling, single-level plazas. Plants and statuary both Human and Alien decorated the whole. Overhead walkways, elaborate fountains and small agoras where people came to sit and talk or listen to musicians or street performers were scattered regularly through the District. Buskers thrived in the Ship's Commercial District; street musicians, magicians, performing troupes of actors and acrobats spent their days entertaining the shoppers and on-break workers of the district, creating an idyllic atmosphere that had not existed on Earth in a very long time.

The Speaker's Corner at the heart of the District was in one such agora; a simple sunken square with two walls of wide, descending steps and two high walls guarded by a small and elaborate garden overhead. Nearby two of the District's main tram lines intersected. Juan found a free space in the square. His face had been featured on the news streams over the Ship's grid so often since Allison had been discovered that he had no fear of not gathering a crowd. Already some of the people who

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had been idly watching other buskers in the square were turning to watch him as he walked up towards the steps, facing them expectantly with his arms crossed behind his back.

People gathered, sitting on the steps in front of him. He heard the curious whispering and his name being repeated. He heard others talking about the riot that had put him in a coma and most importantly his miraculous recovery. When the crowd reached what Juan Carlos considered an appropriate size he raised his hands over his head to command silence. Then as he lowered his hands Juan began to speak.

I am Juan Carlos Rejas. All I can tell you is what I know. You know better the why and how than I; the attack was over too fast for me to remember it all. I was beaten and thrown from my window. I was dead; as good as dead or worse. They didn't know what else to do with me, so they left me on life support.

Benedict looked at his commander as she paused the video. She sipped from her coffee and sighed.

“Is this relevant to our current, Major?”

Benedict nodded.

“Keep watching, Colonel; I think you'll think it is.”

Bloom shrugged and toggled the playback to resume.

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Juan Carlos Rejas

Then there is nothing. I don't know how else to describe it. I was not alive, I was not dead, was nowhere. Then I heard a voice; HER voice. She called me, telling me to come back. And then I woke up.

I was healthy; I was healed. But brought back from darkness, all I could wonder, was why? That first night back in the world I sat alone in my home, in the dark. I felt as though I were somehow a stranger here, in this life. As if the walls could be pulled back to reveal something I cannot define. The whole night I was lost like this, feeling like a prisoner in life and I did not understand why.

Then I discovered something...I learned a truth about this world that I had never imagined. All of what we are living through now has been foretold; it has been written down in prophecy since before Humankind evolved.

There was an ancient Race called the Nai'Marak. They existed billions of years ago...and they could perceive time as we cannot; they could see into the future, far into the future. The greatest of them were even able to see into *our* future.

The greatest of them saw the very events that we are living through now; this far-seer witnessed everything that has happened since the Ship went to Earth millions of years ago. And everything that this great Nai'Marak saw was written down for us; everything

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that has happened to us since we discovered the Ship and everything that has not yet come to pass.

There are great things coming for us all; events both wonderful and terrible will happen. But we are to be saved; we are to prosper and we will be protected. The Nai'Marak saw and named the one who will protect us, the one who will remember us: she is called the Queen of Light and Sorrow, and she walks among us aboard the Ship.

Bloom and Benedict rode the lift up to the Pyramid.

"I want you to wait inside the Pyramid," Bloom said.

"Colonel, I'm not so sure that's a good idea."

"The Nai'Marak said it wanted to talk to me," Bloom said, "Until we know more about what this thing is and what it wants, I don't want to risk doing anything it could misconstrue."

"Alien Studies is still searching the database for references to the Nai'Marak," Benedict said, "But if it's a proper personal name instead of the name of its race or creed..."

"Fuck Alien Studies, Exo; I want to talk to this Juan Rejas. He seems to know a hell of a lot more about what's going on right now than they do."

"Roger that. I have a few questions of my own for him."

"Good; if something happens to me, then you'll at least be able to pick up where I'm leaving off."

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Benedict made a wry face.

“Like I want to be in charge of this shit-storm? Don’t you dare fucking die and put me in charge. Colonel.”

Bloom actually laughed. Neither of them remembered the last time *that* had happened.

“Roger *that*, Exo,” she said, “Roger that.”

Bloom stepped from the Pyramid, back into the long, blue hallway of the Hub. The smell of ozone filled her nostrils; overpowering. The air was alive with the hiss and crackle of energy, and before her the Nai’Marak stood waiting. It was taller than her, vaguely humanoid in shape. There was a texture to its form, but the light was so bright from it that she couldn’t stare at it for long. Bloom carefully removed a pair of sunglasses from her jacket pocket and put them on. She took tentative steps forward, the hairs on her arms and the back of her head standing up as the air sizzled and hissed.

“Welcome, Colonel Bloom,” The Nai’Marak said, its voice like the sear of sparks in an electrical fire.

“Hello,” Bloom said, fighting fear and apprehension as the Nai’Marak moved toward her.

“Have no fear of our form or presence. You will not be exposed to the force inside of us. The membrane covering us will insulate you from our true form.”

“Then let me offer you my hand in friendship,” Bloom said, “As is our custom.”

She extended her arm at the elbow, the fingers of her hand pointed outwards, thumb skyward. The Nai’Marak reached to

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grasp her hand, but its arm moved more like the pseudopod of an amoeba. It had no hand to speak of, so hers was enveloped by the membrane. Bloom shook the Nai'Marak's hand. She felt a strange tingling sensation spread partway up her arm. When the Nai'Marak released her she felt a small shock, as if she'd touched a bit of metal after walking on carpet.

"Nai'Marak, you said that you're here for the Shekhina," Bloom said, "I'm afraid that I don't understand. Who...what is the Shekhina? Why do you think that the Shekhina is aboard the Ship?"

"We have waited here for aeons," the Nai'Marak replied, "For it was revealed to us that it would be from here that She would emerge, from a lost Ship from a forgotten world. Thus, it has been here that we have remained, watching as the universe was emptied of life, by attrition, by evolution, by exodus, by extinction and by annihilation. We have waited here long after the last the League Races and their allies had fled or died. Long after that time, ships continued to arrive, to depart. We knew that the Shekhina was not among them. For all the ships docked here, a thousand others moved on. For all the ships that came and went we waited, sure in our knowledge that She was not yet here."

"But there must be...millions of ships here,"

"Billions," the Nai'Marak replied, "Billions more beyond counting came to the Hub; billions more went on, billions remained here, empty, abandoned. Billions had to be destroyed, for they were infected by the Nimbus."

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Bloom staggered back a few steps at the casual way the Nai'Marak discussed such an epic loss of life.

“How many were killed because they were infected?” she asked.

“As many as were infected,” the Nai'Marak said, “You are horrified because you put the purge in terms of genocide. But you do not understand that the genocide occurred when the Nimbus consumed those beings.”

“Why did the Nimbus come here? Surely they--”

“It,” the Nai'Marak said, “You must never think of it as more than one being.”

“Why did...it...come here? It must have known how well defended the Hub was.”

“It came because it knew no other way to learn the path of Exodus. And it failed at this; the Nimbus never learned where the Races went.”

“Do *you* know?” Bloom asked, “Do you know where they went? Where the Exodus leads?”

“No,” the Nai'Marak answered, “It is not our fate to travel the way of the Exodus. It is our fate to bear witness to the Shekhina's coming and then to prepare for the end of our own Path and Purpose.”

“The Shekhina...You never explained why you think she's aboard the Ship.”

“We sensed her presence,” the Nai'Marak replied, “She is a power unlike any we have witnessed since the last of the Ancients went beyond. Even your own religions recognized her, millennia before she was born: The word is feminine, from

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the root shakan, meaning to inhabit. It is used to describe the spirit of God as it walks the Earth. In the texts of Isaiah and in Zechariah the Shekhina is mentioned in conjunction with the advent of the Meshiach. Commonly, the Shekhina refers to the female embodiment of God.”

“Okay,” Bloom said, “You know Judaism better than I do.”

“Yes. And we know also that the Shekhina is a passenger in your care.”

Realization dawned for Bloom. She felt a mix of disgust at her own obtuseness and horror at the realization of what the Nai’Marak was implying.

“You mean Allison McQuire,” she said.



Juan arrived home late that night. He’d spent nearly a full day at Speaker’s Corner, telling and retelling his tale, reading from the Prophecies of the Nai’Marak and discussing the texts with his audience. His voice was raw from the constant speaking and he was tired. There had been hecklers whom he’d first shouted down, but as the people listening to him warmed to his message, they began to shout down his detractors before he could.

When Juan stopped to eat something and have a much-needed drink of water, it was members of his audience who rushed off to get him food and drink while their friends stayed to talk with him. They asked him about his background and how he had come to be aboard the Ship; how he’d met Allison

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McQuire. He answered fully and truthfully, speaking candidly about how he'd been involved with the United Trinity Observants until shortly before the Night of Blood; how he'd been the only person from his town on the island of San Andres, Columbia to be "Ticketed" for Shipflight. Juan told them what happened between him and Allison. For the first time in his life, Juan felt no shame for his past and he understood how even the mistakes he'd made helped him here, now, with his mission. For everything he had survived and experienced had led him here, now. The people asked when he was going to speak again, for they wanted time to invite others to come and listen.

By the time he'd finished speaking that first day, the crowd had swelled until the whole square and part of the walkways around was a mass of bodies. Juan actually saw security officers present, making sure that the large crowd behaved in an orderly fashion. It took an hour from the time he'd finished speaking for the people to finally let him leave; knots of people kept clustering around him, asking him question after question after question. It was finally security who came to his rescue, telling everyone to let him go home.

Back home at last Juan felt more than a little ready for bed. But his console's linx light was flashing. He had hundreds of messages waiting, both text and video, all from people wanting to know more about Allison McQuire and the Prophecies of the Queen of Light and Sorrow. Despite the

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exhaustion, Juan was more than encouraged. He was truly Allison's Herald; he would bring her people to her.



It was a morning of surprises throughout the Ship. As the sky over Habitat began to lighten, Bloom was just finishing her post-run shower, replaying her encounter with the Nai'Marak the day before. She finished dressing and went to the kitchen for a cup of coffee. She checked her linx as she waited for the coffee to brew. Two messages were most pressing: Paul Santino saying he'd worked out the best way to announce the Exodus to the populace, asking for a meeting to discuss it with her, face to face. The second message was from Benedict:

"Colonel, we'll bring Rejas to you this morning; Castaneda has had people monitoring him since last night; he's also pretty much all anyone's been talking about since his little speech. Well, him and the girl. Also, Doctor Aiziz translated the initial prophecy about this Queen, as well as several of the subsequent prophecies, already. She prepared the translations and a detailed summary several days prior to the riot on Habitat; the documents had been prepared at the request of Juan Carlos Rejas."

Sipping her coffee, Bloom shook her head.

"Why the fuck am I even surprised?"



When Doctor Cole reached the isolated level of the hospital housing Allison McQuire, she found a crowd of people in the wing. They sat in the lounge, stood in the corridor or

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simply sat on the floor the length and breadth of the hallway between Allison's suite and the elevators. The worst throng of people were congested at the nurse's station.

"My God, what the bloody Hell is going on?" she exclaimed.

The duty nurse replied.

"They started showing up late last night," she said, "Before my shift began. They refuse to leave until they've seen Allison McQuire, and rightfully she's refusing to see any of them!"

"And have you actually bothered to call security or just toyed with the idea?" Cole demanded, furiously.

"Yes, Doctor. They came and ordered everyone to leave. Forced them to leave really, or tried to; they kept coming back, refusing to leave. The duty officer for Security decided that in the interests of peace and security at the hospital that as long as these people aren't creating a disturbance or interfering with regular procedure that they could remain. When we told them this, they agreed to cooperate."

Incredulously she looked at the milling throng. Some looked bored, some were talking animatedly, fervently; others just stared at her.

"Can someone tell me what fucking good Martial Law is if you have to put up with this bollocks?"



Juan Carlos Rejas had planned to go to the archives to further research the Nai'Marak prophecies centring around the

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Queen of Light and Sorrow. But when he stepped into the hallway outside his apartment, there were dozens of men and women waiting for him. At first the sight of all those people frightened him, harkening back to the riot that had nearly ended his life. But some of them started calling his name, and others started calling him “teacher”.

“What?” he asked of them, “What do you want?”

“We want to more about the Prophecy,” a young man said, “We want to know more about Allison McQuire; about the Queen of Light and Sorrow.”

“I’ll be in Speaker’s Corner this afternoon,” Juan said, “This morning I have research I must do. There is still much that I myself don’t yet understand.”

“But is she really the woman mentioned in the Prophecy?” someone called.

“Is there a relationship between our religions and the Prophecy?” someone else asked.

“I haven’t had the chance to--”

But Juan wasn’t even afforded the chance to finish his statement. Commander Castaneda, accompanied by two security officers, came down the hall.

“Juan Carlos Rejas,” Castaneda said, “Come with us, please.”

“Am I under arrest again, Commander Castaneda?” Juan asked, concerned about the suddenly threatening faces worn by those who’d been waiting outside his door.

“No,” Castaneda said, “But Colonel Bloom wants to meet with you.”

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“What about?”

“She told me to say that it’s about the Queen of Light and Sorrow.”



Once, a couple of years before the Ship had been discovered, Juan had had the opportunity to meet with the founder of his adopted religion, the Church of the United Trinity Observants. It had been in the Church’s South American headquarters in Lima, Peru. Juan at the time, worked with Alejandro Reynaldo. Reynaldo had been recently appointed to the rank of Apostle, a high office in the Church of the United Trinity. Juan remembered the meeting for several reasons: Gabriel Ashe, speaking to him in halting Spanish about his future with the Church seemed so much smaller as he sat behind a large oak desk flanked by his Apostles. Juan also remembered was the heavily armed guards. Though they were dressed in parochial vestments in the white, purple and green of the United Trinity Observants, the weapons slung across their shoulders, strapped to their hips and belted at their waists made them look more like avenging Angels than men of God. The guards were everywhere: flanking Gabriel Ashe, guarding the door into the office where he had waited, the hallway leading to the office, the elevator, the compound, both inside the walls and out.

The stage was set now with different players, but the scene was still the same. Colonel Bloom occupied the role behind the desk, and she was flanked not by the Acolytes and

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Apostles of the United Trinity Observants, but by Major Benedict, and Doctor Sonia Aiziz. Peter Paulson and Commander Castaneda played the supporting roles in this surreal drama. And this time instead of the purple, green and white of the United Trinity, it was the gold and black of the Shipflight that garnished the uniforms. Juan sat down in front of Bloom, the desk between them. His heart pounded, and not for no reason. Colonel Margaret Bloom, unlike Gabriel Ashe, did not seem small behind her desk. Instead the commander of Shipflight and reigning leader of what had become a military dictatorship wore the majesty and burden of her office like a mantel.

“Am I...” Juan stammered, “Am I in some sort of trouble?”

“No, Mister Rejas,” Bloom answered, “Not in the least. You’re here because you have a very particular perspective about a very particular alien text.”

“Doctor Aiziz is the one who translated it,” Juan said. Bloom suspected his humility had more to do with not wanting to be held accountable for the knowledge he possessed.

“Yes, I did,” Aiziz replied, “But you and you alone made the connection between the alien text and Allison McQuire.”

Bloom continued: “And you spent most of the day yesterday telling anyone who would listen all about it,”

Commander Castaneda made a sound of disapproval.

“What’s wrong with doing this?” Juan asked.

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“Nothing, Mister Rejas,” Bloom said, “Except that the connection you made between the Prophecy of the Queen of Light and Sorrow and Allison McQuire is the same connection that was made by an alien being that visited us yesterday.”

“What?”

Bloom proceeded to tell Juan about the Nai’Marak’s appearance the day before, and its pronouncements about the Prophecy. When she was done, Juan leaned back in his chair, exhaling softly.

“The Nai’Marak called her the *Shekhina*?” he asked.

“Yes,” Aiziz said, “And after the Colonel briefed me, I spent the night researching and translating the rest of the Nai’Marak prophecy cycle about the Queen of Light and Sorrow.”

“What did you find out?” Juan asked.

“A great deal more than I expected,” Aiziz said, “The Queen of Light and Sorrow is central to most of the latter Prophecies written by the Far Seers; as she was represented, the Queen of Light and Sorrow became something of an obsession for them, it seems.”

“I don’t understand why I’m here,” Juan said.

“The Nai’Marak wants to meet her,” Bloom explained, “And by your actions since returning from the dead—or near dead, whatever the case may be, you’ve become the Ship’s resident expert on the subject. Juan, we want you to speak with the Nai’Marak. We want you to act as our go-between.”

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“You consent to the meeting between the Nai’Marak and Allison?”

“Only if Allison does,” Bloom said, “You seem to have a connection to her. You’re the best person for the job. I’ll arrange for you to meet the Nai’Marak. Then, you can talk to Allison.”

“I’d like to read more of the translated prophecies.”

“I thought you might,” Bloom said. She nodded to Aiziz, who gave Juan an optic data slip.

“That’s everything I’ve had translated so far,” she said, “I haven’t read all of it in depth; what I have read, though...” she shook her head.

“Thank you,” Juan said.



Bloom met with Doctor Cole and Commander Castaneda later that afternoon. Bloom and Castaneda met Cole in her office in the hospital’s administration wing.

“Medical mystery, alien prophecy, public hysteria and religious zealotry,” Cole said, “I wonder if it’s even possible to make sense of it all?”

“You still don’t know just how it is she healed Juan Carlos Rejas?” Bloom asked. Cole shook her head.

“Afraid not, Colonel,” the Doctor said, “Frankly, I’m not sure that I want to. I’ve never seen anything so terrifying in all my life. The boy lay on the bed, and he kept flickering in and out of...it was as though...he...it was...” Cole shook her head as she let her words trail off.

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“The girl has the power to kill or the power to cure,” Castaneda said, coolly, “And it seems that she’s learning to harness those powers. Are we sure that we want to *let* the Nai’Marak have access to her?”

In her room, Allison woke with a start. She had found that it was far easier to sleep than it was to stay awake and fight the jumble of noise and voices in her head. Since healing Juan, Allison had found that many of the voices were louder, clearer...some of them were even focused on her. Allison was angry, enraged, by Juan’s impetuosity. How dare he elevate her to divine status? The reverence he sought to bestow upon her was nothing that Allison wanted. She knew that soon he would be coming here to visit her. When he did, she would make him regret his ministry. When he did, she meant to prove to him that what he was doing was a blasphemy. Allison was not a god, and she had no desire to be worshipped as one. But if Juan Carlos Rejas had his way she would be. Already many were talking about her because of him. The more that talked about her, the louder the voices in her mind became. Had it been the voices that woke her? More deluded supplicants praying to her as though she were a God? No; the voices were talking *about* her, not at her. She knew the voices...Laura’s mother...Doctor Cole...the Security Chief, Nadia Castaneda. Allison extended her mind, reaching them to better hear what they were saying.

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“...not, Colonel. Frankly, I’m not sure that I want to. I’ve never seen anything so terrifying in all my life. The boy lay on the bed, and he kept flickering in and out of...it was as though...he...it was...”

Allison smiled to herself. She understood what had frightened Simone Cole. When she had healed Juan Carlos, she had not merely been reshaping his body. It was, she knew, his reality that she had been transforming. And yet, she understood less of what she had done than anyone: Allison had known *how* to fix Juan Carlos, but she had no idea *why* what she had done had worked.

She could see Doctor Cole’s office if she closed her eyes: Cole sat behind her desk; it was an antique mahogany construct that could trace itself back generations to a British Prime Minister from whom Cole was descended. The desk and the bookshelves behind her were meticulously neat; the console on the left of her desk open and showing a few active files. Bloom and Castaneda sat in chairs facing the Doctor; Castaneda sitting so straight and at attention that she might as well have been standing. Bloom leaned to one side, her legs outstretched and crossed at the ankles.

“The girl has the power to kill or the power to cure,” Castaneda said, “And it seems that she’s learning to harness those powers. Are we sure that we want to let the Nai’Marak have access to her?”

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Allison found that Bloom's mind to have the strongest reaction to the name Nai'Marak. She pulled the experiences from Bloom's mind, making them her own.

"I've discussed the Prophecies the Nai'Marak refers to with both Doctor Aiziz and Juan Rejas," Bloom said, "Frankly, the Nai'Marak might have insight into how we can...handle...the situation and control Allison."

"Control me?" Allison murmured, not believing what she was hearing.

"This whole mission's gone mad," Castaneda said, "We're trapped aboard an alien ship, charting a course outside the known fucking universe; we've got a girl who's going Gary Mitchell on us locked up in our hospital and an alien being that can see into the future hanging about outside."

"Commander, I share your frustrations; believe me," Bloom said, "But the fact is that this is the situation we find ourselves in; bitching won't change a thing. The only thing we can do is our best to get everyone through it in one piece."

"And that, Colonel, is precisely why I'm opposed to Allison and the Nai'Marak meeting." Castaneda said, decisively.

Allison withdrew her mind from their conversation. She had no further interest in what they were discussing. As far as she was concerned, if the Nai'Marak had prophesied all that had happened to her then it was as much to blame as the Ship for what she was going through. She also knew that

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whatever Laura's mother decided, that if Allison chose to meet this Nai'Marak, nothing could stop it from happening. The time was coming when Margaret Bloom would learn that Allison was not hers to control. Likewise, Allison was not the Ship's to control, the Nai'Marak's or anyone else's.

Allison stretched her mind out, beyond Habitat and up, narrowing her focus to a single point and propelling it away from the Ship and into the Hub. She felt the eternal loneliness, the sheer, immense emptiness of this place; even its ghosts had long since moved on, leaving nothing but empty slumbering ships and the Hub's Sentinel to watch and wait. But there was one other here; one who had been waiting here almost as long as the Hub had been serving its mission. Though she could sense the Nai'Marak's presence, Allison could not localize it. She realized that its consciousness was as detached from the physical as was hers. More so, because she could still trace a direct route back to her physical body; the Nai'Marak had no body to speak of. The Nai'Marak, she understood, was pure thought and had no physical form. What Bloom had experienced, what the observation cameras had shown, was only the physical expression of pure thought: limitless energy bound only by will.

"Can you hear me?" she called into the emptiness with her mind, "Nai'Marak, I am here."

She tried to expand her own consciousness to fill the Hub, to impose her mind into every millimetre of the planet-sized, abandoned space station. But there was too much detail, too

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many fragments of thought still cluttering its many decks, all of them alien to her. Allison retracted herself, focusing instead on a single place in the Hub: the corridor that ran between the Ship and the chamber prepared for Bloom by the Sentinel.

“Where are you?” she called again, “I am here; where are you?”

The presence itself answered her from everywhere in the Hub at once.

We are here, the words exploded into her mind. And suddenly Allison felt surrounded, watched, trapped.

We are here and we can hear you.

Allison couldn't even fight the incredible power that held her and beheld her. She was acutely aware of an intelligence far greater than hers, far greater than anything she had previously experienced; it wasn't ancient, because such a word had no meaning for the Nai'Marak. Allison could not fathom how old it was; the universe could scarcely be older. She knew that the Nai'Marak had so long ago stopped measuring time as she understood it that it had no longer any need to conceive of age. Allison felt as though she were a pebble, a mote of sand teetering on the precipice of an abyss, a void waiting all around her to swallow her.

Why do you seek us out? The Nai'Marak demanded from inside her mind.

“Why have you been waiting here for me?” Allison countered, “What do you want from me?”

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You know of the prophecy. You have gleaned it from their minds already.

“I don’t believe in it.”

You should.

“Why?”

Because we foresaw it. We are the last of the Nai’Marak; the first and the last of the Far Seers. It was you we saw so long ago...Since long before your world formed, we have known your name, your face. We have even seen this moment and those to come long after it. You misunderstand us to believe we do not measure time; we measure it but are no longer bound by it. For us there is no past, no present, no future; even what your kind will soon discover as alternate reality does not exist for us. While you experience time as a line from past to the future, we perceive time as points of perspective; where in time we are is merely a matter of where in time we wish to be.

“You say all that and I don’t believe any of it.”

Why?

“You tell me that there’s no past, no present, no future; that you can go anywhere in time; presumably anywhere in space as well. And then you turn around and tell me that my fate is sealed; that I have no choice in what’s to come. Well if time’s not linear, if time’s only perceived that way, then you can no more see my destiny than I can grow old and die.”

The Prophecies of the Nai’Marak are never wrong.

“Then what are you saying? That no matter what I do, the Prophecies will come to pass?”

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Yes. Time is not linear. Both future and past can be changed. The choice is yours to accept or reject your destiny. But you will choose to accept it. You have already chosen to accept it. You have always chosen to accept it. Yours is a path that neither begins nor ends, for in time there is neither a beginning nor an end. You are the Queen of Light and Sorrow. You can no more change that than you could change the circumstances of your birth. The Prophecies will be fulfilled; the Prophecies have always been fulfilled.

“I reject your prophecy,” Allison spat, “I refuse your plan for me, I deny the fate you would have me surrender to. I’ll do nothing that you’ve foreseen. Fuck you and fuck your prophecies!”

That is your choice to make. You have chosen to reject your destiny. You have always chosen to reject it and you will always choose to reject it. The Prophecies will be fulfilled; the Prophecies have always been fulfilled.

“Fulfill this!” Allison screamed. She lashed out, turning her pain, her fear and most of all her anger into a tangible force that she threw out in an orb of deadly intent. She would obliterate the Nai’Marak; she would expel his energies across the infinite void.

You are not yet powerful enough to harm us. When you are, we will already be no more. But we have experienced your pain; we lived through it even as you lived through it. We lived through your suffering before you were born, for when the Nai’Marak see far, we see all that is to be seen, all that can be seen.

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“I want you to suffer forever.”

We know. But we already suffer from a pain you cannot understand, for we are the last of our kind. The rest of the Nai'Marak are lost.

“I won't be made into a victim of your fate.”

You are the Queen of Light and Sorrow. You cannot change this. You are not a victim of fate but of existence. Nothing that exists can change that it is marked in time. No being can change that it marks time. You exist therefore you are the Queen of Light and Sorrow. No matter what you decide, no matter how you choose to mark time, this will never change. You were the Queen of Light and Sorrow before the Ship transformed you; drinking hot chocolate with your father one snowy morning in rural Alberta, you were still the Queen of Light and Sorrow. You were the Queen of Light and Sorrow before your species' earliest progenitors survived the meteor impact that obliterated the Dinosaurs and with them the Hthaask. An unbroken chain of events links you to your fate. That chain stretches back to the creation of the universe and stretches on to its end. You are the product of aeons of action and reaction. You are the Queen of Light and Sorrow. Until you have accepted your true self there can be no further discussion. We will not speak with you again until you are ready.

And Allison snapped back into herself, in her rooms, in the Ship's hospital. She was sitting in the same chair she'd been in when she went in search of the Nai'Marak with her

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mind. It was as though no time had passed; as though she'd dozed off and just woken up from a vivid dream. But it had been no dream, Allison knew; she also knew she would get no more answers from the Nai'Marak.



The next morning, Juan Carlos Rejas met with Colonel Bloom. Once again, Major Benedict and Peter Paulson were there. Juan was bleary-eyed and obviously tired.

"Good morning, Mister Rejas," Bloom said, "I take it you had a productive, if restless night?"

Juan nodded.

"I read the translations Doctor Aiziz provided me," he said, "And did some translation of my own. The prophecies are extensive, Colonel; so much so that the best I can give you right now is a summary: According to the prophecy cycle, a great war called the Aeons War would devastate the universe; a war between two enemies: one who wanted to consume life, known as the Dark Cloud, another who wanted to destroy life, referred to as the Death Soldiers."

Bloom and Benedict shared an uncomfortable, knowing look.

"Go on," Bloom said, hesitantly.

"The war would be fought to a stalemate, with the civilizations both sides were after fleeing and vanishing into the deep black. The advent of the Queen of Light and Sorrow will herald the rebirth of the Aeons War. The Death Soldiers will come after the Queen and the people she leads, called the Lost Ones, nearly destroying them. But the Queen of Light

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and Sorrow will claim her crown and her victory against this enemy, before she and her people reach their new home.”

Bloom stared at the surface of her desk a long moment, absorbing, trying to make sense of what Juan Carlos was saying.

“Continue,” she encouraged.

“The Lost Ones will live in safety for a time; but the prophecy says that the Death Soldiers will find them. Here’s where I had problems with the prophecy: it speaks of the Queen vanishing, sleeping, hiding...I’m not sure which. All that I do know is that she is supposed to return in the hour of her people’s greatest need, just ahead of a...champion who will fight across time to protect the Queen of Light and Sorrow and her people against the Death Soldiers and then against the Dark Cloud.”

“What the Hell is any of that supposed to mean?” Benedict asked, irritably.

Juan shook his head.

“That is the problem with prophecy, Major,” he said, “All too often it’s impossible to guess at its true meaning until it is too late.”

“Then let me propose a solution,” Bloom said, “We have the fucking author of these Prophecies right outside. Let’s ask the Nai’Marak what the Hell he was talking about.”



Juan could scarcely believe the view from the lift car leading up to the Pyramid. He looked out over the airframe and inner hull, watching with his mouth agape as they

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ascended above a cityscape of structures along the inside of the Ship. When they reached the Hub, Bloom led him out into the hallway.

“Nai’Marak,” she called, “I’m back. I’ve come with Juan Carlos Rejas, a young man who knows the Shekhina. We have some questions we need answered before we--”

“We know who you have brought before us,” the Nai’Marak said, simply appearing in the air before them, “But we have no need to speak with the Queen’s Herald or to answer your questions. You do not understand the Prophecies. And yet all you need to know you have already read. Open to the future foretold and all shall be revealed. We have no need to remain here any further. Last night the Queen revealed herself to us. We are satisfied that we have met the Queen of Light and Sorrow. We are satisfied that what we have seen will now come to pass. The circle is complete and the Purpose will be served by the Machine.”

“What is the Purpose?” Juan asked.

“The Purpose is what it always has been,” the Nai’Marak said, “What it always will be: the Purpose is Life. Life serves the Machine. The Machine serves the Purpose.”

“We need answers, Nai’Marak,” Bloom growled.

“You have them if you but try to understand the Prophecies we have given you. Farewell, Colonel Bloom. Though we will meet with the Queen of Light and Sorrow and with her Herald again, we are never again destined to speak with you.”

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Fear and confusion swept through Bloom at the Nai'Marak's parting words. A moment after it spoke, the Nai'Marak was gone.



Bloom and Santino entered the Communications Deck together. They were greeted by Major Benedict and Captain Decker. Lieutenant Kalenga himself sat at the main communications console.

"Captain Decker," Bloom said, shaking his hand, "Thank you for taking the time to be here. As Shipflight Mission Commander I feel it's important you witness this firsthand."

"The honour's mine, Colonel," Decker said, "The burden of what's to come belongs to both of us, however."

Bloom nodded.

"Lieutenant Kalenga," Decker called, turning around to face the Comm Deck's main display, "Shipwide emergency announcement, please. Full holographics."

"Full holographics, aye," Kalenga replied, "Skyline override."

Bloom and Santino followed Kalenga as he led them to a round dais. It was walled off two thirds of the way around by a shimmering silver substance that seemed to move ever so slightly.

"This is the imaging booth," Kalenga explained, "It will project your holographic likenesses into the sky around Habitat, as well as to special broadcast terminals throughout the habitable decks."

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“For the record I’ve always preferred console-top micro cams,” Santino said.

Bloom grinned wryly. She didn’t like Santino, but she had to admit that he could be funny.

“Attention, attention,” Kalenga said into a microphone, after returning to the main console, “This is an emergency broadcast. Please stand by for an important message from Colonel Margaret Bloom and Governor Paul Santino.”

Bloom and Santino appeared in full three-dimension from the shoulders up on every console screen aboard the Ship. In the sky over Habitat they loomed like gods. It was a frightening thought to both Bloom and Santino; despite their divergent views they were both frightened for the same reason: the image of totalitarian control was complete and absolute with them appearing in the sky.

“Two days ago we arrived here at the Hub,” Bloom said, her voice echoing throughout the Ship, “We came here following directives left by the League of Worlds to all those who came after them. Here we began to download what we believe to be the navigational data that will guide us along a trail through space to find those surviving races of the League of Worlds.

“Millions of years ago, the League of Worlds ordered the complete evacuation of their interstellar territories, which comprises the Local Galactic Cluster that’s home to the Milky Way, and to Earth. The evacuation was ordered because of a deadly threat that ranged across the League worlds. The threat

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came from two sources: A race of deadly machines called the Zohor, determined to wipe out everything they found, and from a spaceborn plague decimating entire worlds. That plague was known as the Nimbus. We have received credible information that the Nimbus has already reached Earth. What this means...what this means is that we cannot return home; for all intents and purposes, the Earth is now a dead world.”

Bloom had to stop talking; her thoughts were turning back to Laura and all she loved. Laura had opted to stay behind, to remain on Earth...now she was dead. It was Santino who took up the thread and continued speaking:

“Colonel Bloom and I have declared tomorrow a Shipwide day of mourning,” he said, “So that we may all share in the opportunity to grieve for and remember those that we left behind, those who are now dead. Ceremonies will be held throughout the day at all places of worship and all consecrated spaces. Non-Denominational gatherings will take place at all public meeting places, including Echohawk Park and the Central Commerce Speaker’s Corner.”

“We owe it to those we’ve lost to continue forward,” Bloom said, “We will stay the course and the day after tomorrow we will depart on the Exodus Trail and follow the races of the League of Worlds. We hope to eventually find them and take our place among our fellow explorers, to establish a home on a new world so that Mankind will once more thrive. But now is the time to grieve, to contemplate and to remember everything we have lost. Today we are united by inconceivable tragedy. Today are faced with an unbearable

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burden: we are all that is left of Humanity. But today we are also one people, one tribe, one nation, one race: We are the Humans, and most of all we are one family. We are all that's left, but we will face our uncertain future together, as one.”

SIXTEEN
SORROW AND LIGHT

The next day dawned sullen and bleak. Almost no one could digest the news they had been given the day before. No one wanted to believe, but no one could deny the truth of it. Twelve billion people. But these weren't faceless strangers dead in a disaster or conflict on the other side of the world. Everyone was mourning. Everyone had lost family, friends, loved ones. Everyone had lost the world.

Everyone aboard the Ship had known the risks: they had known that by signing on to Shipflight that they might never see their friends or family again. They accepted that their voyage into the unknown could take years, even generations. But they had never suspected, never truly prepared to face the possibility that they would lose those they

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loved because *Earth itself* would be overrun. Twelve billion people dead. The passengers and crew of the Ship were numb with shock, unable or unwilling to even contemplate what it meant that they were all that was left of Humankind.

Throughout Habitat silence prevailed, but it was not an entirely silent day. Nor was it a peaceful day. Security and Hospital staffs were operating at emergency levels because of the sudden spike in suicide attempts and violent acts, as some people—as always—reacted in the worst possible way to the worst possible news. Security responded to nearly five hundred domestic disturbances after Bloom and Santino’s joint announcement. Until that night, there had been less than a hundred such incidents since Shiprise.

For the most part the grieving process in the Habitat was tranquil. Friends and families gathered together for mutual comfort and condolence, prayers and reminiscence. Some tried to celebrate those they lost rather than mourn them, but even those gatherings became maudlin affairs. There were also those, though their numbers were fewer, who went out that day not in search of condolence, but in search of hope.

They came to see Juan Carlos Rejas, to hear him speak. He’d gone to a park near Commerce District Center’s Speaker’s Corner, sitting on the rail of a gazebo as people sat around him in the grass.

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“I’ve had time to further study the Nai’Marak’s prophecies regarding the Queen of Light and Sorrow,” he said, “I’ve also taken a look at other writings relating to it. In order to properly understand the Prophecy we must also be able to understand the culture that created it. The history surrounding the Prophecy is as important as the Prophecy itself.”

“What did you find?” one of his audience called out. Juan Carlos acknowledged the voice with a smiling gesture. It was a habit he’d picked up long ago, from that same professor who had introduced him to the United Trinity Observants. He was not entirely comfortable with the realization, but he accepted that not all men were monsters, that there had been some good in *El Professor*; he could not deny that goodness. If his former mentor could see him now, Juan Carlos had no doubt he would have approved.

“All that has come to pass and all that has yet to happen was written by the Nai’Marak. The Nai’Marak wrote of the Home of the Lost Ones being destroyed by the Dark Cloud. The Nai’Marak spoke of Death Soldiers hunting the Lost Ones. But the Nai’Marak also spoke of the Queen of Light and Sorrow, She who would protect the Lost Ones, and guide them to their Sanctuary on a world to be called *Midian*. We are living through a time of great tribulation, but we must not lose hope. For at the end of this terrible time will come a new era of hope, as the Queen of Light and Sorrow fulfils her destiny.”



Colonel Bloom stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Major Benedict, Captains Decker and Tanaka, Commander Castaneda

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and the rest of the command staff. Bloom had made one of her rare visits to Synagogue that morning, where the Congregation was sitting Chiva for all the lost sons and daughters of Earth.

Then as now she stood with her fellow officers, though now the ceremony was non-denominational and the venue Echohawk Park. She was thankful that she wouldn't be called upon to deliver any speeches at today's ceremony; she'd been crying all night, grieving for Laura. Bloom felt ashamed that she'd abandoned Laura, terrified that Laura's last moments had been spent alone and afraid; most of all Bloom felt a self-loathing she hadn't imagined possible: *it was her failure that led to this.*

"The fucking Ship should have been buried when we buried Mark," she whispered to herself.

As she sat in the park named in his honour, Bloom recalled when Francis George Franck, disciple of the United Trinity Observants, assassinated him in a fit of religious fervour. At the time Bloom had been working at the Groom Lake Special Research Facility. She remembered when she'd reached Laura on the linx; mother and daughter had both just heard the news. Bloom had desperately scanned Laura's face over the linx, searching her daughter for signs of Mark. Every feature she could attribute to him stood out as a poignant reminder that he had lived; their daughter was the legacy of their union. And now their daughter was dead, no sign left in the cruel universe that she, or Mark, had ever lived.

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Bloom felt that she'd paid far too high a ransom for command of the Ship. Her ex-husband and their daughter; her friends and relatives back home. That everyone aboard had just paid in similar measure for the honour or being aboard was of no comfort to her. In fact it worsened her misery, because she was forced to admit to her own complicity in the complex chain of events that had led to the extinction of life on Earth. It had been Bloom who'd been appointed to the Ship Survey Expedition after Mark had died. After the worldwide terrorist attacks of the Night of Blood, it had been Bloom who had petitioned the World Ship Summit to continue the exploration of the Ship. If, as many had demanded, the Ship Survey Expedition had been shut down, the Nimbus virus would never have been introduced. Worse still if the Ship had simply never been found to begin with, never been breached, life on Earth would still very much be continuing as it had before.

Her presence at this ceremony alongside the rest of her command staff was supposed to reassure the public; to console them that their grief was universal and that the authorities were resolved to carry forward and ensure mankind's survival. Who, Bloom wondered, was supposed to reassure her? Who would console her? She had lost her daughter, her friends, her family; Bloom would have willingly traded the world for her daughter's life; the world and the Ship. But the whole world was dead and Laura gone with them, and Bloom felt as though she had traded them for the Ship instead. Bloom didn't try and

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fight the tears she was shedding. She wouldn't resist the anguish and loss that overwhelmed her. Neither would Bloom publicly break down, but she wouldn't hide her pain. She would not pretend to be stronger than the loss of the child she had conceived and carried and borne. She wouldn't pretend that such a thing was bearable. A day of mourning? Bloom had no doubt that she would mourn Laura's death for the rest of her life.



“And though we have not yet faced the worst of what is to come,” Juan said, “We must be brave; when those terrible times are on us it will mean our Queen will be about to take up her mantle. I have read through the Prophecies and here is what they say:” Juan pulled out his portable console and began to read aloud:

The Lost Ones will travel into the dark places beyond the constellations and stars. They will follow an ancient path to safety, but there they will be set upon by the Soldiers of Death. No matter how they struggle, the Soldiers of Death will be overwhelming. Many will die as the Lost Ones fight this unbeatable foe.

And this will come to pass as the Fourth Sign of the Advent of the Queen of Light and Sorrow, for she will awaken to her full potential when she walks into the Heart of the All-Consuming Storm. The enemy will fall back and the Lost Ones escape.

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They will be saved by the Queen of Light and Sorrow and found by those who will soldier for the Queen in the times to come. From there they will be led to the New World and the Fifth Sign of the Advent of the Queen of Light and Sorrow will have come to pass.

In the fullness of time the Aeons War will come, when the Soldiers of Death and the Dark Cloud find the Lost Ones and their hidden world, ending a time of peace that will have lasted for—

“How dare you?”

Juan looked up at the sound of this voice. The crowd was parting as none other than Allison McQuire herself approached. People whispered in awe. When Juan had spoken of the Queen of Light and Sorrow, they hadn't expected a diminutive young woman wearing faded jeans and a purple sweater over a pale green shirt, her long, red hair tied back in a tight, simple ponytail. She was not a vision of godlike majesty but of Human simplicity and elegance. Nevertheless, some imperceptible quality made the people stop and stare at her. She seemed to radiate presence and power, and she held the throng in awe.

“Allison,” Juan said, “I'm honoured that--”

“Don't be,” she said, approaching the gazebo, “How dare you do this? How can you impose this on me and expect me to accept it? The Ship violated me, Juan! How dare you make that into a Sacrament? The Nai'Marak's prophecies have damned me, Juan! And now you are trying to do the same?”

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What right do you have to impose Messianism on me? What right do you have to make me into some kind of God? What right do any of you have?" she demanded, turning to face those who had gathered there, "What right do you have to turn me into something to be worshipped, to make me into your saviour? Haven't I been through enough because of other people's plans for me?"

No one spoke. No one dared. They stood watching her. Allison could hear their thoughts: a jumble of confusion, muted fear and guilt in the face of accusation. She realized that she knew all of their names, all of their secrets. Even Juan, who stood behind her, could not keep his mind from her. He felt a mix of astonishment and hurt which reminded Allison of the feelings of a puppy who's just been beaten by its owner. All she could feel was contempt. She knew why they were all so desperate to believe Juan and to elevate her to Godhood. The announcement yesterday was part of it; even Allison was not immune to the news, and she was just as stricken, just as anguished as anyone, and more: for her connection to the minds of everyone else aboard the Ship meant that she felt their grief along with her own. But she refused to let herself be made into someone else's beacon of hope.

"This isn't my burden!" she yelled angrily, "This isn't my duty! Don't ask me to be your saviour when there's no one here to save me!"

Allison walked away, tears running down her face. No one in Juan's congregation dared move; they sat talking amongst themselves, shocked, awed by Allison's bright anger. She left

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them behind, knowing that when she was gone they'd all go back to their stupid desires for the divine.



The night air was cool, slightly damp. The mingled aromas of earth and tree, night-time blossoms and wet pavement combined to make a perfume all too reminiscent of warm spring nights on Earth. Even the stars reflected from the artificial sky surrounding Habitat had been defaulted to the stars as seen from Earth's equator. But Earth was a distant memory in a distant galaxy; for all intents and purposes was a dead world.

The Skyview Lounge was closed, as were most establishments in the Commercial District. But a private gathering of the Ship's senior officers was being held on the Skyview's terrace nonetheless. The uniform jackets were undone or off; tunics unbuttoned at the neck, sleeves rolled up, alcohol flowing. Every officer at the table knew this commiseration was a tradition older than recorded military history: they were drinking to the fallen, drinking because they were alive. And as long as their had been war-lords and commanders, they had always known that this would be how the Human Race would end: surviving officers gathered for one last toast.

Colonel Bloom stubbed out one cigarette and lit another. By far she was the most sober at the gathering, though that meant only that she was the least drunk. Even her

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Executive Officer was half in the bag, she observed. Lieutenant Baxter, the juniormost officer at the table seemed to get more and more nervous with each drink he took. Lieutenant Kalenga had produced a small amount of Moroccan Hashish; as a Muslim it was against his beliefs to drink. Bloom thanked Allah and the Prophet that Muslims of Kalenga's disposition weren't averse to getting stoned. The pipe he'd produced to smoke the Hash with was slowly making the rounds of the table once again. Only Captain Tanaka declined the hash, preferring to stick to Sapporo, her beer of choice.

"This whole goddamn mission's turned into a clusterfuck," Bloom observed, morosely, "We didn't know what we were getting into; we still don't."

"Better here than back home," Castaneda replied, "At least out here there's a remote chance to live to see another day."

Bloom nodded.

"Point taken," she said, "It just seems like we've come a long way for a lot of pain, with a longer road yet to be traveled. The price was too high; the price was just too fucking high."

Bloom got up, patting Major Benedict on the back.

"Exo, you have command of this bench," she said, "Keep them in good company and better spirits. I'm getting the fuck out of here."

Benedict and the others started to rise, but Bloom waived them back down.

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“Sit the fuck down,” she growled, “We’ll all be back to spit-polish and starched collars tomorrow. Tonight we’re at ease; tomorrow we’ll march on Hell.”

After Bloom left, Tanaka turned to Benedict.

“Did she just really say that?”

They all burst out laughing; all of them but Benedict. He just smiled, though the expression never touched his eyes. Word for word, everything she’d said since clearing the bench had been the same thing she’d always said to him and to any other officers at the table, for as long as he had known her.



Juan was on his balcony, looking down at the courtyard below. He’d felt stricken since this afternoon when Allison had come and berated him and his students for speaking of her as the Queen of Light and Sorrow. Juan’s gathering broke up after she left, although his followers had begged him to stay. He’d refused, returning instead to his apartment. Juan had hoped to be able to find some explanation for Allison’s reaction, something in the texts that would explain her refusal to accept destiny; she must have been aware of the Prophecy and what it meant. Surely she knew what was contained in those texts. But Juan hadn’t found anything. Nothing he read indicated that she would so vehemently deny who she was. Juan had never felt so alone, so miserable. Many of his followers, young men and women only a few years his junior had come to his quarters to keep vigil in the night with him. He hadn’t been able to bear turning them away, though he couldn’t bear their presence either. He wanted their friendship,

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they wanted his leadership. They insisted on calling him “Teacher”, an honorific that he no longer felt worthy of. But looking over the balcony he saw dozens of the new faithful in the courtyard below, holding flickering candles in the night. They stood silently, holding vigil for him, waiting for him to be ready. They looked to him to lead, they looked to him for comfort and hope. Juan realized then that this was his burden, just as the destiny foretold by the Nai’Marak was Allison’s.



Captain Decker wished everyone a good night and left. Lieutenant Kalenga had already gone home, Baxter was halfway to passing out, which left Benedict, Tanaka and Castaneda sitting together at the end of the table.

“Things are finally starting to settle, down there,” Castaneda said, looking at the Habitat slowly turning below, “Another couple of days and things will be back no normal.”

“We’re ready to resume the Exodus,” Benedict said, “Once the mission goes forward tomorrow hopefully we should see everyone level off more.”

“I bloody hope so,” Castaneda said.

“What will happen now?” Tanaka asked, “Beyond following another set of coordinates into the uncharted black?” Benedict shrugged.

“The navigation data from the Hub’s computers will take us to a point in deep space well beyond the Xelhuan Expanse and the galactic clusters surrounding it. We’ll encounter another relay point and then continue on from there.”

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“What, just navigating from one relay to another?” Castaneda asked, “That’s all? Wouldn’t it be a brilliant bloody joke if this Nimbus were waiting for us at the other end?”

“Until we encounter a member of the League, or run out of relays, there’s simply no other option.” Benedict answered.

“Bit of an endless quest that,” Castaneda observed, “We could be at this for weeks, months, years...Christ, it’s conceivable we could be at it for generations.”

“Unfortunately that’s right,” Benedict said, “This Ship is home to the last surviving members of the Human Race. It may be home to Humankind for years to come. We have pretty much everything we need to survive and to propagate the species until we find help. We know there was a vast civilization out there. We know that they fled this part of the cosmos. We know that they left us with the means to follow them. If they’re still out there, we will find them; we don’t have another choice.”

“It’s been more than sixty million years, Major,” Castaneda said, “A lot could have happened since.” Benedict nodded his head.

“Exactly; both positive and negative. Yes, the League could have been utterly wiped out. But we’ve already found more evidence of continued their existence than I ever expected to. That means we have to be open to all possibilities, including the one where the League has moved on and prospers once more.”

“And if it’s a futile hope?”

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“Then at least we’ve tried,” he said, grimly. “At least we don’t surrender to the inevitable; at least we go down fighting.”

“Better not to go down at all,” Castaneda said.

“I wholeheartedly agree,” Benedict said, “Which is why we have to keep going.”



“Mark, come to bed,” Simone called from down the hall. But Mark Kodo couldn’t sleep. He’d requested from the Ship a concise summary of everything the League had known about the Nimbus Virus and he’d been studying it almost nonstop for two days.

“In a minute,” Kodo replied, poring over his notes and comparing them to the information from the Ship’s database. Even when it was dead, the Nimbus was still highly infectious. Any immune cell that tried to absorb the dead virus would instead be taken over by it. The Nimbus shared a great deal with immune cells: it extended pseudopods from its membrane and had amoeboid movement. Kodo had seen viruses that could remain dormant for years, even centuries. But he had never seen one that could return from the dead. He could imagine whole organisms of this virus: they wouldn’t be able to be killed except by fire.

Kodo was even more fascinated with the virus’ apparent intelligence. In their studies the Eoulf had documented behaviour in individual viral cells indicating not just an ability to adapt to different environments but to external

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stimuli as well. Larger cell clusters developed higher degrees of intelligence, including memory and anticipatory response to stimuli.

In evolution, cells that gathered together to form organisms did so to ensure mutual advantage and survival. First, cells clustered together into communities. These communities existed for several cellular generations and would then begin to specialize. Certain cells devoted themselves to protecting the other cells; other cells created means of locomotion while others still concerned themselves with breaking down and distributing food. Some even specialized into a means of communicating between the other cells.

Specialized communities that survived and prospered grew larger and eventually reproduced. As they grew more complex, these communities had to deal with more and more complex problems. And as such, new cells also began to specialize to meet the needs of the community. Eventually these specialized cellular communities joined with other specialized communities.

Groups of cellular communities then became whole organisms; specialized cells forming organs and becoming communities unto themselves. The organisms themselves began to grow more complicated, developing more complex communication systems which became nervous tissue and then brains and then, almost inevitably minds.

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The Nimbus virus wasn't like that. A single cell was highly generalized but it only had one true function: to deliver its genome to a host organism. It was only when that genome took over the host's cells that the Nimbus' true power was revealed: The Nimbus *became* the organism. And the Nimbus organism itself was a carrier of the Nimbus virus. And one organism infected by another took with it the other's own memory, experience and knowledge. If, as the Eoulf texts suggested, at higher levels the Nimbus developed some sort of collective telepathy—

“You said you'd come to bed nearly an hour ago,”

Kodo looked up from his console. Simone Cole stood there wearing a short cotton nightgown. It clung to her appealingly and with promise of more.

“Sorry,” he said, “I just can't let this go. There has to be some way to fight the Nimbus; some way to reverse it, to cure it...to return to Earth.”

Cole felt so sad for Kodo. He utterly refused to accept that the Nimbus had destroyed their world.

“Mark, the Eoulf studied the Nimbus for thousands of years,” she said, “You won't make a discovery that they overlooked in two nights.”

“I just wish I had more than a computer model to work with,” he said.

“Frankly, I'm glad that we don't,” Cole replied, rubbing Kodo's shoulders, “Especially given how dangerous the bloody

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thing is. Now come on. Leave it for the night and come to bed.”

He leaned his head into her belly, relishing the smell that was uniquely hers.

“All right,” he said.



The bedside alarm went off, chiming persistently. Castaneda’s hand shot out like a striking cobra, slapping off the alarm.

“Christ,” she swore, rolling onto her back.

“Is it oh-six hundred already?” Benedict asked sleepily from her right. Castaneda came instantly awake, startled into recalling the previous night. Part of her mind was fighting panic at the thought that she’d just had it off with the Major. The other part of her mind was reconstructing events: Oh-two hundred hours when she’d risen from the Skyview’s terrace, popped a Sobrieten pill and downed it with the last of her beer. She’d announced her departure to Benedict, Tanaka and the newly-awaken Baxter. The Major had said he was leaving as well. They shared a tram back to Habitat. On the tram, as the alcohol-metabolizing Sobrieten pills went to work on them, they started talking.

“This whole thing’s left me numb,” she’d said, “Originally, it was all just supposed to be an adventure, yeah? But when that first girl was found dead...that’s when it all just started falling apart.”

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“For me, it was when we got to Sagittarius and found the hyperlink destroyed,” Benedict said, “That’s when I just...*knew*.”

“We should have turned around at Sagittarius.”

“If we had we’d all be dead by now; the whole Human race. And by then the Ship had already started its fucking experiments and cut us off from communicating with Earth. It might not have let us return to Earth, even then.”

The tram car left the inner hull, crossing into the tube rail line that led down to Habitat.

“Christ,” Castaneda had said, “What have we gotten ourselves into?”

“I don’t know, commander,” Benedict answered, “But if it’s any consolation, you’re not the only one who feels numb.”

“Major, I don’t want to feel numb, anymore.”

They’d stared at each other for what had seemed to Castaneda to be an uncomfortably long time. Finally she took the initiative and kissed him. Benedict returned the kiss and they only broke contact when the tram reached Habitat station.

They went back to Benedict’s quarters because it was larger, more comfortable. They kissed and undressed all the way from his front door to his bedroom.

“Major, I just want one thing to be clear,” she said, interrupting things before they really got started. She relished his weight against her, the heat of him, and the contrast of his dark skin against her own pale flesh.

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“What’s that?”

“I’m not in this for anything more than the night. I think our lives are complicated enough right now, without any extra involvements.”

“Just two colleagues sharing a bunk?”

“For the moment, yeah.”

“Five by five, Commander.”

Castaneda wondered if the whole thing hadn’t been a mistake. There would be no real way to avoid the awkwardness of the morning after when they both reported for duty; the sex was just too recent to be ignored or consigned to memory. Benedict showered while Castaneda did her morning calisthenics.

“I’ll be a little late for duty,” she said as he got out of the shower, “Seeing as how I’ve got to go back to my quarters for a fresh uniform.”

“That’s fine,” Benedict replied. He gave her some sweats to wear for the short trip across the Officer’s Residential Compound.

“See you on the Command Deck,” Benedict said. She stood in his doorway a moment, unsure about leaving.

“What is it, Commander?”

“To be honest, sir, I’m not sure whether to salute you or kiss you.”

Benedict smiled, exhaling a laugh.

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“I’m not sure myself,” he said, “There’s a bit of a grey area between Military and personal protocol right now, isn’t there?”

Castaneda suppressed the urge to smile.

“Just a bit,” she agreed.

“How about we sit down after duty shift ends, and discuss things?”

She nodded.

“Sounds good Major; but like I said last night, I’m not looking for complication, though I suppose that’s not possible any more.”

Benedict smiled ruefully.

“I agree on both counts,” he said, “So no kiss, no salute. I’ll see you on the Command Deck.”

“Until then Major,”



Juan hadn’t slept at all. He’d spent the night in contemplation; now resolved, was on his way to confront Allison. She was going to hear him out; he wouldn’t give her any choice. Arriving at the top floor of the hospital wing that Allison now called home, Juan was greeted by an unbelievable sight: dozens of people lined the corridor, sitting, standing; almost all of them were faces that Juan recognized from his talks. When they noticed him, they began getting to their feet and calling his name. Those closest to him clustered around him.

“What are you all doing here?” he asked.

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“We came to see Her,” one woman replied, “But she won’t see us and her nurses won’t let us in.”

“She’ll see *me*,” Juan said, “I’m not giving her a choice.”

The crowd parted to let him pass. He ignored the calls from the nurse’s station and the call they placed to security. He went up to the door into Allison’s rooms and tried it. It was locked.

“I know you know I’m out here,” he whispered, “I’m not going away until you speak with me. If I have to start holding my talks out here, standing in front of your door, I will. You want your peace; I know. But if you don’t let me in I promise you the number of people waiting here for you will--” Before Juan could finish making his threat, the door opened. As it did, Juan felt an upswell of fear in his belly. The door opened not onto the suite of rooms he expected, but onto an inky blackness that revealed nothing within. Even the light from the hallway did nothing against it.

“Come inside.”

The voice seemed to issue from everywhere and nowhere at once. Juan hesitated. Behind him, his followers were stepping back. The voice had been Allison’s, but the words had been a command, a dare; a threat.

“Come inside!” Allison’s voice called out again, more insistent. Juan stepped over the threshold into the darkness beyond. The door slammed shut behind him.

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The room wasn't entirely dark. The floor seemed contrasted slightly, as was the far end of the room from him. Beyond this, Juan Carlos could not orient himself.

"Hello?" he called. There was no resonance; it was as though his voice was muffled. Nor was there an answer. He started forward, gingerly taking his steps for fear of running into some unseen object. But after just a few steps, it became obvious that there was nothing around him to run into. A few more steps and he knew he should have reached the far wall of the suite but hadn't. There was nothing ahead of him; nothing behind him and nothing around him. Juan felt dizzy; though he felt the ground beneath his feet, he also felt that it was more a question of his weight pressing down on a sense of ground...that in fact he was lost in the middle of some great void. And Juan was suddenly very afraid.

A distant flare of light appeared. It was all Juan could do not to run towards it. It was his only point of reference and it was utterly hypnotic.

Be not afraid; come hither Juan Carlos, come to me.

The voice filled his mind, not his ears; and though it had come from within his mind, Juan Carlos knew the voice was Allison's and he knew it was coming from the point of light. Juan turned towards the light—

And it exploded outwards creating the front living room of Allison's quarters. And she was standing right in front of him, her face angry, her fists balled.

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“Is that what you want to hear?” she barked. Startled, Juan fell sitting into Allison’s living room sofa. She moved to stand over him, looming.

“Well? Is it?” she yelled, “Isn’t that what you’re supposed to want to hear from a Goddess? Isn’t it?”

“Allison, I--”

She bent closer over him. As angry as she was, Juan could see a tear escape from her right eye.

“Let me show you something,” she said.

They stood on a hill overlooking a wide valley. To the south a large river meandered its way west. A vast wall of mountains rose up in the near distance from the river’s southern shore.

“What is this? How did we get here?” Juan asked. He was astounded, amazed and frightened.

Allison waived a hand dismissively.

“Call it a shared delusion,” she said, “I’m imagining this, and I’ve pulled you into the fantasy.”

“None of this is real?”

“Real enough,” Allison said, “Now, look.” She turned and strode east, climbing the last short distance up the hill. As Juan followed, he beheld a vast temple complex. A series of five smaller temples, each crafted of a strange blue stone, domed roofs and columns guarding their inner shrines, surrounded a larger, central structure.

“Look,” Allison said again. She led him past the outer wall and between two of the smaller temples. They were in a

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wide courtyard now; vast lawns and hedges, trees, fountains and statuary everywhere. Juan saw eerily familiar effigies: Allison, himself, Commander Castaneda, Colonel Bloom, Major Benedict...another face that Juan recognized from the early Gridcasts about the Ship: Professor Mark Echohawk.

“Do you know what this is?” Allison demanded, accusingly.

“No; how could I?”

“I didn’t think this was part of your prophecies,” she said with a bitter smirk, “I was meditating, trying to see into the future when I found this.” Somehow they’d already arrived at the large, central temple. Juan was awed by its immense size. He knew, somehow, that Human hands had made this. The vast building comprised many halls and chambers, all done in the same blue stone. Inside the walls were plastered and painted, the colours familiar to anyone aboard the Ship: Black and gold and blue. The halls were wide and tall; their footfalls echoed cavernously as Juan followed Allison. Despite the vastness of the structure, Allison navigated the place as though she’d built it. They reached what Juan could only describe as a cathedral; a cloistered chamber under a huge domed ceiling. There was stained glass in the windows, and more of the same statuary in nooks and before small shrines. At the far end of the cathedral was an elevated dais on which stood a large altar, again carved from the strange, powder-blue stone. Behind the altar on another raised platform, stood a single, ornately carved throne.

“What is this place?” Juan asked.

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“It’s the Temple your followers will build to me,” she replied, “About a thousand years after that I’ll actually be sitting on that throne. I’ve been there Juan; that throne isn’t very comfortable. And if you don’t stop what you’re doing I’ll be sitting there. I don’t want that. Do you understand me?”

“Allison,” Juan stammered, “Allison, you can’t deny who you are.”

She turned to him, crying, now dressed in a black T-shirt, a jean jacket and a flower-patterned pleated skirt.

“I don’t want to be your God, Juan!” she said, crying, “I don’t want to be enslaved like that! I don’t want to be worshipped and prayed to! It’s too much! It’s too big! Do you know what happened when his followers turned Joshua Ben Joseph into a false God? Twenty-one hundred years of persecution, grief, misery and blood! The same thing happened to Moses and Muhammad! And they *all* wanted to lead people; I don’t!”

“But what if that is why it’s meant to be you?” Juan asked passionately, finally finding his voice, “What if you’ve been chosen because you don’t want it? What if the Universe finally realized that only someone who doesn’t want to be God should be God? What if the Universe needed to see Godhood as a burden, as slavery?”

“Do you think I’m denying it because of a sense of *responsibility*?” Allison asked, crying, “I’m denying it because I *want* to be selfish! I don’t want to be anything more than Allison McQuire! Instead I’m the victim of a medical assault;

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the things I can do...they're accidents, Juan, not miracles! I don't want the destiny you're trying to force on me!"

"And Jesus knelt down in the garden and prayed 'Father, if it be thy will than take this cup of sorrow away from me,' Juan said, "I cannot change who you are; only you can do that, Allison."

"You're doing it, Juan," Allison said, "Every time you talk to them about me you chain me to them even more. Stop it. Stop, Juan; just stop!"

"Then stop me from speaking," he said, "Because that is the only way you will silence me. I believe in what I say and I will continue to say it!"

She touched a finger to the side of his head, leaning in and whispering:

"With a thought I could wipe out your speech centers, your memory, your voluntary muscle control...I could blow your brain apart entirely, or make you spend the rest of your days living as someone else, with no memory of the life you've thus far known. It's that easy to do. Or I could turn you back into a brain-dead vegetable, but leave you *just enough* of your mind to know what hell you're trapped in."

"Then do it," Juan whispered back, "Because I will not give up my Ministry otherwise!"

She smiled coldly.

"It would be...so...easy," she said, "So very easy...but power corrupts...and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

"Allison?"

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“Go away, Juan...Right now, I can barely control myself. What you decide to do, whatever you decide, the choice is yours. But so are the consequences.”

“The same can be said of you,”

The air in the room seemed very close, very heavy. Allison glowered at him with murderous intent. Finally, she whispered:

“Get out...get out before I lose control altogether.”



“What is our status?” Captain Decker asked from the Command Station.

“Engines at full power,” Captain Tanaka called from the crew pit, “Time warp generators fully charged. Null buoyancy is active. Kinetic shielding at eighty per cent and climbing.”

“Clear all moorings and plot departure vector,” Commander Kalich ordered.

“All moorings are clear,” the Helm Officer reported.

“Departure vector plotted and laid in,” Nav said.

Decker rose from his chair and turned to face the observation gallery.

“Colonel Bloom, we await your order,” Captain Decker said.

“Take us into the Deep,” Bloom said.

Decker turned back to the crew pit.

“Depart Hub and make ready to proceed with Exodus Vector,” he called, “Stand by on stasis fields and time warp.”

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The dome walls of the Command Deck vanished, replaced with a full holographic image of the Hub's docking levels. The Ship dropped away from its berth and began moving away from the docking array. Bloom's stomach fluttered and she suddenly felt overwhelmingly afraid. As they left the Hub, navigating back through the eerie, seemingly haunted channels and once more into space Bloom knew that they were heading into an uncertain future. As the Ship began to accelerate, the Hub grew smaller in the distance. They were in an expanse of space so void that there was no visible starlight at all; Bloom couldn't even have pointed to a corner of sky and said for certain the Earth was in that direction. And even if they were in orbit around their home, Bloom knew, they would still forever be unable to return.

"Kinetic shielding at one hundred per cent," Captain Tanaka said, "Stasis field generators at one hundred per cent."

"Go on Exodus Vector," Captain Decker said, "Go on time warp."

"STASIS FIELD ACTIVATION IN SIXTY SECONDS," The Ship announced, "ACCELERATION TO MAXIMUM CRUISING SPEED BEGUN."

"All hands to duty stations and stand by," Commander Kalich called.

Benedict turned to Bloom.

"...He steers himself away from what is haunted / by the old ghost of what has been before, / Abandoning, as always, and undaunted, / One fog-walled island more..." he said.

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“What’s that?” Bloom asked.

“From *The Flying Dutchman*,” he replied, “By Edwin Arlington Robinson.”

“Fuck off, Exo. That’s not even funny.”

“STASIS FIELD ACTIVATION IN FIVE SECONDS,” The Ship announced, “FOUR...THREE... TWO...ONE.”

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There are times when a sentient Race is faced with its own extinction. Whether this threat comes from within or without, the reaction is always chaotic and is often violent. The survival of such a threatened Race depends entirely on whether it is able to adapt and face the threat, or slide into panic and self-destruction.

SEVENTEEN
HOLY WAR

Baltimore was a molten city; a radioactive waste. They'd sterilized half the state and even irradiated the Atlantic coast to kill the Nimbus. It had still escaped, branching out into three separate strains. They'd stopped its south-western progress in the Smokies, detonating three nukes and blanketing everything for a hundred kilometres in all directions with Extreme Heat Incendiary Ordinance. The country and the world were already on fire; no one even noticed. Despite their victory in Tennessee, they weren't so lucky with the Midwest Strain making its way through to what was left of America's Heartland, or against the one that climbed the Eastern Seaboard. The Centers for Disease Control became a militarized operation, the nerve center of the only war on Earth that mattered. The whole of the United States Military—what

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was left of it after almost two years of worldwide war—was turned to fight the Nimbus. Even operations against the factions and militias within its own borders were abandoned. The Nimbus was the real enemy.

And Isaac Jude knew in his heart that it was all for nothing. The Arc Sites here and across the globe might postpone the end for a few million souls, but without immunity or even resistance to the virus, they'd have no chance when the Nimbus finally came for them. Jude knew that only those like him, who'd developed resistance to infection by the Nimbus, could hope to be Humanity's future. His only concern was in locating as many of those people as he could and getting them to safety. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff had already deployed engineers and troops to open a secret bunker in the Antarctic. The vast bunker complex had been built long ago by the member nations of the Committee to be used in the eventuality of an alien invasion; the personnel sent there now were just bringing things online. The immeasurable resources of the Committee were now at Jude's disposal. The President's declaration Martial Law before retreating to the safety of the Primary Arc Site made him Commander in Chief of what survived of the United States' once-considerable military might.

Jude deployed teams anywhere that crime statistics reported heavy use of drugs like Oil or so-called Zip pills that were the black market equivalent of military-issue alkaloid

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based stimulants. Once unfettered by the bounds of now-pointless scientific ethics, the CDC had been able to identify other gene sequences that, when coupled with the use of those drugs, allowed for immunity to the Nimbus. Jude's troops ran sweep operations, infiltrating uninfected populations, first collecting the drug users already immune, and then anyone with the genetic predispositions for immunity. Today was their final day of operations in the United States. The Primary Arc was about to be sealed, consigning all those on the surface to their fates. After today, Jude and those under his command and care would be heading south, for good. The rest of the world's governments, now facing numerous outbreaks of the Nimbus virus themselves, were advised by both the President and Colonel Jude to do the same.



The Nimbus had gotten here two days before. A mosquito bit an infected raccoon, consuming the Nimbus and in turn being consumed by it. The insect flew off, tracking the scent of sweat of a nearby hunting party. By order of the City of Rutland, every man and woman who could shoot a rifle was out hunting anything they could find. Food was scarce and the only surviving farms and agricloning factories in the county were under military control. Whose military no one was quite sure of anymore. They could have been the New Minutemen; the Aryan League; the Continental United States; the United States Armed Forces or the Army of Northern New England. By virtue of necessity Rutland remained as neutral as it could, but press gangs had already started marauding in town,

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snatching up anyone who could hold a gun; men, women, children. Those who could get out already had; the rest were making do, just trying to survive. It was as though the Old West had been reborn in Hell.

Five hunters came back early, dragging an improvised sled laden with game: deer, rabbit, raccoon, groundhog and wildfowl; all of it like the hunters themselves, brimming with the Nimbus virus. The meat was butchered and set for quick curing. People were already waiting with their ration slips, the line stretching most of the block. Armed guards in the hire of the store, bought and paid for in rations of meat and grain, stood watch. They were there not to protect the business, but to protect their customers from press gangs. The butchers in the shop hadn't had latex gloves in months; they used hand sanitizer before and after handling each piece of meat and passing it on. But the anti-microbial agents in the hand sanitizer were absolutely nothing that the Nimbus had not already encountered in its aeons-long history. The virus went from the meat into their blood, working its way to the cerebral cortex. These younger strains of the Nimbus weren't yet as potent or fast-acting as the original strain that came from Ashe, so they took longer to reach the brain and begin their work taking over. But once infected, the host organism's fate was sealed. The Nimbus was in Rutland.

By evening hundreds of people had returned home with their desperately-needed sustenance. Prepared and cooked for

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hungry families, the hunter's catch delivered the Nimbus to almost five thousand people overnight. They went to bed Human. They woke up as the Infected. In the morning they all went about their lives as normal; with unity of purpose they returned to work or school, knowing it was the best way to continue to spread the Nimbus. It was only by midafternoon that those uninfected by the Nimbus began to suspect something was wrong.

By nightfall the Nimbus outnumbered the Humans. The nightmare began in earnest for the survivors, then. Pursued by former friends and loved ones now alien creatures bent on infecting them, terrified survivors struggled desperately to flee the town, to get away...but there was nowhere to go. They were chased through the night by the beckoning voices of those they once knew as they fled for whatever tenuous safety they could find. Horribly, some people were worn down by the sight of those they'd loved, by the sound of their calling. These people surrendered, crying and afraid, into the arms of the Nimbus.

But others refused to go easy, refused to allow others to go easy, either. They fought back against the Nimbus, violently, desperately. They fought with the determination that can only come from being on the brink of extinction. They fought in vain. The Nimbus spread too easily; even when pockets of resistance drove back the Infected, the virus could reach them through so many other avenues: domestic animals,

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insects, small birds, any creature at all. Worst of all was how maddeningly nonviolent, calm, entreating the infected were. They wouldn't attack; they wouldn't defend. They just moved in, pressing any advantage to reach the Human survivors, calling the same thing over and over:

“Everything's going to be all right; this isn't necessary; we'll show you why.”

That night saw the city's twenty-one thousand Human souls reduced to a few hundred small pockets of trapped, frightened victims waiting to die. They holed up in basements, on rooftops, attics and even fall out shelters long-forgotten. Some took shelter in the hospitals, the jail, in factories and schools. But the Nimbus surrounded them on all sides; there was nowhere to go. And as the survivors huddled together trying now merely to delay the inevitable, their numbers dwindled cluster by cluster, in the night.

The last day of the city of Rutland dawned silent and cold, the air smelling of smoke and charred flesh. Rutland's few remaining Human citizens were barricaded inside a school gymnasium, tired, afraid, knowing there was no escape, waiting simply for the Nimbus to get in. Those who had been able to fall asleep woke briefly believing the night before to have just been a bad dream. Then they opened their eyes. Some had committed suicide during the night, others promising to do so, asking others to join them. Outside the barricaded gymnasium doors they could hear their names being called by

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voices they knew. They'd sealed themselves in using improvised explosives to collapse most of the hallway leading into the gym. The fire doors had been barricaded with lockers and equipment racks. But the Nimbus were going to get in very soon; too soon. Someone started screaming, then someone else. Shouting began and just as quickly everyone shut up, as weapons fire bellowed in the hall outside. A chemical burning scent filled the air. A moment later the fire doors blew open and the soldiers of Majestic burst in.

“NOBODY MOVE!” an amplified voice bellowed.

The soldiers were sealed inside mechanized suits of armor. Their weapons were levelled at last of Rutland's survivors.

“We're leading an evacuation of the city,” the voice continued, “We can't take all of you. Only people between fifteen and forty-five.” Voices screamed in protest. One man yelled and started running towards the soldiers. The lead soldier pivoted, took quick aim and fired a single round. The unsuppressed muzzle of his weapon thundered like the voice of God. He'd shot the man in the abdomen. He was still alive and bleeding; he'd be neither for much longer. The man fell to his knees and screamed as the incendiary chemicals in the shell fired into him reacted. They burned outwards, consuming the flesh, bone and blood around them and turning it into fuel to accelerate the burning. The survivors recoiled, afraid of this new horror. The man continued to scream until the incendiaries reached his lungs. Then the noise he made could scarcely have been called human. The whole of his body was consumed in less than thirty seconds; surely the longest, most

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horrible thirty seconds that the man had lived. The chemical fire burnt itself slowly out, leaving nothing but a charred, corroded and utterly sterilized hole in the floor.

“As I was saying,” the soldier called out again, “We can only take those of you between fifteen and forty-five. Special priority is placed on anyone who has ever done Oil, Zip, or smoked. To the rest of you, we can offer a quick, painless solution. It’ll be like falling asleep. That’s the best we can do, and I am sorry.”



Green Mountain Bunker Complex, Vermont.

President Clemens stared at the vista from atop the mountain range. The Green Mountains spread out all around her. The mountains and the state of Vermont took their name from the luscious green of the boreal forests that covered the hills and slopes of this spine of the Appalachian mountain chain. Les Verts Monts the early French explorers had named this place; Vermont it had been dubbed by Dr Thomas Young, prior to his role in the Boston Tea Party and American Revolution. The mountains were ancient things, formed when the Earth’s landmasses were all part of the Pangean supercontinent. This facility had been dug out of the ancient stone of the Mountains. The Green Mountain Bunker Complex was a secret military installation commissioned and built during the dark days of the War of Attrition with the Soviet Union, also known as the Cold War. It had been designed as one of several emergency shelters in case of nuclear attack; one

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that would serve to protect America's leaders. It would at long last serve its purpose, though not because of nuclear attack, but something far worse, something far more frightening. Beyond the forested hills President Clemens could see the narrow winding band of asphalt that marked one of several roads through the mountains. Along the road were the obvious signs of settlement; houses, farms, and the inevitable small New England town. From the vista of this secret mountain hideaway, she could count three small towns, including Montpelier, Vermont. She saw the columns of smoke rising into the air above one settlement, a stretch of cars jamming the highways winding through the nightmarish scene along another. Their windows reflected the sun. Even at this distance the desperate, angry, helpless horn-honking could be heard. From the open, solid steel doorway directly into the mountain behind her came the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs.

"Madame President, the strike is only a few minutes away. We have to get you belowground."

"Mister Chairman I consigned these people to their fates," the President said, "The least I can do is witness their executions."

"Madame President, I must advise against that; I'm sure that your bodyguards will also agree."

"Mister Chairman I was advised by General Harrod and Colonel Jude both that the blast wave would take almost five minutes to reach our position. That's more than enough time to escape into the mountain."

"I won't be able to talk you out of it, will I?"

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Clemens shook her head.

“Then will you at least put on a fucking pair of goggles, ma’am?”

Clemens nodded.



Colonel Jude had tracked the virus backwards to Maryland and then from Maryland out, into Europe. The strains of the Nimbus infecting North America had come from the animals in the lab. The soldiers who had been overpowered and infected had run two operations before the nuclear missile struck Baltimore. The first was a diversion: a suicide wave of soldiers staged an attack on the quarantine enforcement. Meanwhile, rats, monkeys, white mice and even dogs and cats fled into the sewers and the gas, water, electrical and data channels underground where they met a similar fate as the soldiers.

In the meantime, the second mission was run. Jude assumed the psychic link and heuristic learning curve of the Infected meant that the intelligence gathered by every creature in play fed directly into the rest were able to see the entire theatre of operations at once. The entire battle had been directed by the Nimbus’ central consciousness, Gabriel Ashe. Networked together, the Nimbus was able to create an opening for Ashe and his entourage to escape.

Jude had identified the escaping cluster of Infected from satellite images taken before the missiles exploded in

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Baltimore. Ashe's group went for the port and commandeered a departing cargo ship. The ship was sailed off course and out of the Grid. The soldiers who had survived the initial onslaught navigated the cargo vessel out of satellite tracking range, holding a course for Africa.

"From Senegal, the Nimbus spread north into Morocco, Spain and then the European interior," Jude said into the camera, "It also spread east into Central and Southern Africa. The joint Iranian-Israeli nuclear action effectively sterilized Eastern Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia and South-Western Yemen. But the Virus came east from France into Italy, then south-east through the Mediterranean into Turkey, Syria and Northern Iran. Security cameras in Berlin give us a positive on Gabriel Ashe. We had him, Madame Clemens. We had him and instead of killing him, we let him get away." Onscreen before him, broadcasting from the bunker beneath the now-blackened surface of the Green Mountains, President Clemens nodded.

"Thank you, Colonel. You have effective control of all our surviving forces on the surface. You are no longer bound by any convention or charter, nor the uniform code of military justice. I ask only that you treat those in your care with mercy and dignity, Colonel. You are the last hope we have of sterilizing our world from the Nimbus."

The situation was the same all over the world: Nations turned into armed camps; civilians being herded into Ark Sites hopefully isolated enough to protect against the Nimbus. Three days before the government in China decided to exterminate its

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entire population. China's remaining nuclear arsenal was targeted to blanket the whole of China's national territory, and a great deal of territory on all sides. Four billion people were killed in the initial blasts; a billion more died throughout Asia and the southern half of the Russian Confederation from the radiation and fallout. Australia closed its ports and the Allied World Army patrol boats deployed to enforce the twenty-year old embargo on Australia and New Zealand were commandeered to be used to protect them from any incoming sea or air traffic. But while at sea the Nimbus spread into the water itself, infecting the oceans with astonishing speed. Australia was consumed in short order, the Nimbus spreading in from the shore.



Today President Clemens had ordered that all remaining surface populations in the American Quarantine Zone be destroyed. She had thus become the first American President in history to authorize the use of nuclear force against its own citizens. In the rest of the country she deployed the National Guard to isolate and concentrate populations into containable areas. And now, Clemens watched and waited as the nuclear missiles she had ordered streaked in from high orbit.

"I'll rot in Hell for this," she said, as she slipped on the goggles that the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs had handed her. The flash of light was blinding, dimming her vision momentarily as her irises squeezed shut. The red-yellow column of nuclear fire seemed to suck the light from the world

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as it rose into the sky, cooling, blackening and spreading out in an ugly cloud of death. As her eyes adjusted, Clemens watched as the firestorm spread out from the cloud's center, pushing ahead of it the shockwaves of wind and radiation that killed everything in their wake. Clemens swallowed back a wave of bile-tasting vomit. It was only after the third time that the Chairman tugged on Clemens' arm that she finally allowed herself to be led into the mountain. The Ark Site below had been set up specifically to house the President of the United States along with the Presidents' family, and the staff and families of the President's office, the Secret Service, White House Chief of Staff and his office, the Press Office and White House Press Pool. Including the families of the soldiers and staff that operated the Green Mountain Bunker Complex, there were just over twenty thousand people inside. The Green Mountain Bunker was therefore the smallest Arc Site in the country. The Vice President, housed with the heads of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Secretary of Defence, the Senate, Senate staff and all their respective families, was housed in the second smallest of the Arc Sites: seventy-five thousand people. The only thing that the President knew about that undisclosed location was that it was somewhere in the Rockies. The second largest bunker, the one over which the United States Congress presided was in the Pacific Northwest; two hundred and fifty thousand people. One million people were in Ark One, the Ark that kept the Supreme Court and its staff and their families safe. The Arks were interconnected via a completely isolated Internet Grid. From that Grid, they knew the American

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military above was fighting a pitched battle alongside the military forces of the entire world. Horribly, world unity only came about as the entire Human Race faced annihilation.

War Four had begun. Mankind united as never in history, fighting to stave off extinction from an alien menace that had never been imagined. It was a war unlike anything Humanity had ever faced. But the Nimbus virus had seen it a trillion times on as many worlds and more. It all played out so predictably that infusing and absorbing the life of this world was essentially on schedule. This was a war that the Nimbus had always fought and only rarely lost. This was the Aeons War, and it had come now to claim Mankind.



*AF-97046, Codename Majestic One, mid-Atlantic
Cruising Altitude: 15 KM*

The sea below was choppy, the water cold and rough. The Nimbus was crossing the Atlantic. Every living creature for hundreds of kilometres in every direction from the Atlantic Basin outwards had been infected. Micro-organisms, algae, plankton, invertebrates and vertebrates alike...all of them were Infected and working as one towards the goal of consuming everything in the ocean. Undersea tactical nuclear strikes had been authorized by the World Council and ratified by the Allied World Army's Global Security Oversight Commission. Jude doubted that the nuclear strikes would contain the Nimbus any more than they would be able to stop its spread into the

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Arctic, Indian, Antarctic or Pacific Oceans in short order. Soon after, Jude knew, even the land-based food supplies would be wholly contaminated. Then the only people who would have a hope of being safe would be the ones underground, in the Ark Sites.

To that end, Colonel Jude had ordered his own select troops to kill everyone on the outside of those bunkers who had knowledge of the whereabouts of the Ark Sites. Jude's men had killed almost three hundred people in four days. General Roy Harrod, Jude's commander in the field, had been the last of the men killed; Jude took the General's life himself.

Jude had also advised the World Council to abandon the coastlines and turn them all into radioactive no-man's lands; get as many people inland as possible; set up as many isolated communities as possible. Incinerate the quarantine zones and everything between them and the Ark sites.

The World Council replied that they would be doing just that. Then they advised him there weren't enough resources to save even half of those who hadn't gone beneath the earth into the Ark Sites. In a few short weeks, Jude understood, nearly eleven billion people around the world would be dead.

INN was calling Jude's ascension to the head of all military operations for the United States of America a *coup*

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d'état; The Secret Service had ordered a full Presidential Detail be put onto protecting Jude; the Generals at the Pentagon who had survived Jude's so-called Night of the Long Knives acclaimed Jude as some kind of Caesar. As the President was now hidden somewhere in the Green Mountains, the rest of the Executive, Legislative and Judiciary branches of the Federal Government likewise scattered and buried, Jude accepted the duty of the Office, if not its political implications. But now he was on his way to a meeting of the Allied World Army's leaders, to discuss the best strategy for fighting the Nimbus. For as much as Jude feared that Humanity's days were numbered, he wanted to ensure that every last trace of the Nimbus was purged from this world before Mankind died out.

"Mister President," one of his military aides (Pentagon-appointed) said, "Sir, we've been advised that Operation Triton is about to commence."

Jude nodded. A good portion of the Atlantic Ocean was about to be vaporized by atomic fire.

"Will we be able to see the blast from here?"

"We're in a low orbit; we should have a commanding view, sir."

Jude nodded again.

"I don't need to see it," he said, "But prepare a full report along with video from the operation; I'll transmit it to President Clemens, personally."

"Begging the Colonel's pardon, sir," his aide said, "But President Clemens gave up command of this country and its military the minute the bunker doors closed on her."

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“And I have said otherwise,” Jude replied, “My only authority is over operations pertaining to the obliteration of the Nimbus Virus and all those who have been infected. The only oath I have taken is my Military Oath of Loyalty. I have not taken any oath of Presidential authority, nor have I been elected to this office. Ergo I am not currently President of anything except putting my foot up the ass of the next soldier who addresses me as *Mister President!* Tell me I’m making myself clear, mister!”

“Yes, sir,”



Majestic One banked, taking bearing south-west. Its fighter escort broke off to refuel as their replacements swept in. Whole squadrons flew the skies around them: troop transports, fighters, reconnaissance planes, bombers, fuel carriers, cargo planes and even commercial airliners. Jude had commandeered anything that could fly, anything that could carry ordinance and live Human beings. Civilians and military had been fed a steady diet Oil and Zip since joining Jude’s Majestic Legion, but only in quantities sufficient enough to build up in the blood. Those who didn’t have the genetic resistance to the Nimbus would be as safe as they could be. Infection in these people would be a slower process, buying the rest of them the time necessary to dispatch the Infected.

The waters were unsafe; any ship upon them or beneath them might well be Infected. That left the skies, not so rife with life as the sea. Jude had a sudden vision of the sea, the

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sky and space all interconnected, forming a single, large and infinite ocean of variable density. He could understand how easily the Nimbus must have spread throughout the universe...infecting one world after another with infinite patience. This wasn't about power or politics...this was about perpetuation, survival, propagation, and it would either be them or the Nimbus.

It wasn't long before this squadron met another fleet of military and civilian transports from another nation; then another and another. They were part of a long stream of aircraft flying gradually south. They were bringing with them as many uninfected Humans as they could find, along with as much hardware as they could get their hands on. The surface of the Earth was dead as far as Jude was concerned. However, humankind waited in hiding underground. Jude would dedicate the rest of his life to the cause of making it possible for them to return safely to the surface.



All orbital satellites had been scuttled. The Nimbus had enough advantages, including the public World Grid, their own telepathy, the military hardware they'd captured in consuming the rest of the world. But the Nimbus wouldn't be able to know they'd headed to the Antarctic. If the aircraft themselves didn't have Stealth-IV plating, there were in each squadron planes that could jam radar from seeing them. They'd deployed several hundred such aircraft, in order to create a massive blackout zone in the southern hemisphere. Even the

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Concord Space Stations had been destroyed prior to this operation; their uninfected crews adding greatly to the Allied World Army's ranks.

But the Nimbus was already aware of the planes moving south. When the satellites and the space stations were destroyed it began to watch the skies from the sea. When the radar surveillance of the south Atlantic went to static the Nimbus was there: Marine life rose to the surface, looking into the sky with a million eyes. Whales, dolphins, fish; anything with that could see outside of water. The planes were visible in the sky far above, moving like Heaven's Army of Angels as the sun shone down from the clouds above. Gabriel Ashe found the analogy fittingly ironic. Before being infused with the Nimbus, that's very likely how he would have interpreted this vision. The people in those planes had sworn themselves against the Nimbus; they believed they were fighting extinction. If they only understood. But for the sake of expediency, Ashe knew that they would have to be sacrificed. And so they would be, once the Nimbus' work on the rest of the surface of the planet was finished.



David Van Der Draas woke up and stepped out onto the small balcony of his apartment in Geneva. He lit his pipe, looking blearily out over the cold, rainy morning. There was no quiet calm to Geneva's mornings anymore. The roar of jet fighters echoing off the canyon walls of the city, the loudspeakers broadcasting information to the frightened,

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huddled, ghettoized pockets of humanity trapped within the city's fortified walls, the shouts and screams from the masses, themselves. The city smelled of fire and fuel, the skies above dulled with jet exhaust. There was no quiet, no sanctuary, no refuge in this city against the terror of the siege. For Geneva was under siege; the Infected were literally at the city gates, waiting for their opportunity to cross inside. Anti-aircraft batteries were scattered throughout the city, lest the Nimbus invade by the sky. The rivers were patrolled, the streets heavily guarded. The soldiers in their armoured biosafety suits looked frighteningly inhuman. Van Der Draas had pulled all the strings he had to make sure his wife and young daughter were safely stowed in the North-West European Ark Site. But he'd remained behind, because he felt that there was something he still needed to do.

Van Der Draas knew in his heart and soul that Humankind's days on Earth were numbered. The species was being wiped out, exterminated by this insidious virus that got smarter and more powerful with each new infection. But there was hope; there was a chance, perhaps, that mankind would not perish. David Van Der Draas' only hope lay in contacting the Ship, of warning them away from Earth. But as, for whatever reason, the Ship had sabotaged its own hyperlink beacon, how would he reach them? The question had plagued him since he'd said his tearful goodbyes to his family, knowing he would never see them again as they were escorted to the Ark. And Van Der Draas knew that this city would fall sooner rather than

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later. His oldest son, Yan, was a Private attached to the Dutch Contingent of the Allied World Army. After Holland fell, Yan's division was evacuated to Geneva, the next nearest surviving Human stronghold.

Yan sent a message to his father; their first conversation in years. David remembered it well. He still woke up at night, thinking about its content.

Father,

You must get Mother and Ana to the Ark Site. Conditions in Geneva are the same as they were in Amsterdam. The city will fall within weeks, perhaps days. Even with the extra armament and troop strength, this city is doomed.

It feels strange to write to you; it seems strange after so many years of silence between us. I feel for the first time that I can talk to you, as one man must be able to talk to another.

The Nimbus Virus will destroy us. Only those in the Ark Sites have a hope of survival. Our commanders have been very clear to us on that. We are to consider ourselves dead; that this is hell we fight in: killing a deadly menace that looks and talks and acts as people we know, but that moves and strikes with a singularity of purpose that nothing Human could ever conceive of.

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Mourn me now, father. For though my heart beats, I am dead. For I will fight the Nimbus until either it is or I am dead. Should I be killed, it will be by one of my comrades, freeing me before the Nimbus can consume surely even my soul. Should I live again, it will be because the Nimbus has been defeated.

And Father, should you still believe in God then pray to Him that we live through this. Pray to Him that the Nimbus does not destroy us all.

The words terrified David Van Der Draas; the words struck him dumb with despair so profound he could not name it. And the words made him realize that he could not, would not, himself become a bystander to Fate. He would do something; he could not fight directly as his son, but there was another Ark Site; one that he could reach, one that he could rescue. With communications failed aboard the Ship and the Hyperlink Relay Network out of commission in the greater area of space, there was a dangerous possibility that Colonel Bloom would order the Ship return to Earth. If she did...

Van Der Draas vowed to not let that happen. He summoned together every member of his team not sealed in the Ark. They returned to the Hyperlink Beacon Station in Geneva. They were granted an armed escort and guard to accomplish this task. Night and day they toiled at the problem. How would they get the Ship to receive their message, if it had deliberately blocked all communications with Earth?

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This morning, as Van Der Draas stood at the balcony smoking his pipe, he wondered again how long it would be. Gunshots echoed from somewhere up the street: two shots, loud; from a rifle, a military weapon. The hissing roar of the flame thrower came next, then the smell of burning flesh. It made Van Der Draas shudder. The smell was obscenely close to the smell of flame-cooking pork. It made him retch even as it made his mouth water. No, there was no calm left to Geneva's early morning.



This last mission was turning desperate. The grim refusal to accept failure despite it's growing presence was giving way...the frustration of loss was upon them. But Van Der Draas kept looking at the pattern, the signals, the rules that governed them, the mathematical necessities...there was a solution...he could almost see it.

"Let's review," he said, in German, "What do we know about the failure of the hyperlink between the Ship and Earth?" This brought multiple groans from his staff. They were tired of this; they were tired of everything. Some of them wanted to try fleeing, just in case they could. Van Der Draas couldn't yet bear to tell them that it was too late...that the barbarians were at the gate, the hordes waiting to destroy them all.

"Come! I said let's review! What do we know?"

"We know the Ship initiated it," Günter Heller said, irritably, "We know the Ship desynchronized itself from our

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Hyperlink.” Heller was one of the operation systems architects.

“We also know that the Ship kept the signal out of synch by oscillating its own target frequencies,” Manon Neill supplied; she in charge of the hyperlink astronomy systems.

“Yes,” Van Der Draas said, “Yes...they have to oscillate their receiver signals to make sure we can’t synch to transmit and receive theirs.”

“Ja, ja,” Heller answered, “And the Ship would have to track our own beacon oscillation to make sure we don’t spontaneously synch.”

“A spontaneous synch is astronomically impossible,” Van Der Draas said.

“Impossible, yes,” Neill countered, “But not improbable. Remember: Hyperlink transmissions rely heavily on quantum probability states, which are in constant flux. It *could* happen. So the Ship has to keep an eye on our oscillation pattern.”

“Which means the Ship needs a direct signal to us,” Heller said, “Of course!”

“Very low bandwidth; just something to ‘ping’,” Van Der Draas said, “We can isolate that signal and use it to contact the Ship.”

“The Ship would switch to another channel before we could reach anyone.” Neill replied.

“Not if we send the signal to the Ship Control Entity itself.” Van Der Draas said.

“What?”

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“It’s signalled us before,” Van Der Draas said, “When they arrived in the Sagittarius Nebula there was a time differential of minus six minutes; relative to us, the Ship had yet to enter time warp. It advised us that it would contact us again in six minutes, and not to advise our version of the Ship.” Heller shook his head.

“That one still mixes me up.”

“Don’t worry. Of all the people who could have figured it out, it was my intern. The one who watches Star Trek. We will send the signal to the Ship, but we will set the co-ordinates of the signal to exactly ten minutes before the hyperlink beacon began to fail. We’ll advise the Ship that we know it is severing hyperlink communication. We’ll advise the Ship of the situation with the Nimbus here, and then advise it to relay the message to the crew only after communications fully fail, so it is too late for them to turn around and come back.”

“The Nimbus must already be aware of where we are,” Heller said, “Even by simple process of elimination they must have figured it out. They’ll be expecting us to try something like this.”

“We’re going to die today, aren’t we?” Neill asked. Van Der Draas said nothing; he only nodded his head.



The Nimbus had spies everywhere. How could it not? Not everything that was Infused could Infuse other things. But they could nonetheless listen, look and learn. Flies were ideal. Fruit flies especially so. Tiny insects that you’d never even

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know were there. They could sit in a room anywhere, very easily hitching a ride on people through quarantine zones and decontamination areas. A fruit fly was far too small to deliver a viable amount of the Nimbus virus. Too few in number and the cells of the virus would be defenceless and easily destroyed by the body's immune system before it could be taken over. As Van Der Draas sussed out how to communicate with the Ship, the Nimbus learned of it.

The invasion of Geneva began immediately after. A massive explosion breached the security wall west of the city. A second explosion struck as first responders arrived on-scene. A third blast in the east knocked out a perimeter gate; the Infected started coming through on foot, in cars, on bikes. As Geneva's defence forces split to deal with the two attacks, a fourth explosion blew open the south gate into the city and the true invasion force poured in to the city.

The members of the World Council and their offices had been evacuated from Geneva long ago, sealed in their own Ark site far from the city. Geneva was a legitimate nuclear target. But no strike would come; the Nimbus knew this, because the last of the submarine nuclear missile bases and missile-launching nuclear submarines had already been taken over. The nuclear silos in the United States had been scuttled, as had those in England, France, and Central Africa. The arsenals in the Russian Consortium and in the Middle East and India were in Nimbus control. The aircraft capable of

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delivering nuclear payloads were heading south across the Antarctic.

The Nimbus moved and Geneva fell.



“We’ve locked on to the Ship!” Neill exclaimed. The sirens were sounding from outside, in the compound of the University of Geneva. Even this deep inside the beacon control building they could hear the gunshots, the screams.

“Send the text burst now,” Van Der Draas replied.

“Sending,”

“Heller, go barricade the door please,” Van Der Draas said, “We need as much time as possible to send the message.” Heller, stern-faced but wide-eyed nodded his head and moved off.

“Receiving reply message from the Ship,” Neill said.

“Show me,”

THIS IS THE SHIP. CONFIRMING RECEIPT OF MESSAGE FROM YOUR TIME OFFSET. WARNING:HIGH-TIME OFFSET TRANSMISSIONS SUCH AS PREVIOUS RECEIVED CAN RESULT IN RELATIVISTIC CHANGES TO THE TIMELINE. PLEASE PROCEED WITH CAUTION. TRANSMIT MESSAGE OF NIMBUS INVASION. THE SHIP WILL RELAY THE TRANSMISSION AFTER IT IS NO LONGER POSSIBLE TO COMMUNICATE WITH EARTH. DO NOT ATTEMPT TO MAKE ANY FURTHER COMMUNICATION.

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Van Der Draas swallowed hard against a lump in his throat as he read the text. His stomach flopped over in fear. Too late for him, now. Not too late for the people in the Arks; not too late for the people aboard the Ship. God help them all.

“What do we do now?” Neill asked.

“Broadcast live to the Ship,” he said, going over to an equipment locker. He opened it and selected a handheld video camera.

“Link this camera to the broadcast,” Van Der Draas said, “And if there’s still time, get out of here.”

“There’s no time left,” she said, “I’ll stay here...make sure the signal gets through.”

Van Der Draas nodded his head, trying not to speak, seeing that Neill was, herself, on the verge of breaking down.

“Thank you,” he said, switching on the camera and waiting for the link to establish itself.

“Hurry, David,” she said, as Van Der Draas dashed with the camera for the fire stairs.



The city had turned into a nightmare. Van Der Draas was struck dumb as he panned out across the city of Geneva. Fires burning everywhere; people running, screaming...why was it, he mused, that after so many thousands of years, did Europeans still die when their cities were besieged and invaded by the enemy? How many family lines had been obliterated, how many whole races exterminated and forgotten? The Nordic and the Irish all had their tales of the Little People...there were tribes of Pygmies in Africa...how many

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racers of Man had been exterminated and turned into myth?
What was one more?

In the streets of the campus that housed the Earth Hyperlink Beacon, people were running, screaming...he caught one of the adjacent buildings bursting into flames from within. Van Der Draas caught site of an Allied World Army Vasquez-class tank aim its turret gun and fire. A second later another nearby building exploded and crumbled. He watched one young woman get crushed beneath a pile of rubble. The screams suddenly reached crescendo. From the smoke and rubble, from the ruins they came. Van Der Draas wanted to believe it was a hoax, but this nightmare was all too real, all too exactly as he had pictured it.

“I pray you can see this,” he called into the camera’s microphone and out, into the vastness of the empty light years between him and the Ship, “I pray to God that this transmission reaches the Ship.”

Suddenly and more terrifying than when the screams began, they were now ending, fewer and fewer to be heard. Pockets of Humans were chased, surrounded, crowded over and then moments later everyone simply walked away.

“This is happening everywhere,” Van Der Draas choked, praying not to let the panic into his voice as he spoke the last words Mankind would ever broadcast from Earth, “It’s happening in every city around the globe! The people have been infected...they’ve been invaded by something...”

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He changed his grip on the camera, turning it to face him, waiting for the auto-focus light to signal that the picture was optimal, “Colonel Bloom, if you are hearing this, then please stay away! Do not return to Earth! For the love of God, do not return!”

He dropped the camera as he heard gunfire behind him. He looked out on the street. Armoured soldiers were firing into a crowd of the Infected, but they staggered, they didn't fall. Their wounds healed over quickly and efficiently. They moved forwards. The troops started using flame throwers, with only somewhat better results: The Infected kept advancing on them, until the bodies collapsed altogether. It was like watching ants fight. The Nimbus moved with a singularity of purpose. They spread as though they were a single organism. They overwhelmed the soldiers effortlessly.

Van Der Draas heard footsteps behind him. He didn't want to turn around...he knew what was waiting behind him...he knew what he would see...who he would see...

“David, it's all right,”

He closed his eyes, shaking his head.

“No, please,” he whined.

“I promise you, David; everything is going to be all right.”

Slowly, Van Der Draas turned around. The Infected were everywhere around him. Even below, under the ledge. If he jumped, they'd be there to catch him. Worst of all, Heller and Neill were there, standing patiently.

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“It’s all right, David,” Heller said, “You can’t imagine how *incredible* it is!”

“Don’t be afraid,” Neill encouraged, “David, you’ll be with us, with everyone soon. It’s absolutely safe.”

“No, God, No!” Van Der Draas screamed. He fumbled through his pockets for the gun that he kept there, but they were too quick. Neill rushed him and jumped, pushing them out over the ledge. She kissed him, biting his lip until it bled. Van Der Draas screamed, but then the Nimbus zeroed in on his cerebral cortex, flooding his brain...and he felt absolute relief as the waiting hands below caught him.



Even with the arctic weather gear, the valley was incredibly cold. The heater in his suit barely kept Jude’s temperature above hypothermic. The sun was an angry orb of yellow-white light, spearing coldly down upon them and reflected up, back off the ice. No precipitation in this valley, because of particular wind conditions around it. With sentries stationed all around the valley, a radar net and motion sensor grid set up on the ground and in the sky overhead, this valley could keep them safe for years. The bunker was over a kilometre below. Jude was still trying to get the surface-to-air and anti-airstrike countermeasure barrages set up and working properly, which is why he didn’t realize there were nuclear missiles inbound until he saw the flare of their re-entry from orbit, directly overhead.

“Holy Jesus,” he muttered.

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And then the other missiles, those gliding near the ice and below radar level streaked in towards the valley at hypersonic speed. The explosion would have been visible from space, had there been anyone out there to see.

EIGHTEEN COUNTERSTRIKE

Jude was snapped back to reality as the countermeasure battery nearest to him spun on its pivot, tracking the incoming nukes. The rocket exhaust port was dangerously close by. He broke into a sprint, the bitterly cold, dry air burning in his chest as he ran. A burst of violent heat behind him signalled the launch of the anti-missile defence system. Other rocket batteries were tracking in and launching. A safe distance from the exhaust flames, Jude stopped to catch his breath and look at the sky. He counted a dozen inbound nukes; three had already been struck by the Ballistic Missile Defence system, exploding without detonating their nuclear payload. The debris was plummeting from the sky. Two more missiles were blown apart as he watched, and more rockets were firing into the sky to take out the remaining warheads. They were far from safe,

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however. That nukes had been launched on this valley could only mean that the Nimbus knew they were here. It wouldn't be long before there was another attack, and this time they'd have fewer BMD rockets to throw back at the attack.

"Shit," he hissed, heading for the command post.

Jude burst through the door, into a storm of shouting, yelling arguing voices. It was baffling that so few people could possibly make so much noise.

"How many planes are refuelled?" Jude shouted, to be heard over the din, "Hey! How many planes?"

"Less than half," a bespectacled subordinate replied, "The cargo planes and some of the passenger transports."

"How long to finish fuelling?"

The officer consulted a handheld console.

"Six hours,"

Jude paced.

"Not good enough," Jude said, "We need to evacuate this location in the next sixty minutes."

"Sir, where to? There's no other secure location left on Earth!"

Jude's mind scrambled, desperately considering and rejecting a dozen different ideas as he went. Antarctica had been their last hope. He knew they didn't have long before the Nimbus launched another attack against this valley...this valley. Maybe their haven could be found elsewhere...

"There was a survey," he said, "Done about five, six years back. They discovered a network of caves underneath a mountain range in central Antarctica."

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“I remember!” One of the officers said, “It was found in the Prince Olav Mountains; the cave network extended deep below the ice shelf and into the bedrock underneath.”

“Get everything we can find on those caves, and start the evacuation,” Jude ordered. The survey in question had been to the Transantarctic Mountain Range. The discovery of the cave network had been quite accidental. Exploration of the caves had revealed a subterranean ecosystem the likes of which had never been seen: luminous moss and lichens glowed from walls. Primitive plants and animals were flourishing in an environment heated by natural geothermal vents. If they could reach the cave network in time, Jude knew, they could seal the entrance and have refuge underground for as long as they needed. They just needed to reach the mountains, the caves. They just needed time.



Around the Earth orbit hundreds of thousands of satellites. Some of them are defunct relics, slowly spiralling back towards the Earth destined for a Viking’s funeral as they burn against the friction of the upper atmosphere. Others are lost and forgotten, in orbits gone to the catalogue. Much of what spins in orbit around Earth is simple debris; components of orbital objects broken apart from stellar collisions, lost tools, heat tiles or other parts of vehicles and stations, waste material ejected and forgotten. But much of what is in orbit is still functional, functioning and in use. Many of those still-working satellites are nothing more than very sophisticated eyes. Most

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of those eyes stare down at the Earth, but some stare up and into the Heavens.

The people who monitored those satellites from observation posts, tracking stations and control rooms around the globe, were part of the Nimbus, now. And so it was that when the first images from space began to appear on console screens, the whole of the Nimbus was alerted to the new threat. For the first time since becoming infused with the Nimbus, Gabriel Ashe felt afraid.

The ship crossing Heliopause was long and slender, tapering to a point. It was nearly ten kilometres from stem to stern. Its far end was a large sphere from which the main, needle-like hull protruded. There was no surface detail to the thing; it was utterly smooth, silver-grey and moved with a fluid grace even as it slowed from its faster-than-light cruising speed. It was a ship that was well known by the Nimbus' collective memory: a Zohor destroyer.

Almost immediately, the world's tactical nuclear arsenals were targeted out towards space, as measurements were taken to determine the velocity and trajectory of the incoming Zohor ship. Forgotten orbital weapons platforms, overlooked by Jude and the Allied World Army and long-since declared illegal by international treaties ignored by most military superpowers, moved into new orbits as they prepared a first line of defence.

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The question of how the Zohor found Earth was mulled over at the same time. It was David Van Der Draas that offered the most likely scenario, moments after the question was posed to their collective mind: The signal he had sent before being infused showed the Nimbus taking control of Geneva. Earth and the Ship had been transmitting via the hyperlink for several days before the signal synch was lost. Geneva kept making regular broadcasts long after synch was lost. In the history of the Aeons War handed down through the Nimbus collective memory, it was established the Zohor had used the hyperlink beacon network against the League and the Nimbus by backtracking the signals to planets, ships and stations. Obviously the Zohor had detected the hyperlink transmissions to and from Earth. Subsequently, when they confirmed the Nimbus on Earth, the Zohor had made it a priority target. The only question left was how many ships the Zohor had sent.



“The survey reports these caves are inhabited,” Jude said, reading from his handheld console, “Photoluminescent lichens and moss; tri...trilobite animals, primitive insects. It’s a unique ecosystem, unlike anything else on Earth. Unfortunately, the entire network will have to be sanitized by fire. We can’t take the chance the Nimbus is already down there.”

His subordinate looked at him questioningly.

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“If the Nimbus is down there, wouldn’t incinerating everything in the caves alert them to our presence?”

“I’m more concerned about keeping the Nimbus out,” Jude replied, “And getting rid of it if it’s already down there. Anything in there that’s infected could move against us. If they are infected, we have to destroy them to protect ourselves.”

“But that’ll bring the Nimbus right to our doorstep,” Jude shook his head.

“The caves are deep down enough that it won’t matter. They’re essentially a massive, naturally occurring bunker. We seal the entrance and go deep, the Nimbus could hit us as hard as they want and never hit us. Our position in the caves would allow us to defend against a direct assault. We’ll use ALI gelatine in the incineration.”

Accelerated Liquid Incendiary gelatine was a variant of the compound used in the incendiary ammunition Jude preferred against the Nimbus. Once it ignited it spread rapidly, rising to coat walls, floors, ceilings, anything in its path, converting whatever it came into contact with into fuel to prolong its burn. A few ounces of the liquid, when used properly, were enough to burn down an entire city block.

Jude sent demolitions teams in biosafety suits down into the caves. The network of caverns had been mapped extensively by the survey years before; Jude’s troops knew exactly where to place the drums of ALI to achieve maximum incineration. The fire would burn for roughly two hours before

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it exhausted its fuel supply. Then it was a matter of clearing out the smoke and moving in. The fine ash residue that would be left following the blaze would be completely harmless and utterly devoid of life. They would move people into the caves and seal themselves off before the end of the day.



The Zohor ship had been travelling very close to the speed of light as it crossed Heliopause into the solar system. When it was caught by the satellites in orbit around the Earth, the images were already almost fourteen hours old. The Zohor ship was slowing down, but it would still reach Earth in just over an hour. Using satellites from the Full Sky Survey astronomy program as well as different probes throughout the solar system they were able to extrapolate the likeliest vector for its arrival. The missiles were targeted and launch sequences began.

The Zohor ship required a nearly incalculable amount of energy to decelerate from the speed of light over the relatively small distance of the solar system. Where the Ship employed a captured toroidal black hole to generate the near-infinite amounts of power it used to warp time and accelerate to faster-than-light velocities, the Zohor tapped directly into the quantum field to extract the power they needed, which meant that even after breaking and halting, the Zohor was still able to power its weapons and defensive systems as the missiles fired from Earth homed in on their target.

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The first volley of missiles was obliterated, wiped out by a single, deadly beam of energy from the Zohor ship. The forward hull of the needle-ship split open into four segments, creating a channel between them as they rose away from the ship at forty-five degree angles. A flare of hot white energy glowed from within the cavity, steadily growing brighter. At the far end of the Zohor ship, inside the massive sphere that housed its critical systems, an orb of solid iridium nearly thirty meters in diameter dropped into a chamber that ran the length of the destroyer.

Iridium is the second-densest element, very similar to platinum. While it is exceedingly rare on Earth it exists in abundance in space. Its mass, high melting point and resistance to corrosion made it the Zohor's preferred material to use as a projectile in their weapons. The Zohor's weapon of choice was the mass driver, which used a series of electromagnetic coils to accelerate projectiles to extremely high velocities. The Zohor ships were, in essence, little more than gargantuan mass drivers.

The Zohor ship selected its target and calculated the firing solution almost instantly. The iridium slug was accelerated the length of the Zohor ship, deploying at a speed of nearly one hundred kilometres a second. It hit the Earth's atmosphere and became an incandescent comet. It took less than ten seconds for the slug to drop from the sky and slam home on its mark. The city of Mumbai was home to nearly

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twenty-five million people. It was the largest city on Earth. As such, it had been the Zohor's first target.

The city was annihilated in the first strike. The impact levelled everything within ten kilometres, creating a massive ring of fire blown on winds travelling almost a thousand kilometres an hour. Hundreds of millions of tonnes of debris were thrown up into the atmosphere, raining down across the Indian subcontinent. Because it was a coastal city, a massive tidal wave was thrown out, driving across the Indian Ocean to slam into coast of Oman. Half of the Indian continent was blanketed in flaming debris, and nearly one hundred million were killed in the first minute following the attack. The explosion caused by the impact was loud enough to be heard around the world. Already the Zohor ship was aiming and firing again.



They were nearly done loading the last of the heavy equipment into the caves: portable atomic generators would provide heat, light and power; agricloning systems for their food, sewage recycling and reclamation systems for their water, and atmosphere reprocessors for their air. The basic necessities of life would be covered as they began their new lives underground.

Jude stood outside in the cold, waning light of the last sunset he would ever see. He breathed deep of the crisp, bitter arctic air, looking around the icy wasteland. The surface had

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been lost to the Nimbus. He could only hope that one day they would find a way to fight back, to purge the Earth, reclaim the warm places and see the sky again. Jude did not expect it to happen in his lifetime. In all his life, he had never expected to see the end of Mankind. He didn't feel horror at the prospect, instead a grim sadness filled him. He had seen war, he had seen how it turned cities and countries to ruin, seen how lives were forever changed by it. This was just another war to him. The scale was larger, the devastation more absolute, but as in all wars, the survivors would adapt. As with all wars, there would come a time when they would rebuild.

“Sir, we're ready,”

Jude turned around. His Lieutenant stood solemnly by the mouth of the cave, waiting.

“Everyone in?”

The Lieutenant nodded.

“Let's go,” Jude said.

It took almost ten minutes to descend to the first chamber of the caves. The first hundred meters of the entrance above had been lined with explosives, as had the last hundred meters leading to the chamber. When Jude crossed into their new underground camp he gave the signal and the explosives were detonated. Stone collapsed down and the mountain shifted imperceptibly, as the entrance to the caves collapsed. The rumble and roar of the blast echoed down, announcing to all that they had been buried alive; the last members of the Human race were now sealed beneath the Transantarctic mountains



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Every available missile was launched against the Zohor. They deployed into space even as a massive, burning debris cloud began filling the atmosphere. The Zohor had devastated the ten largest cities on Earth in a few short minutes; nearly two billion people killed by the subsequent firestorms and shockwaves; the burning debris had set fire to most of Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Thousands of missiles crossed into space, homing in on the Zohor. But the missiles were slow and clumsy, weak by comparison to their intended target. Though they had the potential to destroy the Zohor ship, it didn't allow them to get close enough to pose a threat, taking them out with a minor exertion of its power. The missiles were a distraction, nothing more. As the last of the Earth's arsenal was depleted, the Zohor resumed selecting targets by population density; preparing to finish destroying life on this world.

But in the time that it was preoccupied wiping out the last of Earth's nuclear arsenal, another ship had crossed Heliopause and was zeroing in on Earth. This ship was much smaller than the Zohor vessel and was moving considerably faster, travelling in an altered spacetime reality relative to the Zohor and Earth. It took only seconds to reach its destination; time enough for the Zohor to destroy Shanghai and Seoul and devastate the rest of Asia. The Zohor had detected and identified the incoming vessel, and had classified it as a threat. The Zohor ship came about to respond to the threat. The smaller ship was cylindrical, tapered at either end to points. It

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pulsed, luminous and blue-white as it approached. The Zohor fired a blast of energy at the vessel, but the attack was deflected, not even slowing the new ship down. It countered, firing a single pulse of energy at the Zohor. The Zohor ship went dead in space. As the smaller ship continued past towards earth it fired again, two more pulses. When these struck, the Zohor ship was consumed in a wash of power, disintegrating.

The Earth's atmosphere was a black tumult of fire, lightning, deadly wind and debris. The new ship plunged into the maelstrom unfettered. Another pulse of energy was fired into the atmosphere and as the pulse expanded the storm was stilled and the debris in the atmosphere was consumed. By the time the ship was in the lower atmosphere, the skies were calm and clearing. The devastation across Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Eastern Europe was absolute; nothing could reverse it, but Western Europe, the Americas and Oceania had been spared the worst.

The Nimbus became aware of this new ship when the atmosphere cleared. It began tracking as it sped towards Europe, heading northwest to Geneva. Gabriel Ashe was there and he had no doubt this new arrival was coming to him. He could sense the presence of the alien within the ship, but he could not make sense of its mind. There was something disconcertingly familiar about it, though; he didn't understand how or why, but he believed that this alien knew him, that he knew it.

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It was night time in the caves. As they no longer had the sky to rely on to tell dawn from dusk, Jude had set all clocks to be synchronized and then ordered the lights to be switched on and off in twelve-hour rotations. Certain caves he would later order closed off; the agricloning facilities, the atmosphere, water and waste management, all the heavy machinery would be kept operational around the clock and would not be subject to day and night, though their staff would rotate in and out.

For now Jude had other concerns, such as keeping those machines running. They had some light manufacturing equipment; much of the hardware was military and so was subject to easy field repair, but they had no real facilities to fix anything if there was a major breakdown. They only had partial metallurgy for the caves, and although there were some deposits of the raw materials they would need, mining them was another problem altogether. They'd had to abandon a lot of equipment back in the valley. What they faced now was hardship and Jude knew it would get worse.

As he walked a token patrol through the caverns, he heard the silent sobs and murmured laments of the men and women who were under his charge. Not all of them were military, of course; most of them had the markers of immunity to the Nimbus, but not all. These people were frightened, hopeless. Their morale was vital if this operation, the

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operation to keep mankind alive, was to succeed. Unfortunately Jude was a military commander, not a community leader. He didn't know how to hold together groups of people larger than a platoon. He certainly didn't know how to handle frightened and despondent civilians; there were over ten thousand people down here and already they were looking to him as if he could do something to make it all better. He had no words of comfort, no inspirational speeches. He felt a mixture of pity and contempt for all of them.

Jude didn't see fear as a weakness; quite the opposite, he knew fear could be the source of great personal strength. But the way these people wallowed...the way they despaired without trying to find a way out of their agony...that was weakness; that was what he hated.

“These people need help,”

Jude turned around. The young woman's voice was issued as a challenge. She had dark hair and looked to be in her mid twenties, of mixed descent. There was something strangely familiar about her.

“They need someone to comfort them, to give them hope. They need to be told what to do, or at least what to expect.”

“Who are you?” Jude demanded, “And what makes you think you have anything to tell me?”

“My name is Laura Echohawk,” she said, “And what makes me know I have something to tell you is the fact that I'm one of them; I'm one of those people, and I'm just as

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scared and hurt and...fucking devastated as they are. Everything's been destroyed, Colonel; everyone we've ever loved, everything we've ever known is gone. We're buried alive at the bottom of the fucking world. We need something to do; we need something to focus on. We need anything that will at least give us the illusion of doing something to change our situation."

Jude studied her, now seeing the resemblance between her and her father and her mother. He'd never met Margaret Bloom, but her headstrong, defiant temper and determination were legendary. As to her father, Jude had gone up against him just prior to the Ship's unearthing. Echohawk had the distinction of being one of the few people to survive being on the opposing end of an encounter with Isaac Jude.

"Well, Laura Echohawk, if you have such keen insight into what needs to be done, tell me: what is it you would have these people do? What tasks can be assigned them? Just how am I supposed to take their minds off the fact that they are all that's left of the Human race?"

Laura shook her head, a look of contempt on her face.

"I don't know, Colonel," she said, "All I do know is that you have to do something. Otherwise, the Nimbus has already won."



Gabriel Ashe watched the small, blue ship drop slowly from the sky, curving slowly down towards the strip of parkland where he and the others stood. The ship was conical

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in shape now, with a graduated curve like a seashell. It made absolutely no sound as it drifted down. He didn't recognize the design of the ship; he had no knowledge of the Race that must have built it. It was less than five meters in length, not even two meters high. No landing struts extended from it; instead, its lower hull stretched and flattened out. The ship touched down, and the front of the ship curled back, irising open.

The air changed, and it smelled now as if a thunderstorm were about to break. From within the alien ship before them a hissing crackling sound could be heard, slowly getting louder. A bright light was forming in the darkened interior of the ship. At first Ashe thought the light was growing brighter, but he realized that it was actually moving outward. A ball of energy poured out and onto the ground. Ashe watched as it grew into a vaguely humanoid form, the light seemingly contained within a thin film. A wash of shocked recognition filled Ashe. He remembered from his Human days; the hallucinations, the dreams of the Angel of the Lord. The being that was standing before him now was that Angel, straight out of his dreams.

“Greetings, Gabriel Ashe,” the Angel said, in a voice that seared like fire, “Have no fear of our presence. You will not be exposed to the force inside of us. The membrane covering us will insulate you from our true form.”

“What...who are you?”

“We are that which tried to contact you and so many others for so long. We are the servant of the Nimbus,

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conjoined to it, as are you. We are the Nai'Marak, Gabriel Ashe, and we have come to help you revive and restore the Nimbus.”

In combat situations, a massive first strike by one opponent against the other will catch that enemy by surprise, giving the attacking forces a clear advantage during the ensuing battle. Defensive forces must quickly regroup and reorganize in order to mount an effective counteroffensive and in order to survive.

NINETEEN
FRENZY

The Xelhuan Expanse had once marked the edge of the League of Worlds' territory. It was hundreds of millions of light years across, an unfathomable, empty void. Few attempts had ever been made to explore it, let alone to travel beyond its borders. That was until the Aeons War, until the Exodus. Then the League used it as a way station on the long route from its known territories as they fled the Nimbus and the Zohor.

Beyond the Xelhuan Expanse was another galactic cluster, a much smaller one than the cluster that had been home to the League, and along the fringes of its territory, the Earth. The Ship came out in the space between galaxies, an uncharted region that had only ever been seen by a rare few of the League's most intrepid explorers.

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“For all anyone in the League would have known,” Peter Paulson explained to Colonel Bloom as they sat together on the Command Deck’s observation lounge, “The Xelhuan Expanse might have been the edge of the universe, itself.”

“I thought the universe was infinite,” Major Benedict said from beside them. Commander Castaneda stood at the railing, looking down into the crew pit below. The dome above and all around them was black; infinitely, opaquely black.

“Even an infinite universe must necessarily have a point of singularity,” Castaneda said, “The edge of the universe is the point between where the universe has expanded to, and where it has not yet been able to expand.”

Bloom, Paulson and Benedict looked at her, stunned.

“Why do you lot always look so surprised to learn I know these things?” Castaneda asked.

Doctor N’Banga cleared his throat.

“Back on-topic: the edge of the universe would be impossible to travel beyond, or even near to,” he supplied in his lilting African Tenor, “It would be moving perpetually away from us in all directions at the speed of light. Even travelling faster than the speed of light we could never catch up to it because of the sheer radioactive output of the singularity’s edge; anything that got too close would just be demolecularized. We’d also be able to see such radioactive output from millions of light years away.”

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“Then the Xelhuan wasn’t the edge of the universe,” Bloom said, “We’re not in a new universe; just another part of our own.”

“QED,” N’banga replied.

“Then my next question should be obvious,” Bloom said, “How do we know that the Zohor or the Nimbus haven’t already been here?”

“We don’t,” Paulson answered, “We can only assume that the Exodus route was mapped out ahead of time and that they made sure to plot it through a section of space unknown to either party.”

Bloom sighed and stared up at the blank, dark ceiling. The coordinates given to the Ship from the Hub should have brought them out right on top of the next marker along the Exodus. They had no charts of this area, and no way of knowing if they were now in enemy territory.

“With no points of reference how do you tell where you’re going?” Benedict asked, voicing Bloom’s thoughts.

“So the first thing we have to do is find something to use as a point of reference,” Bloom said.

“Already working on it, Colonel,” Captain Decker said, as he ascended to the observation lounge, “The Ship began deploying faster than light probes ten minutes before we came out of stasis.”

Bloom nodded.

“Good,” she said, “Anything?”

Decker shook his head.

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“Navigation over as exponential a distance as we’ve been travelling isn’t anywhere close to pinpoint. The Ship’s acceptable margins of error in this instance are plus or minus one and a half million light years.”

“That’s acceptable?” Bloom asked, incredulous, “We don’t even know what we’re looking for; how is the Ship supposed to locate it, in a grid a million and a half light years wide?”

“In the event we don’t find anything, we have to return to the Hub,” Decker replied, “Update the navigation files and try again along a different route. That’s how the Exodus was established; multiple routes from multiple locations.”

“Until we find something,” Bloom said, “Let’s maintain stasis for all passengers and nonessential personnel.”



Bloom watched the probes deploy from the observation blister of the Ship’s main hangar. They looked like smaller versions of the Bugs; compact, but with a corkscrew-like antenna from the forward section; they’d earned the nickname Narwhal for their appearance. Fired away from the Ship it didn’t take long for one of the Narwhals to turn into nothing but a brilliant flare of blue light, accelerating to the speed of light and beyond as they went. When they hit the lightspeed barrier they seemed to slow to a halt and grow dim before suddenly accelerating away in a brighter and brighter flare until they curved away from the horizon of visibility. It was hypnotic to watch in the dark.

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But it was also frustrating to feel this helpless, to only have a passive role in the unfolding events. They were all operating outside the bounds of their expertise; outside the bounds of anyone's expertise. The only hope they had was that the Exodus would lead them through this dark nothing.

“ATTENTION, PROBE CONTACT HAS BEEN MADE,” The Ship announced, “ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY SEVEN LIGHT YEARS ON A DIRECT HEADING FIFTY-SIX DEGREES ON X – NEGATIVE – Z.” Bloom spun to the wall beside the observation blister and toggled the link to the Command Deck

“Colonel Bloom to Command,” she said, “What's going on?”

On the Command Deck, Captain Decker turned away from his control station to look out over the crew pit.

“One of the probes has made a contact, Colonel,” he said, “I don't have any information other than that at this time; report to the command deck if you want to know more.”

“On my way,” Bloom said.

Decker turned from his console to the command deck below.

“Tactical, what have we got?”

“A series of large objects, unidentified composition; grouping and drift pattern suggests a single object that broke apart.”

Benedict had arrived at the Command Deck. Instead of going up to the observation lounge he went to the Command Station.

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“Captain, could that debris field be the next point on our journey?” he asked.

Decker shook his head.

“The wreckage, if that’s what it is, is too small to have been another space station, too big to be anything like a hyperlink beacon.”

Bloom and Castaneda arrived, joining the impromptu conference at Captain Decker’s command station.

“Would they use hyperlink beacons along the Exodus?” Benedict asked.

“That’s debateable,” Castaneda supplied, “The Zohor used the hyperlink beacons to track their enemies; in theory however, this section of the cosmos should be or should have been well out of their territory.”

“How do we know we’re far from the Zohor?” Benedict asked, glancing up at her.

“Because the Hub was still there,” Castaneda said, shrugging, “They would have destroyed it if they’d have found it. The Zohor didn’t even know about Hiddek Uhl.”

“Your orders, Colonel?” Captain Decker asked. Bloom frowned.

“Maintain our present position,” she said, “We’ll send a scout to the object and decide what to do from there.”

“Colonel, if we’re aware of them, they are doubtless aware of us,” Castaneda said, “The Ship’s defences are as of yet untested. We have to have at the very least an escape trajectory plotted; one that doesn’t lead directly back to the Hub.”

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“Agreed,” she said, “Commander, you work with Captain Decker’s team on plotting an escape solution. In the meantime, let’s use the Ship’s sensors to determine what we can about that debris. Once we have our escape vector plotted, we’ll send a scout team in.”

“With the Colonel’s permission,” Benedict said, “I’d like to lead that team.”

Bloom turned to Benedict.

“Really, Exo?”

Benedict shrugged.

“I got a taste for it on Hiddek Uhl; walking an alien world, exploring the ruins; I’d also like to experience what it’s like to fly through a wormhole; I haven’t had the pleasure, yet. Also, I’m the best fucking pilot under your command.”

Bloom smiled.

“Well put, Exo; okay. You’ll lead the mission.”



The three Bugs sat on the main deck of the hangar, pointed towards the launch bay. The two smaller craft were Hornets; the third was a Beetle-class transport. Inside the staging area that led to the hangar deck Major Benedict stood suited up for space flight along with the other top pilots of Hornet Squadron, Major Theo “Esquire” Reeves and Captain Hud “Bonus Round” Paxton. They were accompanied by the Alien Studies team put together for the scout flight: Peter Paulson, Sonia Aiziz and Matthew N’banga. The pilots stood facing the civilians.

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“In order to reach the debris field we’ll need to perform a wormhole jump,” Benedict explained, “This is a violent and chaotic experience. Some of our pilots who’ve been through a wormhole claim to have experienced pain, others no. We would recommend that you remain harnessed in to your flight chairs until we have reached the other side of the wormhole.”

Aiziz swallowed nervously.

“Is there any danger?” she asked.

Benedict shrugged.

“We’re dealing with alien technology that is capable of doing things we can’t even begin to imagine,” he said, “It’s going to force open a quantum filament that technically exists outside the bounds of reality and only in the realm of probability. We’re going to be expelled through the filament across several hundred light years. Is there any danger? Yes, absolutely. However, the Race that built the Ship and the Race that designed wormhole travel did so for millions of years without any reported complications.”

“Was that supposed to make me feel better about this?”

Aiziz asked. N’banga laughed.

“I’ll explain it to you during the flight,” he said, patting Aiziz on the shoulder.

“Captain Paxton will pilot the Beetle,” Benedict said, “Major Reeves and I will fly the escort craft. All ships’ nav systems will be slaved to mine prior to the wormhole jump.”

“And after?” Peter asked.

“After,” Benedict replied, “Reeves and I will scout the debris before Alien Studies is allowed into proximity.”

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The three Bugs flew away from the Ship and into the unbelievable blackness beyond. Benedict adjusted his visual display to locate the probe that had found the debris.

“Okay, here we go,” he said over the linx, “Locking navigation on the probe’s coordinates. All ships, slave your navigation controls to mine...now.”

As he got the confirmation that the other two Bugs were slaved Benedict aligned the three ships in a row, the Hornets ahead of and flanking the Beetle.

“Wormhole telemetry complete,” he said, “Initiating wormhole breach.”

Benedict didn’t think it was possible to see something blacker than the void, but as the wormhole opened, he realized how wrong he had been. As the Bug began to be drawn towards the mouth of the wormhole, Benedict found himself in a near-panic, utterly terrified and thinking that he was crossing into the gates of hell.

He didn’t know how right he was. And then he stopped wanting to think.

The universe collapsed upon itself and ripped apart from its center. Benedict wanted desperately to scream but the air in his lungs felt thicker than water. He felt as though he were falling face-first and being ripped apart in all other directions at once.

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Aboard the Beetle, Sonia Aiziz screamed and cried miserably. She could breathe again, and all she could do was repeat, over and over again in Farsi, “God keep and protect us”.

“Everybody stand by,” Captain Paxton said.

“Is it over yet?” Aiziz asked.

“No,” N’banga said, “We’ve crossed through the Black Ring; the wormhole’s entrance. This is the Node—the exact center of the wormhole; the zero point where attraction and repulsion cancel one another out. Our inertia will carry us through and then we’ll be pushed into the White Ring and expelled out the other end of the wormhole.”

“How long will we be in the Node?” Peter asked.

N’banga shrugged.

“There’s no way to tell; even we won’t be able to keep track of time while we’re insi--”



He was falling again; being ripped apart and crushed and crumpled, stretched out, suffocated and deafened by a roar beyond sound. He felt as though he were being compacted and exploded all at once, his vision an infinite horizon of silver white agony against a black eternity.

And as suddenly as it began, it was over.



A flare of brilliant white light exploded in the darkness, the first illumination in this part of the Void in aeons. The three Bugs surged out from the disk of luminescence, awash in

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its harsh, pure light before it collapsed back upon itself and the darkness prevailed again.

“All wings,” Benedict gasped, “All stop and report in.” There was a whoop of excitement, euphoria over the channel.

“Man, that was like fucking the universe in the ass!” Paxton screamed, “Holy shit! That was the best rush of my fucking life!”

“Reeves, report,” Benedict said, turning so that he could see the other Hornet from his position, “Reeves?”

“Yeah,” came the gasping reply, “I mean, Esquire here, sir; whoa...oh, God...”

“Are you okay, Major?” Benedict asked.

“Yes sir,” Reeves replied, “I just needed to breathe,”

“Navigation slave link severed,” Benedict said, “Begin scanning for the debris field; we should be almost on top of it.”



“We’ve re-established hyperlink communications with the flight group,” Lieutenant Kalenga said. Captain Decker nodded, turning to face Colonel Bloom, who stood by his station.

“Broadcast on mission channel,” Decker said, “Lambda Six-Two-Eight flight group, come in. This is the Ship calling. Lambda Six-Two-Eight do you copy?”

“Copy, Ship,” Benedict replied, “We’ve just got our bearings and are now on approach to the debris field.”

“Lambda Six-Two-Eight flight group: We have you at just over a two hour time lag. Reset your chronometer to one-four, three-seven, zero-zero on my mark...mark.”

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“Roger that, we’ve been out that long, Captain? It’s only been three or four minutes for us over here.”

“That’s how wormhole travel works,” Bloom interjected, “It fucks around in time and space. You might gain or lose more time on the return trip, too.”

“Really Colonel? Are we back yet?”

Bloom chuckled.

“I couldn’t tell you even if you were. At least, not according to Doctor N’banga.”

“Roger that, Colonel,” Benedict said, “We’re closing on the debris; about twenty minutes away, present speed. Will advise once we’re on-scene.”

“Confirmed, Exo,” Bloom replied, “We’re standing by.”



The Bugs flew through the perpetual darkness of the void, lit only from the pulsating bands of blue that bisected them along their dorsal and ventral lines. The spherical cockpits of the Bugs were equipped with perfect three dimensional imaging beyond the control panels. As soon as the first particles of debris came into range, the enhancement systems built into the display picked them up, highlighting them.

“Esquire, Bonus Round, hold your positions while I scout on ahead.”

“Roger that,” Paxton replied.

“I’ll take point ahead of the Beetle,” Reeves said, “Cover your entry.”

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“Negative,” Benedict said, “Keep the Beetle safe; if I run into anything, you get them the fuck out of here. Do you copy?”

“Five by five,”

Benedict nodded to himself and edged forward on his controls. His Hornet sped into the debris field, his sensors sweeping for signs of life, signs of power...anything to indicate that this was more than a mass of floating garbage in space. He brought the Hornet around a large piece of debris and there it was.

“My God,” he gasped.

There in the dark was a massive wedge of hull wreckage, the carcass of a great, black ship. It was at the center of the debris field, and apparent from the ruins of the long, deltoid vessel that the explosion that ripped it apart had come from within, though Benedict couldn't say for sure if it hadn't exploded because of an attack.

“Major, you all right?”

“Yeah, yeah, roger that,” Benedict replied, “Sorry; I was just...Shit, you've got to see it for yourselves. Lock in to my video feed and have a look. You're cleared to come through to the center of the field. Follow my approach route; I'm uplinking the data from my navicom to yours, now.”

“Confirmed. We're on our way in.”

Benedict opened communications with the Ship.

“Major Benedict to Colonel Bloom,”



From the observation lounge overlooking the Command Deck, Bloom turned her attention to the console.

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“Go ahead, Exo.”

“Colonel, the debris is from another ship; different design, but it was destroyed by an explosion,” Benedict replied, his voice issuing from the speakers hidden in the console, “I expect that the Alien Studies team will want to take a look. Initial risk assessment is that we’re safe as long as we match speed and rotation of the wreck; other than its drift, it’s perfectly stable.”

“You’re on-scene, Major,” Bloom replied, “I defer to your judgement; Alien Studies is cleared to examine the wreck; just proceed with caution.”

“Roger that; Benedict out.”



The Beetle was nearing the wreckage. Looking at the passenger cabin display screen, Doctor N’banga was reminded of a time he’d gone scuba diving and encountered a school of sharks. The sharks had been drifting motionless among the reefs along the ocean bottom. Sleeping, his guide had later explained; the school of sharks had been asleep, drifting and at rest. N’banga couldn’t shake the feeling that he was back swimming among sleeping sharks.

“My God, look at the size of it,” Doctor Paulson said, in hushed, reverent tones. There seemed no end to the hulking derelict as they approached. What was left of its hull was a broken shell, but massive, so massive...its inner decks visible in gory cross-section as they flew inside. N’banga toggled the linx to the cockpit.

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“Captain Paxton, Doctor N’banga here,” he said, “Captain, do you have a reading on the size of that ship?”

“Just a minute,” Paxton said, “Reading is coming through...holy shit; this thing is nearly eighty kilometres long from stem to stern, and it would have been nearly twenty kilometres high through the center.”

“That’s more than twice the size of the Ship,” Peter said, “I’m linking in to the Ship’s archives system.” He moved to a console station as Aiziz and came forward to look at the main viewer.

“What do you hope to find?” she asked.

“Maybe the Ship can identify this ship based on its silhouette. It might give us a clue as to the Exodus.” Peter said.

“I want to see the telemetry data,” N’banga said, moving to another console, “This is fascinating!”



Bloom watched the images from the flight group’s systems over the hyperlink system. Though a hundred and twenty-seven light-years separated her from Benedict, she was watching events unfold at the site of the wreckage as they happened. She sat rapt, hypnotized by the three-dimensional images rendered on the flat screen before her; another alien vessel...this one dead, all the more fascinating and mysterious for this and for its size; the Ship held a small city aboard itself...the dead vessel out there could have held a small world...it was incredible to her, frightening and fascinating at once. Which may have been why she didn’t immediately notice when the caution alarm lights went on throughout the

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Command Deck, or why Captain Decker took her by surprise when he raced up the ramp to the Observation Lounge.

“Colonel, we’ve positively identified the make of that vessel,” he said, desperately, “The ship out there belonged to a race of beings called the Zha’har; they were the builders and forefathers of the Zohor. Colonel, we have to get them out of there, now.”



Benedict was patrolling the wreck while Reeves escorted the Alien Studies team on a tour of the dead behemoth. He was running sensor-heavy, making sure that he was picking up readings on everything visible and invisible around them. But the sphere of the viewer remained frustratingly blank. But there was something about this wreck he didn’t like...it wasn’t subtle; it was out in the middle of nowhere; by design any ship or object in the Void would be out in the middle of nowhere, but its placement relative to the Ship’s re-entry co-ordinates bothered him. It had taken them longer to find the Hub in the Xelhuan expanse. This had been right there. Benedict kept ruminating on the mystery, circling the wreckage in both equatorial and polar loops, a flight pattern similar to the stitches on a baseball. He was so focused on the patrol and on the audaciousness of the wreck that he failed to notice that they’d had no contact with the Ship in several minutes.



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“Lambda Six-Two-Eight acknowledge please!” Bloom said, urgently, “Exo, come in, please! You have to evacuate immediately!”

She looked at Lieutenant Kalenga, sitting at the Communications console.

“Still no response Colonel,” he said, “The transmission has been jammed at their end.”

“Shit,” Bloom swore, “Captain Decker, owing to my tactical experience I’m assuming command of this operation,” she announced, striding up the ramp to the Command Station, “You’ll serve as my Exo for the duration.”

“Operation status?” Decker asked, as he rose from the Command Chair.

“This is a fucking rescue mission,” Bloom said, “Commander Castaneda, assume Tactical Station. Captain Tanaka, power up the Ship’s tactical and defensive systems.”

“Colonel Bloom, no!” Castaneda said, “We don’t know what we’re going up against!”

“I’m not going to let my people die,” Bloom hissed, “Now either get to the Tactical station or leave my bridge.”

Castaneda marched over to the Tactical station and sat down.

“Under protest, Colonel,”

“Duly fucking noted.”

“Navigation, plot wormhole jump to the debris field,” Captain Decker ordered, “All hands to battle stations.”

“Hornet Squadrons are scrambling,” Castaneda announced, “Main Flight Deck reports sixty per cent of our fighters are ready to launch.”

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“That better get up to eighty before we jump,” Bloom said.

“Aye, Colonel,” Castaneda replied.

“Captain Decker,” Navigation reported, “We have a wormhole jump solution; solution viable for five minutes.”

“Why aren’t we going?” Decker asked.

“Sir, I believe the tactical advantage to this operation would be to use time warp,” Nav replied, “We would be able to lock on to and retrieve the Bugs faster.”

Decker turned to Bloom.

“Commander Castaneda?” Bloom asked.

Castaneda hesitated, then nodded.

“He’s right,” she said, “We might not even see combat if we’re in time warp.”

Bloom nodded.

“Ready the solution and implement it immediately,” she said.

“Colonel, we have a problem,” Tanaka reported, “Our reserves haven’t recharged from the jump out of time warp. We’d have enough power to get there, but we wouldn’t have enough to get back.”

“God dammit,” Bloom hissed, “How long to recharge fully?” she demanded.

“Twenty minutes to recharge fully.”

“How long to accelerate to maximum velocity outside of time warp?”

“Twenty-five.”

“Get it done,” she said.

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Benedict's sensors chimed, snapping him back to the present. The Hornet was reading several changes in local electromagnetic field geometry. As he checked his sensors, the pilot looking now for what he couldn't see, he realized the sudden and prolonged silence.

"Esquire, Bonus Round, report in," he snapped.

He got a staticky, half-understood burst from Paxton, nothing from Reeves.

"Lambda Six-Two-Eight to Shipflight Control, respond please."

Silence. Benedict accelerated and banked hard, bringing his Hornet back around and down towards the hulking wreck of the alien vessel.

"Esquire, Bonus Round, evac! Evac! Retreat to exfil coordinates; repeat: retreat to exfil!"



"Say again?" Paxton asked, as he received the fragmented static of Major Benedict's last message:

"...reat...xfil...peat:...retr...exfil!"

The last word was the only one that Paxton understood, the only one he needed to understand. He powered up the Beetle's drive, beginning a rapid manoeuvre to get free of the wreck of the unknown alien vessel.

"Bonus Round to Esquire," Paxton called, "Esquire, come back!"

"Esquire here," Came the response, "Go ahead."

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“The boss’s called for exfiltration from the area,” Paxton said, “Let’s form up and get the fuck outta here!”

“Roger that;” Reeves said, bringing his own hornet in towards the wreck. He caught the running lights of Benedict’s Hornet, still distant, coming in towards them. Then he focused on his sensors, as multiple alert chimes began sounding.

“What the fuck,”

His sensors were reporting the same strange electromagnetic field changes as Benedict’s, but there was something else as well. Something was happening...

“What the fuck...” he muttered.

On gut feeling he switched his weapons systems on.

“Esquire, Bonus Round: are you running hot?”

“Damn right,” he said, “Bonus Round, I’m not going to fly escort; I’m going to cover your retreat. Roger that?”

“Roger,” Paxton stammered, “Roger that, Esquire.”

“As soon as you’re clear of the wreckage you plot your wormhole the fuck out.”

He could see the Beetle get free of the derelict ship, navigating the fastest way from the debris field surrounding it. Benedict’s Hornet had grown in size as it flew toward them, and it was changing course to protect the Beetle’s other flank. Reeves checked his own tactical systems and saw that Benedict was running hot as well.

“Flight Group Lambda Six-Two-Eight to Shipflight Control,” he said, “Major Reeves here...respond, please.”

Suddenly the darkness of the Void was broken, shorn apart as large, conical wedges of metal blossomed from the dark. There

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were hundreds of them; massive, dull-hued and identical ships, all of them pointing in towards the wreck, surrounding it from all sides, appearing out of the darkness and closing.

“Oh, my God,” Reeves gasped.



“Time,” Bloom demanded, facing Captain Tanaka in the crew pit below her.

“Thirteen minutes,” she said.

“Tactical,” Bloom said, “Report.”

“Long-range sensors are picking up multiple objects surrounding the wreck,” Commander Castaneda said, “We have nothing definitive beyond that.”

“Can we plot a wormhole solution?” Bloom asked.

“I can’t recommend that course of action,” Castaneda said, “We have no way of knowing what we’re up against. At least with time warp we’d be able to evaluate the situation better.”

“Commander Castaneda, our people likely don’t have another thirteen minutes,” Bloom said, “I need alternatives.”

“Captain Rivers on the flight deck for you, Colonel Bloom,” Lieutenant Kalenga called.

Bloom turned back to the Command Station and switched channels on the linx in her ear.

“Colonel Bloom here, Captain; go ahead.”

“Harpy, we’ve been monitoring the situation,” Rivers said, “I’ve got a five-man squad of volunteers, myself included, in the launch bay and ready to scramble. Those are our wingmen out there, ma’am; we’re ready to help.”

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Bloom nodded. Rivers had very deliberately used Bloom's call sign; Bloom was Squad Leader for the Hornets...

"Your bees are clear to leave the hive, Buckeye," she said, "Good hunting."

"Roger that, Harpy," Rivers called back, "Buckeye out."

Bloom closed her eyes and shook her head.

"Captain Tanaka," she said, "Get us there; now."



Benedict saw the ships appear in the sky around him just as the proximity and tactical alerts came on. There were hundreds of them...they were huge; still kilometres away, but closing fast...The hyperlink jamming was getting worse...and the Hornet's sensors kept repeating something about changes in local gravity that Benedict didn't like. He was trying to reach the large, bulky Beetle, cruising away from the alien wreckage, the obvious bait. If he could get close enough, they'd be able to use ship-to-ship radio despite the jamming. If he could get close enough, he could cover the Beetle when the attack came.



Paxton checked the computer again. Still no wormhole solution.

"What the fuck is going on?" he muttered.

The alien ships had silenced all chatter from the passenger compartment. That was a blessing, but it was still disconcerting. He kept looking up at the tall, shard-like ships closing in. He couldn't stop thinking about how much they looked like some alien monster's teeth.

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“UNABLE TO CALCULATE WORMHOLE SOLUTION,” The Beetle’s computer announced, “LOCAL GRAVITY UNSTABLE.”

“Local gravity unstable?” Paxton yelled, “What the fuck does that mean?”



In the passenger compartment, Peter, Aiziz and N’banga sat harnessed in to their seats, watching their screens in silent terror and resigned disbelief.

“We’re going to die,” Aiziz said, surprised at how calm she sounded.

“Look at the bright side,” Peter chuckled, nervously, “At least you won’t have to go through the fucking wormhole again.”

“I don’t know,” N’banga said, “Back when I was a student we collaborated with a medical study on the quantum states of the Human Mind. We had terminally ill patients agree to be scanned as they died...”

“Doc, I don’t need to hear this, right now.” Peter said, “Please.”

“Oh,” N’banga said, “But, it’s good news, sort of,”

“Doc, please!”

N’banga turned his attention back to his screen, uncomfortably aware of Doctor Aiziz reciting a prayer in her native language. It reminded him too much of his youth in Somalia, during an attack by Muslim rebels on his village. Instead, he tried to recall the experiments in the physics labs, studying the readings recorded as their terminally ill volunteers died. At the moment

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of death, a great deal of activity began taking place in the Human brain, even one damaged by Alzheimer's or other physical ravages. Not just the release of endorphins and other chemicals designed to relax the mind, but a great deal of electrical activity, in sudden bursts. And at the quantum mechanical level, the activity going on was unbelievable: flat quantum filaments were repelled from the electrical fields created in the dying brains, while ring-shaped filaments, the "macaroni" quantum filaments that were stretched open and used in wormhole travel, were attracted towards these electrical fields. Further study of these scans showed that these electrical fields discharged over time into these quantum rings. N'banga knew that somehow, somewhere, the contents of every living human mind were "downloaded" into some other quantum reality. It was comforting; frightening, but comforting.



As he closed on the Beetle, Benedict got past the jamming.

"Esquire, Bonus Round, come in!"

"Bonus Round Standing by,"

"Esquire on your three,"

"Bonus round, put your shields on double-forward and increase to maximum speed on my go. Esquire, we're going to engage the enemy. We have to buy them time."

"Roger that," Esquire said, grimly, "Paxton, get the fuck outta here."

"All ships break on my mark," Benedict said, "Esquire, stand by to fire at will."

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“Roger that,”

“Running hot,”

Benedict hesitated half a second as he uttered a silent prayer.

“All ships, break!”

As the Beetle surged away through the last of the debris field and into the Void, the Hornets accelerated and pivoted on their vertical axes, turning about one hundred and eighty degrees and opening fire on the alien ships. But these ships were already firing. A cascade of white lightning, arcs of energy kilometres across showered down from between the alien ships as they closed together. A bolt clipped the forward sensor node of Benedict’s hornet and he was plunged into darkness as the ship spun out of control. Benedict was spared the sight of Major Reeves’ Hornet being disintegrated in a white explosion of energy.

Benedict could see only his controls as the Hornet spun and tumbled out of control.

“PRIMARY SENSOR NODE LOST...PRIMARY SENSOR NODE LOST...PRIMARY SENSOR NODE LOST...” the Hornet’s computer repeated urgently. Benedict irritably took the time to toggle off the alert voice, trying to stabilize the Bug while its systems tried to re-route at least some of the sensor data to other sources. Another blast of energy nearby clipped the Hornet, sending it tumbling off in a new direction. Benedict fought the controls and thruster pedals, feeling as though he were fighting against an out-of-

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control animal. A sudden alert siren wailed just before something in the aft section of the Hornet exploded.



“LOCAL GRAVITY STABLE,” the Beetle’s computer advised, “CALCULATING WORMHOLE SOLUTION.”

“About fuckin’ time,” Paxton growled. Aft sensors showed both Hornets destroyed. And though they’d thus far avoided being struck by enemy fire, Paxton knew his luck wouldn’t hold. And he was right: Already the alien ships were changing course, closing in on him all over again. A familiar alert siren began to sound.

“UNABLE TO CALCULATE WORMHOLE SOLUTION,” The computer announced.

“No, no, fuck, no!” Paxton yelled angrily, “God dammit!”

“LOCAL GRAVITY UNSTABLE.”

“Fuck you in the ass with your unstable local fucking gravity!”

“UNABLE TO COMPLY.”



“Captain Tanaka!” Bloom barked.

“If we go to Time Warp now,” she said, “We’ll have enough power to jump back out and recover our ships. But it’ll take almost ten minutes before we can jump back into Time Warp and get away.”

“Commander Castaneda, what is the status of the Ship’s offensive and defensive systems?” Captain Decker demanded.

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“Fully operational; grids and targeting systems are fully automated with three-man backup groups at every weapons grid station.”

“How many groups in total?” Bloom asked.

“Two hundred and twenty-two stations,” Castaneda said, “Two hundred and twenty-two groups.”

“Six hundred and sixty-six souls in total,” Bloom said, “I hope no one’s feeling superstitious.”

“TIME WARP IN TWENTY SECONDS,” the Ship advised, “ONCE IN TIME WARP, TRAVEL AT MAXIMUM SPEED TO THE TARGET ZONE WILL TAKE APPROXIMATELY FIVE MONTHS TO ACHIEVE DESTINATION. THIS IS WELL WITHIN ACCEPTABLE MARGINS FOR HUMAN LIFESPAN TRAVEL VERSUS TIME WARP. DO YOU WISH TO ACTIVATE STASIS FIELDS FOR MILITARY-DESIGNATED AREAS?”

“No,” Bloom said, without blinking, “That’s five months we have to prepare for the mission.”

“Colonel?” Decker said, confused.

“We have a unique opportunity to take five months and more to plan an upcoming battle, Captain Decker. Once in Time Warp, our ships out there will be frozen in time, relative to us. We’ll only return to the same time field as them, when we return to normal time. That’s five months to plan a rescue mission. An unprecedented tactical advantage.”

“Then let’s hope it’s not one that the enemy shares, Colonel Bloom.” Decker replied.

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“Colonel, what about the ships we have in the wormhole?” Castaneda asked.

“We’ll rendezvous with them back at their launch coordinates, unless we can make hyperlink contact.”

“We’ll have to stay within fifty-thousand light years for up to thirty hours, owing to relativistic effects of wormhole travel, Colonel,” Castaneda advised.

“Then we have five months to plan for that as well.” Decker replied.

“Roger that, Captain Decker,” Bloom said, pacing back to her command chair, “Hang in there, Exo. We’re coming.



Paxton barrel-rolled the Beetle as another cascade of white fire rained down from the ships. They were closing their net... Paxton knew he was next. And suddenly there it was, larger than life and twice as beautiful: The Ship! It was a thousand kilometers away but unmistakable and brilliant. He accelerated towards it. But then one of the giant, fang-like alien ships dropped straight into the disk of the Ship’s upper hull and exploded.

“Oh God, no,” Paxton rasped.

The maelstrom of white fire from the alien ships came down on the Beetle again. It was battered. It broke apart and then disintegrated, swept away like sand in a storm.



The Command Deck was dark and shaking, buckling as shockwaves rocked through the Ship. Sirens wailed and people yelled as the computers came flickeringly back to life. Bloom

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strapped herself into her chair's harness and turned to her station, where she called up a tactical display of the frenzy outside. They were right in the middle of the Zohor attack field. They'd been yanked out of time warp as they approached, before they'd even had a chance to deploy their long-strategized plans. The Zohor had already begun re-orienting themselves for another attack. The ship that had rammed them had been waiting for them the instant they were pulled out of time warp.

"What is our status?" Bloom called.

"Main power's been knocked off-line," Captain Tanaka said, "The stasis fields are down; we've lost hyperlight propulsion and time warp capability. It looks like the main focusing chamber took damage."

As auxiliary power to the Command Deck and its viewing systems kicked in the lights came back. Bloom picked herself up off the deck and stood at the railing overlooking the Crew Pit.

"Commander Tanaka, get down there and see what you can do," Decker said, "We need main power back on-line to get away."

"Redirect as much as you can into shields and weapons," Bloom ordered, "Put everything other than life support into those systems. Take the civilian areas out of stasis and evacuate everyone to the emergency decks."

Decker turned to Castaneda.

"Commander, coordinate with the fighters we still have in the air on finding our ships and bringing them in."

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“We just lost the Beetle,” Castaneda said, “Zohor ship on collision course! Diverting all power to shields and weapons! All available Batteries: Target that ship and fire!”

“Con, Sensor.”

“Sensor go ahead,” Bloom said.

“We have a white hole opening; Captain Rivers’ flight group is inbound.”

“Advise them of the situation,” Bloom said, “Link Captain Rivers directly to Squad Leader Aruha.”

“The Zohor are firing!” Castaneda shouted.

Arcs of energy the size of cities fired between the Zohor ships racing around one another and down their lengths; the Zohor ships worked in conjunction as a single, giant weapon. The storm of energy that rained down on the Ship sheared across its skin in a devastating web of raw power.

As soon as he crossed from the wormhole back into normal space Captain Rivers received a desperate message from Captain Aruha, Callsign Tsunami:

“Buckeye take your group in with Black Moon’s and defend the breach in the upper hull of the Ship,” Aruha said, “Try and stay out of proximity of the larger ships and keep your eye on the smaller ones; scramble; scramble!”

“You heard Tsunami,” Rivers called to his group, “Full burn! Let’s go!”

They flew into the melee, sensors tracking all the other “friendly” ships in the area...their numbers dwindling rapidly

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as giant sheets of forked lightning rained down from the Zohor ships.

“Run hot and fire at will,” Rivers said, “Let’s move up to the—holy God.”

His exclamation came as they approached the Ship. Fully a quarter of the upper hull was a gaping ruin, flares of energy and flames of venting fire from the damaged inner decks. Weak counteroffensive fire was coming from the Ship, from the Hornets and Beetles that swarmed around it, but between the smaller, missile-like Zohor ships and the larger, energy-beam firing vessels, it was a one-sided fight. The Hornets swarmed in and out of dangerous formations to target the Zohor needle-ship missiles that were raining down on the Ship, each one exploding with devastating force. But the needle-ships moved with lightning speed and laser precision. They didn’t care whether they exploded against the Ship or against the Hornets sent out to defend it. Dozens of fighters were lost in the first few seconds. The others fought on, dodging enemy fire and enemy craft, but the Law of Averages was stacked against them. More and more were blown apart, the Zohor scoring far higher victories than the Hornet Squadrons. It took mere minutes to cut their numbers in half; the Zohor swarms seemingly still very close to full strength. Captain Shannon Aruha knew what had to be done:

“All fighters draw fire away from the Ship,” Tsunami said, “We have to buy time for them to escape. Colonel Bloom, do you copy?”



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The Command Deck Imaging Dome was dark, the lighting from harsh yellow-orange alert lamps and console screens displaying a wealth of disastrous news. Bloom leaned heavily against the railing of her station deck.

“Go ahead, Tsunami,”

“We’ll buy you some time to get away; I don’t know how long we can last...hurry.”

Bloom swallowed hard against the lump in her throat, praying to a God she wasn’t sure she believed in that the fighters’ sacrifice would not be in vain, even as part of her yearned to be out there, fighting, dying among them.

“Your sacrifice will never be forgotten, Captain Aruha,” Bloom said, “We’ll try and come back for you, if we can.”

“The outer hull’s been totally breached,” Castaneda reported, “Beta Quadrant, all decks, top to bottom. Emergency bulkheads are sealed, but we’ve lost main power; the defensive grid is off-line in Beta and parts of Alpha and Gamma. Weapons systems are failing and are having no appreciable effect.”

“Helm, get us the fuck out of here, best speed.” Bloom said.

Like a wounded animal the Ship began to move, faster and faster from the Zohor swarm. But the fang-like ships simply reoriented themselves and continued pursuit. The fighters tried to hold a line but it was quickly broken, the Zohor not even bothering to counterattack, simply ploughing through

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the meagre fleet. Of a hundred and twenty-six fighters, sixty-one remained. They flew suicidal defensive patterns around the Ship, protecting it from as much of the attack as they could. Another twenty ships were wiped out by a Zohor energy burst; three others in needle-ship combat as the Ship kept limping onwards, slowly gaining speed and hopefully getting clear of the Zohor ambush, as minute by minute more fighters perished.

From the Command Deck Bloom and Decker could only watch their screens and call for updates from the Helm and Nav positions.

“Captain Tanaka to Command; I’ve reached Main Engineering.”

“Report,” Decker commanded.

In Main Engineering, Captain Tanaka was studying a readout screen while a wall-to-ceiling display showed a full-sized view of what was happening in the gargantuan chamber beyond: The Main Focusing Chamber was vast; cavernous beyond cavernous. Slabs of super-dense material, kilometres high, spun in three interweaving axes between the upper and lower apertures in the chamber. Normally a towering column of hot-white energy was channeled up from the bottom of the chamber, through the spinning rings and up into the pulsing, diamond-shaped, luminous blue heart of the Ship. But the rings had shattered. Slabs of debris lay scattered throughout the chamber, which was awash in unfocused arcs of energy.

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The remaining stone slabs spun shakily in their orbits, as the energy that should have sustained them assailed them instead.

“The power stabilizer’s been destroyed,” Tanaka reported, “Colonel, there’s no way to repair this quickly or permanently. And if we can’t stabilize and focus our power supply, the Ship will likely tear itself apart.”

“Is there an alternate means of focusing power?” Decker asked. He turned to Bloom, who was directing the remaining fighters to rescue as many of their comrades as they could and return to base; their deaths would be pointless, now.

“THERE IS NO BACKUP POWER FOCUSING SYSTEM,” the Ship replied, “THE FOCUSING CHAMBER OF THIS ONE IS ANALOGOUS TO THE HUMAN HEART.”

“And just as stupid for only having one,” Bloom muttered.

A siren began chiming from Tactical Command.

“Colonel, Zohor missiles are inbound; heavy yield,” Castaneda said, “Our targeting systems are locking on...gunnery crews confirm lock...firing!”

The Ship fired on the approaching missiles as the retreating Hornets, too few of their comrades’ wrecks towed behind them, fired from the flanking position. The Zohor missiles had been flying far apart, but not far enough. A lucky shot from Captain Rivers’ cannon detonated one of the Zohor warheads, as the Ship’s fire did the same to another. There was

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a chain reaction: Almost every Zohor warhead lit up in an obliterating flare of white. The screams of terror, cheers of celebration and pilot radio chatter blurred into a single ringing canon, an iron tolling that

wove its way into Allison's mind, waking her from her drug-induced sleep. She was immediately aware of the situation, of the danger, of the dead and dying. A single missile had survived the countermeasures. Even as the Hornets swept 'round to perform an emergency landing manoeuvre the Zohor capital ships (for that is what they were, she knew) were powering up for another deadly strike. The Ship was turning its wounded side away from the enemy. The lone missile was a sliver against the dome of a mighty cathedral, but a deadly white shard of Machine, nonetheless. The warhead was known as a Nova Bomb, because it generated an explosive shockwave equivalent of a small star going nova. Like all Zohor machines, the Nova Bomb was intelligent. It wove its way into the rupture created for it during the initial attack, flying through the Ship's massive inner airframe towards its single purpose and sole target: The toroidal black hole from which was channelled the Ship's power. A direct hit on the Ship's power source would wipe out everything in the sector. The missile was only seconds away from impact.

And suddenly, for Allison McQuire, time slowed almost completely. The movement was still there, but it was imperceptible, fungal. Although she knew this, she also knew

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she couldn't possible have caused it. She found first one, and then another mind still conscious, still aware. The first one was familiar to her, Human, wrath-inducing in his religious devotion to her, Juan Carlos. The other was infinitely greater, more powerful a mind than even that of the Ship Control Entity. And Allison understood now who it was that had slowed time down.

And then there were three, outside of it all, looking down on the Ship, on the Zohor swarm, as if all were in miniature. There was nothing else but Allison, Juan Carlos, and the Nai'Marak.

INTERLUDE
BETWEEN SECONDS

She knew this place. It was...*familiar*. That was the Big Word she'd just learned from the Grid Gang from the PGS, what her Big Brother said was the Pubic Gridcast Service. But Allison knew that "Pubic" was a bad word; that it meant about down there, where her pee-pee button was and where boys had their hose. She ran down the golden-walled hallway happy, carefree, her white flannel nightdress flouncing around her. She passed a tall lady with really pretty red hair like hers and kept going. She was going downstairs to see her daddy. Every morning she got up when he made coffee. She would come quietly downstairs and sit with him as he made her a cup of cocoa. There was a lot of snow outside, a big storm. Daddy said he might stay home today, which made Allison very happy.

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“I remember her,” Allison said, astounded, “I was five...oh, Goddess, I was so happy, so innocent.”

“But she was never here,” Juan Carlos said, from behind her. She turned around. He was dressed in the vestments of a Catholic Priest, though the band around his shoulders and down his front was done in the white, purple and green motif of the United Trinity Observants.

“No, that girl stayed a little girl a while longer,” Allison said, with a sad smile.

“And she became the woman I behold now,” Juan said. Allison was disturbed to see the band around his shoulders change to a powdery, luminescent blue with stripes of silver and gold running through it.

“I know those colours,” Allison said.

“Do you know yourself?” another voice asked.

Allison and Juan beheld the Nai'Marak.

“How easily your minds slip into memory and fantasy,” the Nai'Marak said, as its swarming firefly luminescence shone down on both of them.

“Why did you halt time now?” Allison demanded, “Why did you intervene now?”

“Because everything you have encountered since leaving Hiddek Uhl has been a test, Shekhina,” the Nai'Marak said, “To mark your abilities as the Queen of Light and Sorrow. This is the final test.”

“What?” Allison roared, suddenly outraged.

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“Your temper cannot serve you now,” the Nai’Marak said, “You can only prevail through your mind and your will. This part of the Exodus Trail was long abandoned, as it was discovered by the Zohor. We directed the Sentinel from the Hub to send you along its route, for the time has come for you to accept your destiny.”

“What...the fuck are you talking about?” Allison demanded.

“Only the Queen of Light and Sorrow can save the Lost Ones from the Machines of Death,” the Nai’Marak replied, “Either you accept your destiny and do what must be done to destroy that missile and stop the attack, or you and your entire race will perish, now that your home world is overrun by the Nimbus.”

“How can you hold my people hostage?” Allison asked, sickened.

“In order to serve the Machine,” the Nai’Marak replied, “It is sometimes necessary to make certain decisions.”

“Certain decisions? Genocide is a decision?” Allison yelled, her anger overflowing.

“There always comes a crisis point in the evolution of an intelligent species, where it must adapt and survive, or be extinguished. Our prophecies foresaw this moment, because it is the moment that the Queen of Light and Sorrow will be born.”

“And what if I refuse to do anything?”

“You are the Queen of Light and Sorrow, no matter what course you take,” the Nai’Marak replied, “The choice is

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whether or not you will be the Queen of a dead race or of the future.”

“You bastard; you fucking monster,” Allison hissed, tears streaming down her face in futile rage and helpless grief, “You have no right to force this on me!”

“Anger will not serve you now, Shekhina.”

“And why am I here?” Juan Carlos asked, tentatively.

The Nai’Marak glided towards Juan, causing the young man to step backwards several paces.

“You are here to bear witness,” the Nai’Marak said, “You are here to record what happens, so that you might teach others of what will happen, what has happened, what will always happen. This is your only purpose in life; chosen not for you, but by you. Do it, therefore, wisely and well. See it, remember it; write it down.”

“I will destroy you, Nai’Marak,” Allison hissed, “I don’t care how much or how little of this shit you’re responsible for, I will destroy you.”

“If such is written along your Path, it will Be,” the Nai’Marak answered, “But now it is time to choose your Path.” Allison became aware of more than just the Nai’Marak and Juan Carlos, and heard the panicked screams of the passengers sealed in the emergency shelters beneath the surface of Habitat. She felt the passing away of the dead and dying in the Ship and in the Bugs that were flying a suicide mission outside. She felt the voices on the Command Deck. The Nai’Marak spoke then, so did Juan Carlos. In unison they said:

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“The Lost Ones will travel into the dark places beyond the constellations and stars. They will follow an ancient path to safety, but find themselves instead set upon by the Soldiers of Death. No matter how they struggle, the teeth of the Enemy will bear down upon them. Many will die as the Lost Ones fight their foe.

“And thus will come to pass the Fourth Sign of the Advent of the Queen of Light and Sorrow. For she will awaken her full potential when she walks into the heart of the all-consuming storm.”

“Do you see the path before you now?” the Nai’Marak asked.

“Yes,” Allison said, “I understand now. Life and Death.”

“This is the beginning of your journey,” The Nai’Marak said, “This is the point of no return.”

“I’ve already made my choice,”

“You made your choice before you were ever born.”

“I know,”



Captain Tanaka was trying desperately to bypass the focusing chamber, to either dump the raw energy into the weapons or the drive systems or vent it from the Ship, altogether. It wouldn’t be long before the chamber exploded; when that happened, the top half of the Ship would be annihilated. The rest of the Ship would be torn apart as the toroidal black hole that powered the vessel and ran around its lower section in a specially designed ring chamber began to

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collapse back onto itself. On the plus side, the resulting explosion and X-ray burst would wipe out the Zohor entirely, along with everything else in a hundred thousand light-year radius.

“Captain Tanaka, clear this room. Now.”

Tanaka turned in the direction of the voice. A woman stood there, long, dark red hair, pale skin and wearing strange robes of blue and white.

“Who are you? What are you doing here?”

“I am the Queen of Light and Sorrow,” Allison replied, “And I’m here to save the Ship. Now, clear this room.”

Tanaka stepped towards her.

“I don’t know what you think you’re--”

Before she could finish speaking, an arc of energy shot from Allison, striking Tanaka in the chest. She fell to the ground, unconscious. Allison looked around the room.

“Take her and get out!” she shouted, “Seal the door behind you!”

Too terrified to do otherwise, the gold-and-black uniformed engineering crew complied. Allison turned to the control panel in front of the massive floor-to-ceiling viewing window into the focusing chamber. She placed her hands on the control panel, keying a sequence of Shiplanguage runes that she knew would give her direct access to the Ship Control Entity.

“Ship, now you must let me into your mind. If you truly wish to save these people, you must let me into your systems and your consciousness and open the focusing chamber to me.”

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Allison focused her mind on the large, overwhelming omnipresence that was the Ship Control Entity. She abutted against it as though it was surrounded by a membrane and then she was through. All of the Ship's intricacies and secrets were laid bare before her and in a single, painful instant, that knowledge was absorbed into her own; millions of years of recorded experience, everything in its databases and archives, every piece of information left in the Ship's memory or in its care merged into her own mind. The merge was total. Not only did Allison now possess the knowledge and understanding of all the Ship's systems, but she had control over all of them. But before she would enter the focusing chamber beyond, there was one last thing that Allison needed to know.

“Why?” she asked, “Why me? Why did you do it? What authority did you have to violate my body?” By way of response, the Ship sent a single image into her mind: a rune from Shiplanguage, a single sentence that could not be expressed in words but as an idea:



And Allison knew Shiplanguage, because she knew the minds of the women and men who had learned it. She knew Shiplanguage, because she knew the Ship's mind. The rune, when used alone, had many possible contexts. It could mean

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decision, travel, or it could mean the *present*; the K-rune, as it was referred to, was one of the Primary Runes of Shiplanguage; one of five “root” runes out of which all other runes in Shiplanguage were derived. It had many other meanings, including *time, promise, curse* and *eternity*. But what Allison realized now was that it meant all of those things, all at once. The very rune itself stood for the Prophecy of the Queen of Light and Sorrow. Inserted into the language by the Nai’Marak, millions of years before life had ever evolved on the world where the Ship had been created.

“Thank you,” she said, unmindful of the stream of tears pouring down her face, “Now, open the access for me, into the focusing chamber.”

“YOU WILL NOT SURVIVE THE OPENING OF THE CHAMBER.”

“I will not need to. I don’t need my body; I’m everywhere; I’m merged with you; I’m merged with the mind of every person inside of you...though none of them are aware of it. Now open the chamber.”

“BE PREPARED,” The Ship Control Entity said, “YOU WILL EXPERIENCE GREAT PAIN BEFORE YOUR BODY RUPTURES.”

“And you will not survive much longer, no matter what happens.”

“CONFIRMED.”

“Survive long enough to save them.”

“AGREED.”

“Open the chamber.”

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“IT IS DONE.”

Allison’s body was burnt and shredded in fractions of a second, but the pain of tearing mind from body was eternal and unbearable. Still, she knew the placement of every atom that had been a part of her and where they belonged in sequence to reassemble her body, as it spun and stormed about the kilometres-wide chamber. And as her consciousness, enhanced by the consciousness of the Ship Control Entity, focused to fill the gigantic compartment itself, she understood; what had happened to the focusing chamber, to the damaged channelling node, the tri-axial power stabilizer rings, the focusing systems throughout.

Allison extended her will into the chamber’s damaged components, just as she had extended her will into the damaged parts of Juan’s body. She understood so much now...she saw the dynamics of interconnectivity; how the shattered remains of the superpowerful capacitors were still joined on a quantum level; infinite bonds of attraction between any two atoms that had ever been in contact with one another; infinite segments of spacetime connecting them forever. It was easy then to summon the debris back together; easier than it had been to heal Juan Carlos. Allison simply exerted her consciousness and the components of the regulator systems reassembled and restart themselves. It was more difficult to focus on the raw power filling the chamber; harder to impose order on the chaotic bursts of energy from the Torus. She managed, absorbing some of the energy, redirecting the rest. The

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focusing crystal at the top of the chamber was cracked, the material too dense—only slightly less so than Dark Matter—and far too great a challenge for Allison’s fledgling powers. The crystal was damaged and would shatter eventually. But Allison knew that it would hold long enough—barely—to see the last surviving members of the Human Race to safety. She channelled the power coming through the chamber up into the focusing crystal and the massive power distribution central beyond. The rest of the power she used in restarting the stabilizers. Her mission accomplished, she moved into the Ship’s Control Systems, redirecting power away from the engines and the shields and into the weapons. Massive eruptions across the surface of the Ship tore into the Zohor fleet. It was unexpected; the Zohor had no defence. Thousands of needle-ships and missiles were destroyed. The nova-bomb missile that had made its way into the inside of the Ship breached the sealed bulkheads but did not explode, its detonator eradicated by an act of will from Allison’s mind as she channelled power back into the engines, bypassing the power regulators to launch the Ship into time warp and away from the Zohor at the best possible speed.

By the time anyone on the Command Deck realized what had happened, they were already well away from the Zohor.

“The last of the surviving Hornets are aboard,” a Ship Traffic Control officer reported from the deck.

“Ship, what is our heading?” Captain Decker asked.

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“AWAY,” was the reply, “WE WILL DROP FROM TIME WARP AND PLOT A NEW HEADING ONCE WE ARE CERTAIN THAT THERE HAS BEEN NO PURSUIT.”

The timber and tone of the rumbling, crystalline voice of the Ship Control Entity was different. At first, Bloom couldn't put her finger on it. But then as the Ship said, “ACTIVATING STASIS FIELDS ON ALL DECKS,” She realized what it was: The voice now sounded, except for the crystalline harmonics, exactly like Allison McQuire's.

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TWENTY ADRIFT

The Ship came out of hyperspace still deep within the Void. But now a hazy band of starlight shimmered in the distance: the leading edge of a new galaxy still hundreds of thousands of light-years distant.

Captain Tanaka was lying on her side in the recovery position, upper leg tucked over the lower, arms in front of the head, lower arm straight. The position guaranteed an unconscious victim wouldn't roll over and asphyxiate or aggravate a wounded condition. Her officers formed a horseshoe around her, waiting for help to arrive. But thousands of people were waiting for help to arrive, all over the Ship. Tanaka came to slowly and struggled to her feet.

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“What the hell just happened?” she asked. No one could give her an answer. Tanaka staggered over to the door back into the control room. Safety readings showed the radiation levels to be negligible; she unlocked the door and it dropped into its recess in the deck. There was a flare of light coming from the open airlock into the focusing chamber.

A single instant of blind terror overcame Tanaka as she thought about the unfathomable radiation she’d just absorbed. But realizing she’d even had time to have the thought, Tanaka understood that there was no radiation; or rather, that it was being channelled elsewhere. The escaping energy from the focusing chamber was being channelled into the flare, which extended in a wavering arc from the open airlock to the floor in the middle of the deck. The airlock closed a fraction of a second after the arc stopped. On the floor of the deck was a blue-white glowing orb of energy that seemed to gradually cool first to yellow, then to orange and then to red...as the energy dissipated what was left in the center of the focusing chamber control room was the naked and unconscious form of Allison McQuire.



“All decks, I want damage and casualty reports,” Decker ordered, “Tactical: Were we followed?”

“I’ve got nothing on sensors,” Castaneda replied, “But the Zohor fleet was cloaked up until they attacked.”

“Then we’ll just have to hope that we’re alone out here,” Bloom said.

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“Helm, plot our current position relative to our last known coordinates, including time offset,” Decker said, “Commander Kalich, take charge of rescue and recovery operations.”

“Yes, Captain.” Kalich replied, heading for the lift.

“Command Deck, this is Doctor Patel. Colonel Bloom, you’d best get up here.”

And Bloom realized there was only one reason Patel would be calling her to the flight deck.

“Jack,” she choked.



Allison opened her eyes slowly. She became aware first of herself then the other people in the room and then all of the Ship’s surviving passengers and crew. There were so many around her right now; frightened, injured and dying, the dead and near-dead. Shouts, screams, moans...they weren’t just sounds, they were emotions, thoughts, feelings...they assaulted her; A privacy curtain uselessly isolated her from the other patients; it was open at her feet and she could see the madness going on outside; she could also witness events as they were lived by the doctors, nurses, technicians and of course, by the suffering. Cole was coming over, having seen that Allison was awake. When the doctor came, she took Allison’s vitals very quickly.

“Hello Allison,” Doctor Cole said.

“I’m all right,” Allison said, trying to push her away.

“I’m sure,” Cole said, finishing her examination, “How exactly did you get from the emergency shelter area of the

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hospital to the focusing chamber's control room in main engineering?"

Allison shook her head and shrugged, as though she were still shaking off sleep.

"There's so many out there," she said, "So many all over the Ship...suffering, dying..."

"Allison, please focus," Cole said, "How did you get to the control room in main engineering?"

"I'm not...I don't really know...I was having a vision...the Nai'Marak, Juan Carlos...then I was outside Main Engineering and I knew exactly what it was I had to do...Doctor...the people out there, they--"

"You took over the Ship," Cole interjected, "Inside and out."

"Yes I had to," Allison said, "It was the only way to save everyone; I became part of the Ship so that I could use its systems to amplify my mind and do what had to be done."

"Amplify...Allison...what exactly happened in Main Engineering?"

"Doctor, the easiest explanation is that I walked into the focusing chamber and corrected the fault with the power regulation system."

"But that's impossible," Cole said, "The radiation alone would have incinerated...impossible. You wouldn't have survived."

"My body didn't," Allison said, "But with my mind ensconced in the Ship, I was able to survive. Then it was just a matter of reassembling my body, one atom at a time."

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The flight deck had the look of a field hospital. The number of men and women lying on gurneys was dwarfed by the number lying under plastic sheets. The smell on the deck was a mix of oily scent of machines, the ozone of electricity and the coppery-sweet stink of blood and damaged flesh. The screams of the wounded and dying filled the air in a sickening chorus of agony; doctors were working to stabilize the injured so they could be moved to the hospital; nurses were evaluating those who were still waiting. Some were moved to emergency surgery ahead of others...while many more were left alone to die, their injuries already too great. Bloom surveyed the scene with the practiced calm of a field marshal visiting the scene of a horrific battle. Beneath her calm demeanor, however, Bloom was tormented by the carnage visited upon her fellow officers.

“Doctor Patel?” Bloom called over the din of the field hospital.

She found Benedict before Patel reached her. He was naked, lying on a stretcher. Most of his dark skin was covered in blisters and lesions; he was swollen, intubated and mercifully unconscious. Bloom prayed that he was medicated enough not to feel the pain.

“Oh God,” Bloom turned away, anguished.

“I’m sorry, Colonel,”

She looked up. Patel stood before her, his face grim.

“How long has he got?”

Patel shook his head.

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“Not long; a few hours, maybe less,” Patel said, “Probably less; he was hit with about sixty sieverts of radiation when the Bug’s power core exploded.”

Bloom squeezed her eyes shut. Benedict was her oldest friend and the last living connection she had to the world they had left behind. It was more than she could take.

“Is there anything you can do?”

“We’re keeping him comfortable; he’s not in any pain.”

Bloom nodded, the tears rolling down her cheeks.

“Thank you, Doctor.”

Patel left her to sit vigil by Benedict’s side and wait for her friend to die.



Allison rose, draping a blanket from her bed around herself.

“Where are you going?” Cole asked as Allison padded from the bed towards the privacy screen.

“I can feel their suffering,” Allison said, “It’s getting worse and worse. I can stop it; I can help them.”

Before Cole could think about stopping her, Allison stepped out onto the hangar deck and raised her hands.

“Allison, stop!” Cole shouted. Allison ignored her and a moment later the entire deck was flooded with blue-white light.



Bloom jumped to her feet as the strange light filled the chamber. Benedict started gagging and choking. The glow was already fading when she watched his hands fly up to the

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breathing tube sticking from his mouth, tugging at it, pulling it free of the tape that held it to his face. It was only as he extubated himself and opened his eyes that Bloom realized that he was healed and whole again, the rapid, burning decay of radiation poisoning gone as if it had never been.

“Colonel,” he gasped, “What...”



Even with Allison’s intercession the death toll was horrific. And while Margaret Bloom, veteran of brutal wars like the genocidal Australian Conflict was horrified by the number, she could no longer muster the strength to be sickened by it. Decker, however still swallowed back bile as he read the numbers aloud:

“Total casualties as of this report: forty-eight thousand, three hundred eighteen dead; six thousand two hundred and twenty-one missing and presumed dead during the hull breaches,” he said.

“Captain Tanaka,” Bloom rasped, “Damage report?”
Tanaka cleared her throat.

“All decks around the largest hull breach through the damaged quadrant have been sealed off. The breach goes right through both the ventral and dorsal hulls. We’re lucky the Zohor didn’t penetrate the containment chamber for the Ship’s power core. It’s a fair guess that’s what they were trying to do. The main focusing crystal has been cracked; the Ship can’t repair it, so it’s only a matter of time before it shatters; when that happens the Ship will blow. The Ship estimates it’s got a few million years of time warp travel left before we’ll have to

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evacuate. Repair crews are concentrating on bypassing the damaged areas while the Ship heals what systems it can. But the airframe is buckled and collapsed in places. There are breaches all over the Ship, top and bottom. Much of the Ship's outer decks are without power; likely that's not going to change. Life support's pretty bad...I recommend placing all civilians into stasis and start pruning non-essentials from the crew ASAP. Habitat was exposed to vacuum and Christ knows how much radiation. The emergency decks remain sealed but as I said, should be placed back in stasis. I recommend we head back to the Hub and find a new ship."

"I agree," Decker said

"No," Bloom said, "We can't risk crossing paths with the Zohor again." Bloom said, "Not with the Ship the way it is now. We'd never survive another attack."

Decker protested, "And if we go forward and meet the Zohor again?"

"More chance of meeting them behind us than ahead," Bloom said, "We've got maps of the galactic cluster ahead. We have to find somewhere to go. We evacuate to the first habitable planet we find and then return a small fleet of ships to the Hub on alternate routes. Get another ship and continue on the Exodus from there. Captain Tanaka, see to repairs. Commander Castaneda, you're to focus on improving our defences. We'll get the people back into stasis when we can be sure we can get them back out again, first."



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The emergency decks beneath the dead surface of Habitat had never been intended for permanent occupation; most of Habitat's storage and infrastructure were in these decks. While the emergency decks had their own water and atmosphere, the temperature ranged from one section to the next between unpleasant extremes of hot and cold. The lighting was poor and the facilities were all but nonexistent; chemical toilets, liquid sanitizer and bottled water were all that was immediately available. The engineering crews were working desperately to seal the hull breaches; they had no time to take care of the amenities. As it was civilian volunteers had been recruited in order to help transport food and medical supplies from what was left of the Ship's stores to the Habitat's emergency decks. Fear, grief, despair and confusion combined to form a residue that hung in the air of the cramped shelters; oily and thick. Hope was a lost and forgotten thing.

Through the day, impromptu memorials were held among friends and family who had lost someone in the attack. Everyone aboard mourned the dead, none of the survivors spared loss. It was among these huddled masses and despairing survivors that Juan Carlos Rejas brought his ministry. He already had a small band of followers and he sent them out among the Ship's survivors, delivering a simple message wherever they went:

“Tonight at eight, come listen to a message of hope.”

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Juan's followers now included military personnel as well as civilians. As such he had knowledge of both how Allison had saved the Ship and of how she had healed all those who'd been sick and dying. Juan had been there when Allison had, before the Nai'Marak, at last accepted her destiny and with it the mantle of the Queen of Light and Sorrow. And despite any efforts at rumour control, there was no one aboard the Ship who didn't know that Allison had saved the Ship and then healed its wounded and dying. Juan knew that the Nai'Marak's prophecy had predicted that it would take catastrophe before Allison surrendered to fate. And though he grieved for all those who had died in the Zohor attack, Juan took comfort and strength from the knowledge that their deaths heralded her Ascension.

Juan and his followers were using a storage area as their gathering place. It was the ideal size to accommodate an assembly. Juan's followers had scrounged up almost a hundred mismatched folding chairs and stools from across what was left of the liveable areas of the Ship. They'd even built a small platform for Juan to speak from.

That evening, the seats were less than half-filled. Fewer people than Juan had hoped. But enough to hear his message and spread the word. He climbed the platform once he and his followers were sure that no one else was coming. He cleared his throat and began speaking:

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“This is a sad night,” he began, “Everyone here has lost someone; friends, lovers, mothers fathers, sisters, brothers, or a husband, wife, son or daughter. And whomever it is we have lost, whatever they were to us, let us now take a moment of silence to remember them and to pray.”

The silence wasn't absolute; there were hushed sobs, coughs, murmurs of bereaved comfort. After a moment of personal prayer and reflection, Juan raised his head to face the assembly.

“As terrible a tragedy as we have been through and as great as our anguish is, it is also a time to rejoice; for a new hope has come to life today. A hope for all of us: a hope not only for our survival, but for our salvation as well.

“Those of you who know me know that I am speaking of the Queen of Light and Sorrow; of Allison McQuire. She was transformed by the Ship into something far, far more important than we can even begin to understand. I've spoken before and at great length of the Prophecy that foresaw Allison rising to become the Queen of Light and Sorrow; that she is destined to guard and guide us, the Lost Ones, through the tribulations before us now and through those yet to come, the Aeons War.

“The Prophecy of the Queen of Light and Sorrow predicted five signs that would herald Allison's ascension. Four of those signs have come to pass:

“The first was the sacrifice of innocents: the women who died as the Ship tried to evolve one of them and create an improved strain of Human Being. The Ship created in Allison a new force, a new life, a new future for us all. The Signs of

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the Advent of the Queen of Light and Sorrow are all signs full of tragedy, full of grief. But with that grief, with that sorrow comes the light of what Allison became.

“The second Sign was the death of an innocent at the hands of the Queen of Light and Sorrow. Theresa White, a nurse, died when Allison lost control of the abilities that she scarcely understood.

“And, I stand before you as the Third Sign of the Advent of our Queen. I was attacked, beaten into a coma. But as Allison’s powers continued to grow, she healed me; made me whole and did to me what even the Ship could not: though I will grow old and die, it may take hundreds, perhaps even thousands of years. And the men, women and children that Allison healed today will also likely share in this extended life. I have since dedicated my life and all the time that has been given me to spreading the Word of the Prophecy of the Queen of Light and Sorrow, to be her herald and to give a message of hope to all who will listen.”

Juan was silent a long moment, contemplating what he had to say next and how to say it, and allowing his congregation the chance to digest what he had just revealed.

“Today,” he said, pausing, “Today, we have lived through the greatest of all tragedies of our time aboard this Ship. The attack by the Zohor fleet has taken more than forty thousand of our friends and loved ones. Have any of us come through this day unscathed? We have all faced more than we ever expected, more than we believed ourselves capable of

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surviving. But, we did survive. And we are now alive because the Queen of Light and Sorrow.

“Allison fulfilled the Fourth Sign of the Prophecy when she destroyed the Zohor and saved us by repairing the Ship:

The Lost Ones will Travel into the Dark Places beyond the constellations and stars. They will follow an ancient path to safety, but there in the Darkness between the stars they will be set upon by the Soldiers of Death, the Destroyers of Life.

And despite their hero's efforts, the Lost Ones will be devastated, their guardians overwhelmed. Many will die as the Lost Ones fight against this undefeatable foe. Thus will come to pass the Fourth Sign of the Advent of the Queen of Light and Sorrow, as the Queen Declares herself and saves the Lost Ones from the Soldiers of Death.

The Queen of Light and Sorrow will walk into the heart of the all-consuming storm. The enemy will fall and the Lost Ones escape and from the fires of creation the Queen of Light and Sorrow will be reborn.

“Allison McQuire appeared in Main Engineering before the Chief Engineer, Alina Tanaka.” Juan said, “There, she declared herself the Queen of Light and Sorrow and then entered the Ship's power distribution core. The Zohor fell back and the Ship escaped.

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“The Prophecy goes on to tell us that we will be led to a new home, a world where we will be safe, a world where we will prosper under the protection of the Queen of Light and Sorrow. And that from there generations and legions will become her Army of Light and Life; they will be born, raised and called into service. Already we know the great miracles that Allison McQuire, is capable of. Not only did she repair the Ship and save us; she has on this day healed the sick and the dying, just as she healed me.

“There are many who will tell you that we are doomed,” Juan said, “That the Ship is dying, that our enemies will find us. And I tell you this is not so! Allison would not have done these things if we were not, even now, already safe! Allison McQuire...the Queen of Light and Sorrow, would not have done this if there were no hope. We will find sanctuary. The future will be guarded. We must not despair. Yes, it is good—it is right to grieve and to mourn our dead. But at the same time we owe it to those who have gone before us both aboard the Ship and back home on Earth to take courage in the fulfillment of Prophecy. For we have seen and lived through the worst of what was foreseen for our generation. Our duty is to the future. Our duty to the future is to live in peace, to live long and to prosper and flourish when we come to the place that has been made for us.”



It had been a long and restless night. Benedict was released from hospital only a few hours after Allison healed everyone. Bloom had ordered him off-duty for at least forty-

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eight hours. In the silence of the late hours of the night, Bloom left the emergency levels to return to what was left of the habitable decks and to her office in the sky over Habitat—or what was left of Habitat. Outside her window of transparent metal alloys the vast chamber was dark. The sphere was a darker black against the gray-black of the giant and dead image generators. Its surface was dead; the earth and trees partially torn up and scattered when the Habitat chamber had been exposed to vacuum. The buildings were dark, the world spinning in a gloomy shadow. It was like looking at a mountain range at dusk, Bloom reflected. She could only see an outline of Habitat in the dark and bleak chasm.

The lights in her office worked, but she kept the room mainly dark. From one of the drawers of her desk, Bloom had retrieved a stale pack of cigarettes and an old book of matches. Despite the harsh taste of the over-dry tobacco, Bloom inhaled gratefully. Benedict was alive; he would live. In truth, that was all that Bloom cared about right now. That and getting the people that she had led into this disaster somewhere safe.

She'd failed as commander of Shipflight. In her mind she'd already held the court martial, already found herself guilty of gross negligence and misconduct. The entire mission had been an utter failure; the failure entirely her fault. But, Bloom swore she would see these people somewhere secure, somewhere protected, somewhere they would be able to flourish.

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The following day Bloom reported to Doctor Cole in the Ship's hospital administration wing. The Chief of the Ship's Hospital looked haggard. Bloom had never seen Cole look so exhausted. Even after the attacks by the United Trinity Observants on Fort Arapaho prior to Shiprise, Cole hadn't seemed this drained.

"Have you gone over my report on Allison McQuire, Colonel?"

Bloom nodded.

"Colonel, I'm completely frightened of her at this point. Strike that; I'm terrified."

"She saved the Ship," Bloom said, "She saved us. She healed everyone who was sick, everyone who was injured."

"Yes," Cole replied, "Including half a dozen people with recently-diagnosed terminal illness, chronic treatable diseases both major and minor, and even three people who were suffering from insomnia. One of my patients had their right thumb and index finger amputated when they were seven years old. Their thumb and finger have grown back, Colonel. And the lung infection I was actually treating them for is gone."

"You're frightened by the fact that she used her abilities to heal these people?" Bloom was incredulous.

"No. The mere fact that she *has* these abilities frightens me. She walked into a maelstrom of raw energy and radiation the likes of which we can't even measure. She should have been dead the instant that chamber even began opening. Not

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only did she survive she was able to manipulate radiation, energy, matter...she was able to bend it all to her will. She talks about it as if it were the easiest thing in the world.”

“All I know Doctor is that my Exo was dying. Allison healed him. He’s going to live. I don’t know how she did it...I frankly don’t care.”

“We can’t control her, Colonel. Imagine for a moment that we found ourselves in a scenario that forced us to move against her. We wouldn’t be able to. Not only because we have no means of stopping her, but because she can read our minds and she quite possibly has some precognitive ability, as well.”

“You’re beginning to sound like Commander Castaneda,” Bloom said, “And I don’t share in your pessimism.”

“Colonel, she’s unstoppable. What’s to keep her from falling victim to her own power? What if she should get angry or feel threatened by us? What then?”

“And if I give you my word, Doctor?” a new voice asked. Bloom and Cole turned to look. Allison stood in the doorway of the Doctor’s office, her hair pulled back in a braid, dressed in a green sweater and blue jeans, looking nothing at all like a godlike superbeing.

“What if I swore to you that I don’t intend to hurt anyone aboard the Ship? What if I told you that after all I have been through that I don’t want anything but to be left alone unless I’m needed?”

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Cole and Bloom stared at her. Allison came into the office and took the chair next to Bloom.

“I’m sorry for barging in on your conversation, Colonel, Doctor,” Allison said, “But my name is being spoken and whispered by nearly everyone, right now. Nowhere, however, is anyone discussing me more intently than here in this room. Almost no one anywhere else aboard the Ship speaks with more fear than Doctor Cole.”

“I think Doctor Cole’s fear is understandable, Allison,” Bloom said, carefully, “You’re...you’ve gone so far beyond anything we’ve ever witnessed or experienced. The Nai’Marak called you the *Shekhina*; the female aspect of God. You’re more powerful than...than...”

“Anything,” Allison finished, “And absolute power corrupts absolutely. The danger is not in my power but in the fact that I possess it. Do I have the wisdom to use these abilities? Do I have the will not to use them?”

“Enquiring minds, Allison,” Cole said, “Would like to know.”

Allison smiled and lowered her eyes. Bloom shifted in her chair.

“When all of this started,” Allison said, “I would have said, no. But as my powers grew, things began to happen. I was angry...so angry. I didn’t want this. I still don’t. But I’ve absorbed into myself the memories...the experiences of everyone aboard the Ship. I felt the deaths of everyone who died in the Zohor attack. And I still have their...their essences inside of me. I am a living record of their souls, Colonel. And,

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I also absorbed a record of the Ship's consciousness into myself. I think that was how I was able to accomplish what I did, saving the Ship and healing all those people all at once. My memory from the Ship stretches back millions of years; my experience from everyone aboard spans thousands of lives. Do I have the wisdom to control these powers? I dare say yes. That wisdom was given to me...bestowed upon me with each new life I came into contact with. Are there moments in which I am mad, intoxicated by what I have done or can do? Are there moments when I am filled with palpable rage because of the violation I survived? On both counts, yes. But at those times, I don't think I'm capable of doing much."

"And how can we know any of that for sure?" Cole asked.

Allison shook her head.

"You can't," she said, "I have the advantage of being able to see your thoughts. I don't have to trust; I don't need faith, because I simply *know*. You and Colonel Bloom have to find faith within yourselves to trust me when I say I have no desire or intention of harming anyone. The only way I can earn your trust is through my actions, so I ask you to judge me on what I've done and what I continue to do."

"That's a lot to ask," Cole replied, "As you said: we can't know your mind."

"No more than you can anyone else's mind." Allison replied, "Yet every day you must trust other people and even inanimate objects to help you, to keep you safe, to sustain you...Am I so much less deserving of that trust? What have I

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done to lose your trust? You know how hard it is, Doctor Cole, for me to live with what I did to Theresa. Her death will always haunt me. But since then, I have done nothing but help; I have done nothing but heal.”

“Since last night, Juan Carlos Rejas’ ministry has grown,” Bloom observed, “A lot of his supporters see you as some sort of god.”

The look of shame and anger on Allison’s face was so overt that Bloom almost swore she could feel it, herself.

“I know,” Allison said, “As much as I want to, I can’t control him or his ministry. But they have a part yet to play in things.”

“What do you mean?” Bloom asked.

Allison frowned.

“I’m not sure; I can’t—at least not yet—I can’t see the future.”

“You think you’ll be able to...” Cole stammered.

“Possibly,” Allison said, “I can already anticipate what people are going to say, what they’re going to do...I’ve had flashes like dreams of things that happen, of things that will happen...but nothing so well-defined as a vision of the future.”

“To be honest, I’d feel better if you were kept isolated from the general population,” Cole said.

Allison nodded. “Right now given how they feel about me, I’m more than happy to oblige; I just wish they’d leave me alone.” she said.

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“We’ll make sure you still have plenty of Human interaction,” Bloom said, “I don’t want you completely isolated from--”

Bloom stopped talking as Allison gave a start, looking around, nervously.

“What is it?” Bloom asked.

“Colonel Bloom, there’s someone out there.”

Just then the intercom chimed.

“Colonel Bloom, report to the Command Deck,” Major Benedict called, “We have a sensor contact.”

“Shit.” Bloom hissed.



Major Benedict, Captain Decker and Commander Castaneda were gathered around the main tactical console. The dome display was still blank. Bloom knew better than to question her Exo about having defied her orders to stay off-duty; something was up.

“What is it, the Zohor?” Bloom asked

“No,” Benedict said, “We don’t know what it is.”

It was still strange to see Benedict back on his feet so soon. Yesterday he was blistered, burned and dying. Today there was no trace that he’d even so much as stubbed a toe.

“The silhouette doesn’t match anything in the Ship’s database,” Castaneda said, “We can’t even trace it back to a progenitor, the way we did with the Zohor ship.”

“Can I see a visual?” Bloom asked.

Castaneda called up an outside sensor image. The alien vessel was taller than it was wide and a dark, rusted red. Its hull was

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wrinkled-looking and pitted, and the vessel was bulbous like a pear or a teardrop.

“It’s still about a thousand kilometres off,” Benedict said, “But it’s closing at about a hundred clicks a minute.”

“So, we have ten minutes,” Bloom said, “What are the tactical specifications of the vessel?”

“It’s smaller than us,” Castaneda replied, “Five kilometres high, ten long and five wide at its largest. Hull is non-metallic; some sort of dense organic material. Power output looks similar to ours, though.”

“What about weapons?” Bloom asked, knowing that even with Allison’s intervention their chances of surviving another fight were slim.

Castaneda worked a sub-panel to the tactical station.

“Nothing running that the Ship’s systems recognize as weapons energy,” she said, “No discernible weapons array along the vessel’s outer skin.”

“All that means is that their gun ports are closed,” Benedict said.

Bloom grunted her agreement.

“Stand by to make an emergency jump to hyperspace,” Bloom said, “We’ll do it at the first sign of trouble.”

“Colonel Bloom, we’re receiving a transmission from the alien ship,” Lieutenant Kalenga announced.

“Are the translation systems online?” Benedict asked.

“There’s no need, sir,” Kalenga replied, “The message is in English.”

Bloom turned to regard Benedict.

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“What do you know, Exo?” she said, “All the old Sci-Fi shows were right: the whole fucking universe speaks English.”



The alien vessel closed on the Ship with graceful precision. It continued to broadcast its message to the Ship as it slowed and halted, now only a few hundred meters away. Bloom sat down at the command station, facing the console.

“Route the transmission to me,” she said to Kalenga. Her screen flickered to life. At first Bloom thought she was looking at a picture of some sort of alien machine; before her was a large, blue-white oval of what was either highly polished metal or an acrylic compound. She had no reference for the size of the object, nor could she see more than its upper half. There were small black, oval-shaped blisters arranged regularly in rows through the center of the upper half of the ovoid object. It was only as the thing reared back and began speaking that Bloom realized she was facing an alien being.

“Colonel Margaret Bloom,” The alien said, its English perfect if somewhat accented, “We come in peace. We’re here to assist you in making repairs to your Ship.”

“I appreciate the offer,” Bloom replied, “But I’m a little more concerned with the fact that you know who we are, speak our language and knew where to find us.”

“We were given that information, Colonel,” the alien said, “We are allies of the Nai’Marak and we have all sworn an oath to serve the Queen of Light and Sorrow. I’m the Grandmaster, commander of this ship, the *Ouroboros*,” the alien said, “My people are known as the El-Ahur, and I had

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hoped that we would never meet. However, you are here now, and we are here now. My ship's systems and crew are at your service."

Bloom turned to regard Benedict, Decker and Castaneda, still standing together at the tactical station in the crew pit below.

"After our last encounter with an alien species, I'm a little hesitant to accept."

The alien seemed to make a gesture of acknowledgement.

"If we met in person, Colonel Bloom, would you feel more comfortable discussing this?"

Bloom paused, considering.

"Let me put it another way, Colonel," the Grandmaster said, "Let's look at the situation with blunt logic: If we were hostile, if we wanted you dead, the Ship would already be destroyed. We have been sent here to help. After the Zohor attack, Colonel, you and your people need all the help you can get."

Bloom leaned back in her seat.

"That didn't sound very friendly," Bloom said.

"I don't expect so," the Grandmaster replied, "I can only hope it sounded sincere. If you prefer, Meg, we could leave."

Bloom leaned forward, staring at the screen.

"What did you call me?"

"Would you like it if we met, Colonel?"

"Yes," Bloom said, guardedly, "I think I would like that very much."



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Commander Castaneda walked with Bloom from the tram car station to the main landing bay. The tram station was built along the innermost bulkhead of the outer hull and as such, it had a spectacular view across the gigantic airframe to the bulk of the inner hull of the Ship. Bloom and Castaneda barely noticed, as they walked down the wide corridor to the Ship's primary space port. It was a complex facility, one of several ringing the Ship's outer hull. There were traffic control and coordination facilities, launch bays, landing bays and hangars...thousands of hangars and workbays.

"Colonel, are you sure about this?" Castaneda asked, "I strongly recommend you consider a security detail. We're letting an unknown alien aboard the Ship. For all we know, they're infected by the Nimbus."

Bloom shook her head as they cleared the security checkpoint into the facility. A small tram car sat waiting for them. As they stepped aboard and sat down, it took off, silently gliding down the hallway towards the main landing bay.

"As the Grandmaster pointed out," Bloom said, "If they were hostile, we'd be dead, already."

Castaneda was insistent, "And if they're infected with the Nimbus? They could just be trying to get aboard to infect us."

"How did they get the navigational data from the Hub?"

"Perhaps they were already out this far."

They arrived at their destination and headed for the landing bay control and observation deck.

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“Commander, whether they are hostile, infected by the Nimbus or if I simply don’t allow them, we’re dead in space. Our best chance is if we trust these...Uhura—”

“El-Ahur,” Castaneda corrected.

“...to help us.”

The door into the control room dropped slowly open as they approached.

“Nadia, I appreciate your concern and your vigilance,” Bloom said, “But we’re beyond our depths; we’re in so far over our heads we can’t even see the surface.”

Castaneda nodded, defeated.

“Very well, Colonel,” she conceded, “We’ll play it your way.”



A shuttle launched from the *Ouroboros*. It had the same organic pod-shape and design; a simple, seamless almond sliver of rusted orange and white.

“It’s beautiful, whatever it is,” Bloom remarked as she watched the alien shuttle slip gracefully onto an approach path for the Ship.

“Docking control to *Ouroboros* shuttle, you are cleared for final approach. Maintain speed and heading.”

The Lieutenant at the console relayed Bloom’s instructions to the approaching ship. She stood behind him, staring out the observation window at the empty landing bay.

“Landing bay is now at zero pressure, Colonel,” the Lieutenant said, “I’m opening the doors.”

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The large hangar doors split apart from each other, recessing diagonally into the floor. When the doors were fully opened landing lights came on as the main lights of the hangar went out. Beacons outside the landing bay sent a large shaft of yellow light into the darkened expanse. All the shuttle pilot had to do was follow the light's angle precisely and they would be on-course.

“Docking control to *Ouroboros* shuttle: reduce speed by seventy-five per cent and angle up seven degrees.”

“Shuttle on final approach,” the modulated voice of the Grandmaster echoed through the console's speakers, “Five-by-five.”

Bloom and Castaneda shared an unsure look at the use of such a Human expression and turned to watch the shuttle as it slowed and then crossed—almost drifting—into the landing bay.

The entire bay was a kilometre long from outer to inner bulkhead, and almost four times as wide. It led onto hangars, repair decks, crew facilities, offices...an entire complex; one of many. Bloom felt a sudden stab of fear in her belly as she realized that the Ship had been designed as an Ark in the truest sense of the word. Millions of people could have lived for hundreds of generations aboard the Ship. She'd always known this, but until that moment she had never truly understood its full implication. The crew of the Ship numbered in the tens of thousands; they were a skeleton staff, she realized, compared to what the Ship had the capacity for. Millions of passengers and

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crew could have lived and worked throughout the alien vessel. Perhaps as they traveled the Exodus, they would have. Bloom had never considered that theirs could be a quest over the course of generations.

The alien shuttle slowed and fired reverse thrusters, hovering until its landing struts were fully extended. They seemed to unfurl like young vines. But they were as rigid as steel when extended. The shuttle touched down and the landing bay doors rose shut. Small engines came to life under the shuttle, lifting it slightly as it taxied into position against the docking gantry.

“Pressurizing bay,” the Lieutenant at docking control said, “Atmosphere and pressure in the bay are equalizing...now equalized to Ship-normal atmosphere.”

A gangway extended from the gantry along the sides of the shuttle to permit its passenger to debark.

“Sweet fuck all aboard this Ship is normal, Lieutenant,” Bloom said, crossing to the airlock into the landing bay, “And don’t you ever forget it.”

“No, Ma’am,”

As Bloom reached the gangway she realized that the shuttle wasn’t that big. No bigger than a small cargo / passenger van; The alien shuttle was smaller than the old camper Mark used to drive around in, she thought with a mix of melancholy and curiosity. It split open against the gantry, curling apart in four places. When the shuttle’s airlock opened,

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Bloom got her first look and full understanding of what she had seen when the Grandmaster's image had first appeared onscreen:

The leader of the El-Ahur was large; it must have been bending or kneeling over inside the shuttle. Standing up, the El-Ahur was almost twice as tall as Bloom and easily twice as wide. She was reminded of an oversized sumo wrestler as she looked at the El-Ahur. Its body was a single oval, the inverted egg shape flattened slightly on the sides. Huge arms and legs extended from the torso, all of it in the same powdery blue-white alloy. But the El-Ahur didn't appear to be a machine. Instead it was seamless and moved fluidly like a living being. Bloom would have expected the thing to walk ploddingly, but it had the grace of a large prowling cat. The black ovals over the upper ridge of the El-Ahur were its eyes, Bloom realized. As the Grandmaster reached her, its right forearm extended on a six-fingered hand. At either end of the four fingers was an opposable thumb. Bloom took its hand in hers and shook it.

"You're wondering if I'm a machine," the Grandmaster said, "The look on your face says as much. The answer is no. This exoskeleton is for my protection."

"From what?" Bloom asked.

"A great many things, Colonel. We're a strong Race, but ultimately we're also quite vulnerable."

Bloom shrugged, unsure how to reply.

"Welcome aboard the Ship," she said, "What's left of it, anyway."

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They walked together down the ramp towards the entrance to the landing bay control room. The Grandmaster's footfalls were as light as Bloom's, barely making any noise.

"As I said, we came here to assist with your repairs. We can stabilize the Ship's superstructure enough for you to get your passengers and crew somewhere safe."

"That rules out evacuating to your ship, then." Bloom commented.

"Where we are going, your people can't follow," The Grandmaster said, regretfully.

"Why is that?" Bloom asked, "You're willing to help us, you're asking me to trust you, but it seems that your offer of help is limited, to say the least."

"It is; you're absolutely right. I wish it wasn't, but it has to be. Events must unfold very precisely if we are to succeed."

They walked out into the hallway, past the still-waiting tram car that Bloom had come in, with Castaneda. Bloom stopped, turning to face the El-Ahur.

"Why is that, exactly?" she asked, "Don't get me wrong, Grandmaster; I appreciate your offer of help, especially with the entire Zohor fleet looking for us. But I'm afraid I've got to ask you to be a little more forthcoming."

"You never could quite pull off being diplomatic, Meg," the Grandmaster said, with what sounded like an electronic chuckle.

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“That’s twice you’ve called me that,” Bloom hissed, “Very few people in this universe have the privilege of addressing me so familiarly.”

“There’s only one answer that will satisfy you,” the Grandmaster said, “Can we go somewhere private?”

The door into the flight deck briefing room rose shut behind them as the lights came on. Bloom locked the door. The Grandmaster of the El-Ahur stood in the center of the room, watching her.

“You promised me an answer,” Bloom said, “So, let’s have it.”

The El-Ahur crouched, its large arms reaching and then extending out behind it until the inverted oval of its torso was leaning away from Bloom. She watched as a seam suddenly appeared down the center of the exoskeleton from top to bottom. It split in two directions at its two points, arcing back down the sides of the shell at the top, arcing up along the sides of the shell from the bottom, meeting in the middle. There was a tiny hiss, as the pressure inside and outside the carapace equalized. The two quarters of the front of the El-Ahur’s exoskeleton opened outwards and dropped into recesses along the sides. Bloom could not believe her eyes. Sitting inside the El-Ahur exoskeleton was a man; not just any man: he was older and a large scar streaked its way in a jagged line down his now-dreadlocked head from behind his right ear, across his cheekbone and down to his chin. The uniform he was wearing was of black and the strangest dark powder blue Bloom had

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ever seen; it seemed a perfect shade, for some reason it was almost hypnotic. Gold insignia on the black jacket over his heart were in Shiplanguage runes, Bloom realized, astonished. Despite the scars and the years in the face, the hair and the uniform on the man, there was no mistaking Jack Benedict.

“Hello, Meg,” he said, “It is really fucking good to see you again.”



They were in there an hour. Commander Castaneda called Bloom’s linx four times in the first twenty minutes. After the fifth time Bloom threatened to come out and shoot her in the foot if she didn’t stop. For the entire hour inside the briefing room, Benedict talked. He told her what would happen. He told her about the Aeons War, the war that he, as Grandmaster of the Order of the El-Ahur, was sworn to fight: the war against the Zohor, the war against the Nimbus. He told Bloom of the future awaiting his past self; he told her of her own mission and fate. Bloom was afraid and relieved all at once.

“I’m sorry to burden you with such information, Colonel, with such a duty.”

Bloom shook her head as she wiped a tear from her cheek.

“No, it’s okay,” she said, “Jack; I’ve spent most of this mission feeling as though I failed in my duty. Now, you’ve given me my chance to redeem myself.”

“You always took your duty too seriously.”

“I am an Officer of the United States Air Force,” she said, “A Colonel whose only mission was to see these people

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and this crew and Ship safely through space. I was in over my head from the beginning. I stayed the course; I pressed on. My pride, not my sense of duty did this to us. Now I can repent for the sin of pride, Jack; now I can execute my duty with a finality that will guarantee not only the safety...but the future...the future of all Humankind.”

But Bloom’s knees buckled slightly nonetheless. Benedict, now nearly her age, reached out and took hold of her, steadying her. Even Margaret Bloom couldn’t quite discuss her own imminent death without growing faint.

“Jesus H. Christ I’m sorry, Meg.” Benedict said.

“Jack, it’s not your fault,” she said, “You’re as much a victim in all of this as I am. It’s almost fucking biblical, isn’t it? I think a lot more’s been dumped on your shoulders, or will be dumped on your shoulders--”

“Will have been dumped on my shoulders,”

Bloom chuckled.

“Fine,” she said, “A hell of a lot more will have been dumped on your shoulders than mine.”

She stared silently into the weathered face before her. This Jack Benedict was one she’d never get the chance to know. He’d been through a Hell of war far worse than anything she’d ever seen. In that sense she didn’t envy him. That he would still outlive her though, Bloom knew she did. He was the type of man she’d always admired...the type of man she’d always loved. He was nothing like her Exo, a young man whom she’d been training for command, a man who could only have become this man on his own terms.

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“You’ll be wanting to see Allison before you return to your ship to dispatch the repair crews, am I right?” she rasped.

“Yes,” Benedict said, “She and I have things to discuss. Of the three of us, Colonel, I’d say that young woman’s got the worst burden of all. Even I wouldn’t trade places with her.” He climbed back inside the exoskeleton. Bloom winced as she watched him plug a small bundle of cables into a jack implanted behind his left ear.

“It doesn’t hurt,” he assured her, as he plugged a similar bundle of cables in behind his right ear, “And when it’s switched on, the interface makes the suit as much a part of me as my own body.”

“Jesus Christ,” Bloom said.

The suit sealed and the El-Ahur stood up in one quick, fluid motion.

“The exoskeleton itself is called a Macronaut,” Benedict said through the suit’s modulated voice, “It’s partially organic, like the Ship. It was evolved out of Ship technology, so it shouldn’t be that surprising. Most of it is mechanical, though. A technology they’ve explained to me a dozen times, that I still don’t understand.”

“That is really fucking cool,” Bloom said, wistfully. Again, the robotic chuckle.

“I gotta agree with you there,”

“I’ll take you to see Allison,” Bloom said, “While you’re with her, I’ll make preparations to have your people come aboard. I assume they’ll be in Macronaut suits as well?”

“Yes,”

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She led him to the door. Before unlocking it she turned to face Benedict, in his future guise as the Grandmaster of the El-Ahur.

“Can you just tell me one thing?” she asked, shaken, “Can you just tell me why, Jack? Why any of this happened, why any of it is happening? Why it even *has* to happen?”

“I wish I could give you an easy answer,” he replied, “But the fact is there isn’t one. I used to believe there was no such thing as fate; then I used to think I could change my fate; I don’t know, anymore. The Allison I know, the Queen she’s become in my time, says that both the future and the past depend on the actions of the present and of our own point of view. She says that even what has been foreseen and what is destined to be can be changed. Meg, I once put a gun in my mouth and pulled the trigger. The fucking gun jammed. Up until a few hours ago, I didn’t even know this meeting would take place.”

“Fuck,” Bloom rasped.

“Queen Allison says that everything we’ve gone through since the Ship first arrived on Earth, let alone since the time we came to be aboard the Ship, serves the will of the Machine. And the Machine serves the Purpose,”

“And the Purpose is Life,” Bloom finished, “All Life serves the Machine.”

“Yeah,” Benedict’s modulated voice rumbled bitterly.

“Believe it or not, Jack, knowing that makes it easier for me.”



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Allison felt them coming to her long before they reached her suite of rooms. She could identify Colonel Bloom and Major Benedict—except that he wasn't really Major Benedict, was he? He was a time-traveller...His destiny was known to him; as such it was known to her...and she found his fate to be nearly as strange as her own. Bloom and Benedict were outside her door. Allison willed the door to open. Benedict, inside a spidery, robotic suit—a Macronaut, she reminded herself—stepped into the room. Bloom remained outside. The Macronaut towered over Allison, easily twice her height. She was impressed by the technology. She knew of it because Benedict was physically connected to the Macronaut through the neural link in his head. She had access to the exoskeleton's computers, its schematics, diagnostics; everything; the perfect fusion of mind and machine.

“Hello, Allison.” Benedict said, through the suit's modulations, “We have a lot to talk about.”

“I know,” Allison replied.



When Benedict-the-future left Allison's rooms, she sat alone in her parlour, looking at the two objects that he had entrusted to her. The first was small rectangular wedge of golden metal; etched in black into its surface was that Shiplanguage rune, again:

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The second object was an apple-sized piece of what appeared to be dark blue glass, shot through with strands of gold. Benedict had told her to keep these safe until the time had come to give them to him.

“You’ll know when and where,” he said, “At the beginning of the end.” He said.

“When you...when he is taken into the future,” Allison said, “When he’s brought forward to finish what you started.” Benedict nodded.

“You probably have a better understanding than I do as to how all this happened,” he said.

A slight smile touched Allison’s lips.

“I have a good idea how it could be done, yes,” she said.

“Then I only have one last thing to ask you,” Benedict said.

“What is it?”

“Find a way to change things! Find a way to help us change our fates! You have over a thousand years to think about it, to figure it out. And like I told your future self not so long ago: *Find a way to save me and I’ll find a way to save her!*”

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“Who?” Allison asked, but inside the Macronaut Benedict smiled grimly as Allison plucked the knowledge from his mind. For the first time since before the Ship had violated her she knew fear. For the first time since she’d become nearly omniscient she felt the horror of epiphany.

“I’m pregnant,” she rasped, “Juan...we only had one night together...we conceived...”

“You’re well into your first trimester,” Benedict said, “And from what your future self told me, it won’t be long before she starts talking to you.”

Allison began to cry.

“I’m...I’m not ready; I’m not worthy...the child inside me, she’s...”

“Yes, she is,” Benedict said, “And I revere her, Allison. The only words I can find are very old words, but I feel I must say them, nonetheless.”

“You’re a follower of Juan’s religion,” Allison said.

“I became one, yes,” he replied, “But it’s not just Juan’s religion. It’s hers; it’s yours; it’s all of ours.”

“Oh, Goddess, no,” Allison sobbed.

The Macronaut dropped down on one knee, reverentially.

“Blessed are you among women, Allison McQuire, Queen of Light and Sorrow, and Blessed is the fruit of Thy womb.”

“Gabrielle,” Allison sobbed, wrapping her arms around her belly.

And from somewhere inside her, she felt that other mind...it was tiny, primitive, still animal. But it expressed a single

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thought of slumbering comfort, surrounded, it knew, by its mother's life-force. And Allison knew the tiny organism had recognized its name.

The Macronaut rose and opened the door from Allison's suite.

“Until we meet again, my Queen,” he said.

“I swear I'll do everything in my power to do as you asked,” Allison said.

The modular voice chuckled.

“I wish I had that in writing,”

“Until we meet again, Grandmaster.”

“Until then,”

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If it is true that people seek out leaders and heroes, then it is also true that the best leaders and the truest heroes are those who are most reluctant to lead and least interested in heroism.

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TWENTY-ONE REVERENCE

The Ship hung in space. After the Zohor attack, it was a gutted ruin; skeletal and torn. The gold of its hull had lost its lustre; the luminous bands of blue across its surface were dark, cold. The Ship was dying. It would not complete the mission to which it had been dedicated, though it would see that its passengers and crew were taken to a safe haven. The *Ouroboros* was parked nearby and a constant stream of support vehicles crossed between the two vessels. They worked to slow the inevitable, to prolong the Ship's life long enough to complete its final task.

The El-Ahur had reinforced the Ship's airframe and restored the navigation and sensor systems. Major Benedict—the Jack Benedict from this time and from the Ship—knew

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nothing of the conversation between his Commanding Officer and his future self. No one but Bloom and Allison knew the truth. His orders were now to find a new home, a sanctuary world, for the surviving passengers and crew of the Ship. To that end the Major had deployed hundreds of probes out towards the far-distant galactic cluster. Almost seven days later, they were only now returning telemetry, none of it promising.

It was another ten days before the El-Ahur had completed their work on the Ship; from a cosmetic standpoint very little seemed to have been done. But inside the airframe the change was obvious: the superstructure had been reinforced dramatically throughout the damaged sections. The repairs had been carried out with a combination of fast-growing, genetically engineered materials and traditional metallic alloys. With the Ship's superstructure reinforced and the damaged Ship's computer systems re-routed and repaired, the El-Ahur were at last ready to be on their way.

"Captain Decker, the El-Ahur ship reports all repairs are complete," Commander Kalich said.

"Acknowledge repair status with the El-Ahur and inform Colonel Bloom," Decker replied, "I believe she wants to thank them for their help, personally."

Kalich nodded and returned to his station.



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Bloom sat in her office on the now mainly-deserted Administration Level. She sat with the lights off, looking out the permanently-sealed transparent alloy window. The dark bulk of Habitat sat in dull gloom. Emergency floodlamps provided dim reference to the Ship's dead heart. Bloom's linx chimed. She resisted answering it for a long moment before succumbing to duty:

“Commander Kalich here Colonel Bloom,” Kalich said, “The *Ouroboros* reports all major repairs are complete. They're awaiting your leave.”

Bloom tuned to her desk and switched on the right-hand console; the only one that still worked. It sputtered and flickered to life; a disconcerting reminder of the failing systems aboard the dying Ship.

“Patch me through to the Grandmaster,” she said.

A moment later Grandmaster Benedict, hidden within his Macronaut, appeared on screen.

“Colonel,”

“Grandmaster, you have my thanks and the undying gratitude of all those aboard,” Bloom said, “You've given us hope...you've given me hope.”

As the communication ended, Bloom whispered: “Thank you, Jack.”

“Wish you could have had more than just hope.”

“Me too. For you, her, me...all of us.”

“Times twelve billion.”

“Times twelve billion, Exo.”



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Major Benedict sat inside a small, darkened alcove. Around him shimmering with ghostly brilliance were gossamer images of nebulae, starscapes and systems of the galactic cluster ahead. The different renderings hung in the air around of the console; colour-coded and diaphanous as he charted the probes' progress through the nearest bodies of the supercluster.

The probes themselves were capable of time warp jumps and used narrow-beam hyperlink broadcasts to relay information back to the Ship. With so many probes out there, it was a simple matter to interlink them and receive real-time information from even the remotest. Unfortunately it also meant that they were at risk of being discovered by the Zohor, who could turn hyperlink networks against their users.

Benedict was looking for one of two things: either another space station, another port-of call of any kind, or a planet that could sustain Human life. He'd found neither and knew that looking for either, even with the resources of the Ship, would be like looking for a mote of dust in the desert; the area to be covered was far too large. He'd nearly depleted the Ship's supply of probes and all Benedict had uncovered was a host of gas giants and balls of ice and dirt. Other worlds made the tumultuous climate of Venus seem pastoral by comparison. Grimly, his favourite had been the world with shallow oceans of boiling lead and mercury, and an atmosphere of toxic and corrosive gasses. He'd dubbed that one Benedict's Hell-hole. It boasted a superhot landmass of metals and alloys the

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consistency of mud, and daily electrical storms in the arid, poisonous atmosphere that released enough raw energy to power the whole of Earth for decades. The Ship's probe beacon was the only thing that could survive penetration into that atmosphere. Benedict looked down at the back-lit console at his fingertips. One of the probes was reporting it was approaching G-type star around which there were several large orbiting bodies.

The probe was arriving in-system now. Because the star's magnitude was so similar to Earth's that only the three or four planets closest to it would be warm enough to sustain Human life, assuming that these innermost planets were at the right distance from the star, that they had breathable atmospheres and that they were of the correct planetary mass. Benedict waited as the probe began its sweep of the inner system, checking in on other probes approaching other candidate stars. Finally, the probe he'd been monitoring reported in: the system was no good. Of three worlds close enough to the G-type star to support life, one had no axial spin, meaning it had a permanent, burning hot day-side and an ice-cold night side. The second planet was barren and devoid of even an atmosphere while the third was a swampy mass of noxious gasses and poison chemical rain. Benedict sighed, closing his eyes, shaking his head. It was all no good; there was nothing out there.

"God," he whispered into the darkness of the imaging chamber, "God help me."

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Hollowly, impotently, his voice echoed against the darkness.



Her long, black hair in a tight braid behind her back, dressed in a pair of shorts and a tank top, Alina Tanaka knelt on an *Asana* in the darkness of her quarters before a small altar. Tanaka and her family were Hindu, not Buddhist or Christian like most of Japan. The altar was dedicated to Vishnu, and Tanaka was kneeling before it to pray and to meditate. A week before she had witnessed something; she had participated in something incredible: Allison McQuire's actions, the... miracles she'd performed...Tanaka had gone through a spiritual awakening when she'd seen Allison McQuire's body form from a stream of energy escaping from the focusing chamber: She had looked upon energy turning into matter, under the guiding force of Allison's will alone. At that moment, Alina Tanaka had experienced *Sanatan Dharma*: an undeniable personal religious transformation; a pure expression of understanding of Truth, however small, of the universe and her place in it. And Allison McQuire was at the center of that *Sanatan Dharma*; she was a *Sangha*, an Awakened One. Tanaka had born witness to the birth of Allison as *Sangha*; a *Sattva*—a being of great good and power. In fact, having looked over all that Allison had done, from saving the Ship to healing the dying, wounded and the sick, Tanaka even believed it possible that Allison McQuire, the so-called Queen of Light and Sorrow, could very well be the Avatar for *Shakti*; the Divine Mother.

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As she had done every day for the last two weeks, Tanaka sat and prayed. She prayed that she was right, and that Vishnu would bestow blessings upon the *Sangha Sattva*. Tanaka knew as well that she needed to speak soon with Juan Carlos Rejas. She had to learn more for herself and Rejas, she believed, could teach her.



Bloom, Benedict and Decker arrived on the engineering deck the following morning. They met Captain Tanaka in the focusing chamber control room, where she stood looking through the specially shielded, transparent wall and into the cavernous vault beyond. Tanaka turned around and saluted, standing at attention.

“At ease, Captain,” Bloom said, “Report.”

“It’s already started,” Tanaka said, “The field around the toroidal black hole is fluctuating; not by much, just by a few thousandths of one per cent. Likewise with the focusing crystal: it’s Dark Carbon; a super-dense crystalline element. It works the way quartz crystals do in watches or computer systems: as a resistor and regulator of the power frequency travelling through it. But the crystal’s fissured inside; the energy harmonics will shake it apart. It will shatter.”

“How long?” Bloom asked.

“That’s the good news: we have about twenty million years.”

“At the Ship’s maximum speed that’s at best only a couple of jumps through time warp,” Benedict said. Tanaka nodded.

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“Yes, sir,”

Benedict felt instantly uncomfortable; Tanaka was staring at him so intently; it was a look discomfotingly similar to one that Bloom had worn every day for a week, at their regular breakfast meeting.

“Damn,” Benedict swore, “We’ve used up nearly every probe that survived the attack,” he said, “We haven’t found a fucking thing.”

Bloom smiled.

“We have all the time we need, Exo.”

Benedict and Tanaka both looked at her, curiously.

“How can you be so sure, Colonel?”

“Because I am, Captain,” Bloom said, “Because I know.”

Tanaka frowned.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“The good news is you don’t have to,” Bloom replied.



Juan Carlos Rejas greeted Captain Tanaka at the door into his quarters. He smiled and ushered her inside. Somehow, Tanaka found the young man instantly disarming, so unlike what she expected someone who was essentially a Holy Man to be, that the sense of gravity of the occasion, the feeling of desperate need to speak with him vanished. He was as normal as she, simply ordinary, especially as he led her into his kitchen and opened up the fridge.

“Would you like something to drink?” Rejas asked her, “Some coffee or tea? I also have juice, water, soda, beer--”

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“You’re better stocked than the Officer’s Mess, right now,” Tanaka said.

Rejas smiled and shrugged with a humility too unconscious to be insincere.

“One of the burdens, I imagine, that I should have expected,” he said, “People bring me offerings; it’s sort of embarrassing.”

Tanaka laughed. The young man smiled and blushed. He took them each a bottle of water from the fridge, opening hers before his own.

“Well, I mean, it is,” he said, sitting down, “But I put it to good use. My students take it out into the community, giving food baskets out to those in most need. These last couple of days, it seems that that’s everyone. At least no one is sick; no one is dying.”

“We have Allison McQuire to thank for that,” Tanaka replied, “She’s also the one who saved the Ship; what she did...how she did it...” but she just trailed off, shaking her head.

“I’ve heard recordings of the talks you give,” she stammered, “I’ve read some of the Prophecy...And I was there in the focusing chamber during the attack. I watched as her body was formed out of a current of radiation and raw energy...”

“She was reborn from the fire of creation,” Juan said, “As it is said in Prophecy.”

Juan took a long sip of water, considering his next words.

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“As a student of theology,” he said, “I find it interesting the number of religions and cultures that use fire as a symbol of purification.”

Tanaka concurred, “Fire...combustion...is basically the transformation of matter into energy.”

“And Allison’s third birth saw her being turned from energy back into matter,” Juan said, “And then only hours later, she cured the wounded and the dying. Which means she chose to be reborn will all the changes the Ship made to her, all the mutated evolutions, the superlong lifespan...she chose to return as the Queen of Light and Sorrow.”

“You know more about the prophecies than I do,” Alina said, “But, you’re not just describing the Nai’Marak’s prophecy,”

“What do you mean?”

And so Tanaka explained to him how what she had witnessed fit in with her religious upbringing, her beliefs. Juan listened with patient fascination, not so much astounded as he was fulfilled. At last, Tanaka stopped talking and took a long drink from her bottle of water.

“Did you know that the Muslims refer to a *Mehdi*, the Anointed One who is to come to unite Mankind to God’s love and lead us into a world of peace? While most of the Islamic traditions say the *Mehdi* is a man, there are some scholars who speak of a woman foretold to lead them. What do you make of that?”

“I don’t know,” Tanaka said, “I’m not familiar with Islam.”

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“Have you heard Allison referred to by the term *Shekhina*?”

Tanaka nodded.

“Yes; that was how the Nai’Marak first called her, when speaking with Colonel Bloom.”

“Colonel Bloom is Jewish,” Juan said, “And in the Jewish faith, *Shekhina* is the term used to describe the female Aspect of God; the Divine Feminine. Mary, mother of Jesus in Christian traditions, is thought by some scholars to fulfil the role of *Shekhina* in much the same way that Jesus fulfills the role of Messiah. To me, what you have told me of *Shakti*, of *Sangha Sattva*, it all fits together, doesn’t it? People have always wondered how there could be a true God, if there are so many religions. I wonder, as we bear witness to the fulfilling of the Nai’Marak’s Prophecy, as we finally begin to see the glorious pattern woven from the common threads of so many of our own world’s religions, I can’t help but marvel appreciate the design that is unfolding before us, now. I’m hopeful and afraid and comforted all at once.”



It was late. Benedict hadn’t had anything to eat in more than a day; he’d scarcely noticed the lack of food. The lack of sleep was another thing. There was too much to do; not enough time; not enough hope. They’d used the star charts to look for candidates; they’d sent thousands of probes out. Noow they were nearly out of probes and they’d only managed to examine a handful of star systems.

“Maybe I could help,”

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The voice behind him was soft, feminine and utterly unexpected. Benedict turned around. Though he'd never met her before, he recognized Allison McQuire immediately. There wasn't anyone else that this red-haired young woman in the dark green sweater and the faded blue jeans could be. This was the woman who'd saved them; the woman who'd healed him and everyone else. Somehow, she didn't live up to her beatific reputation in person; she seemed small, sad; tired.

"How can you help?" Benedict asked.

Allison looked around at the holographic display surrounding them. Thousands upon thousands of stars caught in streams of common gravity; the whorls of galaxies, nebulae and so many deep cosmic voids so much like the one they were in now. Allison was caught by the interplay of light and colour, the way that specific beams of energy exciting specific atoms in the air around them created the vast panorama of extra-stellar space they saw before them. She fully understood how the technology worked and even how it could be improved upon, but found it no less fascinating, no less magical.

"Allison?" Benedict asked.

Allison turned her attention back to the Major.

"Sorry," she said with a half-smile, "It's hard for me to pay attention sometimes. I can help, because I believe that I can find our new world; at least, I believe that I can localize it."

"How?" Benedict asked, "Can you see into the future or travel through space and time?"

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Allison couldn't tell the Major that it was his own future self that had given her the coordinates. Grandmaster Benedict had called it "Setting up the closed loop".

"I can't see into the future," she said, smiling. "But sometimes, the future sees me."

Benedict stared at her in astonished disbelief.

"What the Hell," he said, "I'll try anything at this point."

Allison turned her attention to the panel before her. The readout was simple enough, so were the controls. She looked across the starfield simulation and rotated the map to see along its horizontal plane from above, scanning slowly over the intricate network of stellar dewdrops and cosmic spider webs. She highlighted an area of the map on the panel before her and the view swept in and magnified the corresponding region on the holographic display. She did this several times; first into a galaxy, from the galaxy into one of its sectors; into a nebula and from there into a system surrounded by a dozen major and minor planets. It was a massive star, magnitudes greater than Sol and its next closest neighbour was less than half a light year away.

"That's almost a hundred and sixty million light years away," Benedict said, "Even at the Ship's top speed, that'll be cutting things close. How sure are you?"

"Send a probe out to the seventh planet of that system," Allison said, "It's a gas giant with nine moons. The fifth moon is in a rapid orbit around the gas giant and spins on an uneven axis. The moon is similar in size and composition to Earth and

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has two moons of its own. Despite its distance from the star in the system center, the gravitational pull of the gas giant and the radiation output of the star allows the moon to remain warm enough for water rain and a nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere to have developed.”

Benedict retrieved the coordinates and then relayed them to a series of probes awaiting launch. They fired a few moments later.

“There,” Benedict said, “It’s done. We should get our first telemetry reports in eight hours.”

He stared pointedly at Allison.

“How exactly are you so sure of what we’ll find there?” Allison just shook her head.

“I just know,” she said, “Just as surely as you know your own name, Major.”



Bloom woke from a troubled sleep. She’d had problems sleeping almost every night since Grandmaster Benedict came aboard. She couldn’t help Counting Down the Days every morning and each night. Her father had taught her the trick as a young child. Every year she’d look forward to Chanukah, always asking Papa when it was coming. Finally he taught her to count sleeps and wakes to remember. And so every night when she went to bed Bloom knew the next day brought her that much closer to the moment the Ship would die and its passengers and crew would be marooned on an alien world on the far side of the universe from home. What had once filled her childhood heart with joy now smothered her in

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dread. She was terrified of what she must do; it revolted and frightened her. It was also, the Grandmaster explained, the only way they'd be safe.

She ran at night now as well as in the mornings, trying desperately to exhaust herself enough to sleep. But still she wasn't the least tired. She'd lie in bed awake no matter how exhausting the day had been, or the one before. Bloom closed her eyes...*just* closed them...at midnight. It hadn't even felt like she'd fallen asleep; the proximity alarm went off a few minutes after three but she'd had no rest...no sense of sleep whatsoever; just exhaustion, dreadful exhaustion. She jumped from her bed, racing to slip on her headset and get on a uniform.

"This is Bloom," she said, "What is it?"

"Lieutenant Abdulkhader here; long range sensors have picked up five Zohor ships sweeping this sector."

"Shit," Bloom hissed, "I'm on my way to command now."

The night shift on the Command Deck were no less vigilant for the hour. Bloom had needed to take a Go-Pill to revive herself.

"What's the situation?"

"Five of the larger ships are at extreme sensor range," Abdulkhader reported, "They've spread out on what looks like a recon formation."

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Bloom went over to the tactical station. The wolf pack was heading laterally across the system from upper to lower quads. There was no indication that they'd spotted the Ship but Bloom had no doubt that's what the Zohor were after.

"It's a good bet they detected the hyperlink beacon network created by the probes," she said, "Send the emergency destruct code; all probes in the network."

"Signal sent," Lieutenant Abdulkhader said a moment later, "It should take about eight minutes for all of them to comply."

"Fine," Bloom said, "Helm: make the jump to time warp."

"On what heading?"

"Anywhere that isn't here."



Benedict was in the map room, watching telemetry come in as the probe reached the moon Allison McQuire had pointed out to him. The first images were just starting to compile when the screen went blank. The message

SIGNAL LOST: PROBE DESTROYED

flashed in red across each screen. He switched on his linx.

"Command, what happened? I need to re-establish contact to the space probes ASAP!"

"The Zohor, Sir," replied a Deck Officer from the Command Deck, "They had a fix on our sector. Colonel Bloom ordered probe destruct."

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“God dammit we have no fucking probes left!”

A moment later Bloom came on the linx.

“Colonel, I was given the coordinates of a good candidate,” he said, “We were *just* starting to get telemetry when you killed the fucking signal!”

“We had no choice Exo,” Bloom answered, “The Zohor come at us again and we’re fucked.”

“We have nothing left, ma’am! The probes are all destroyed, now. The world I was told to look at was our best bet!”

“The world you were *told* to look at? Told by whom?”

“The girl; Allison McQuire.”

“Relay those coordinates to navigation.” Bloom shot back without hesitating.

“Colonel, we’ve only got one shot at this.”

“Relay them.”



The Ship slipped from time warp on approach to the fifth moon of the seventh planet. The moon’s nightside looked out upon gas giant, colouring the night time sky an eerie black, silver and purple. In its own right the moon was a planet larger than Mars. The Ship listed and changed course to enter into high orbit around the moon.

“Orbital approach confirmed,” the Nav officer said, “Eighteen minutes to orbital insertion.”

“All senior officers and department heads the Command Deck,” Bloom said, toggling her linx, “Allison McQuire, and Citizen Paul Santino to the Command Deck.

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Evacuation Teams you are now on Standby. All Flight Crews report to your designated hangar bays and stand by.”



The wall display in the briefing room showed the view from orbit. The moon’s atmosphere was Earth-like, though with slightly elevated levels of argon and helium. The moon itself had two much smaller moons of its own: one of which was a hellish molten nightmare of volcanic activity, the other a barren lump of rock, scarred by meteoric bombardment from the solar system’s early years. Between the tidal forces of the moon and its satellites, the purple-silver gas giant and its own other moons and the light and radiation produced from the system’s light-hour distant sun, the moon’s climate was ideal to support Human life.

“We’ve launched radio probes to the planet’s surface,” Major Benedict said, “There’s some complex vegetation but very few species of indigenous land animal. Three major landmasses: one in the tropical northern hemisphere, very narrow but wrapping itself most of the way around the pole at that latitude; a large, central continent with equatorial to subtropical weather and climate conditions, and a tight chain of very large islands in the south and around the southern pole. The northern hemisphere is considerably warmer than the southern, owing to the position of oceanic geothermal vents and radiation reflection from its mother planet.”

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“What about ocean life?” Doctor Kodo, sole surviving member of the Alien Studies senior staff asked, “What’s it like?”

Benedict referred to his notes.

“Very primitive,” he said, “Algae, plankton, single-celled organisms, some more sophisticated creatures, but sparsely populated; this is a world very early on in its evolutionary cycle. The oceans are salt-water; though with a much lower salinity than Earth’s oceans. The seawater’s drinkable, but it’d probably taste like soup broth.”

Kodo nodded.

“I realize we need to evacuate to this world,” he said, “But I have to wonder what might have evolved here, had we never come along.”

“There’s no way to tell, Mark,” Doctor Cole said.

“Commander Kalich is scouting out a landing zone, now,” Captain Decker said, “We’re looking for something on the central continent; somewhere warm with fertile soil. We’ve got enough food-crop plants to set up agricultural and agricloning systems. Most of our animals and livestock died during the Zohor attack, but we have cloned protein and meat cultures to produce a sustainable diet.”

“So, that’s our new home,” Benedict rasped.

“Yeah, that’s it,” Bloom replied.

“It’s well-hidden,” Castaneda remarked, “The star system’s in the middle of a dense nebula; we’re a moon orbiting a gas giant; because the nearest star is half a light year away, we’re provided with additional radiological cover.”

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“The main problem will be setting up quickly; potable water, shelter and disease resistance,” Doctor Cole said, “We’ll have no immunity to any indigenous microbial life down there.”

“We don’t have the ability to quarantine the entire Ship’s population,” Bloom said, “So we’ll isolate all medical and military personnel to monitor the population.”

“That sounds positively Orwellian,” Cole said.

“There is nothing on the planet that will harm anyone,” Allison said, “No disease or animal, at any rate. If there were, I would know about it.”

“Can you be sure of that?” Cole asked.

Allison shrugged.

“Quarantine a medical team if you want,” Allison said, “But I promise there’s nothing on this world that will harm any of you.”

“Captain Decker,” Bloom said, “As soon as Commander Kalich has found an LZ, begin the evacuation of the Ship.”

Decker nodded. Now, Colonel Bloom turned to Santino.

“Governor, you’ve wanted to be a leader to the Passengers on this Ship since you came aboard,” Bloom said, “Well, now’s your time. These people are going to need a leader; someone who knows how to reclaim the desert, someone who’s turned communities around, as you did with Laguna back on Earth. Commander Castaneda will be in charge of public security; the militia, the police and emergency services will be under her domain. Everything else will be put

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under yours. Keep in mind the rules of the World Council Charter will apply to both of you. Am I understood, Governor Santino?”

“Absolutely, Colonel Bloom,” Santino said.

“Then, let’s move this meeting forward: we have another problem to deal with,” Bloom said.

“Just one?” Castaneda asked.

“The Zohor tracked us using the pinpoint hyperlink transmissions from between the Ship and the probes,” Benedict said, “So it’s likely they’ll backtrack the source of the other hyperlink signals, IE the probes, in an effort to find us.”

“The advantage we have right now is that we’ve made two time warp jumps since our most recent encounter with the Zohor,” Bloom said, “But they’ll have their eyes searching for us throughout this cluster, now.”

“We have no more probes, but we could program some of the Bugs to autopilot out there and set up a dummy network,” N’Banga said, “We could make it look like we’re searching another section of the galactic cluster; send them to a destination we’ve already mapped and rejected.”

“When the evacuation’s complete we can send the Ship to that destination,” Castaneda said, “When the Zohor fleet comes in, blow the Ship’s power core. Those that aren’t taken out by the blast will probably get caught in the event horizon formed when the Ship’s black hole collapses back on itself.”

“Except there’s a problem with *that*,” Tanaka said, “We don’t know exactly how much longer the Ship will have when and if we use it to ambush the Zohor. It could take hours, days,

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even years for the Ship to die after the Zohor come into the system. They won't be likely to leave the Ship intact that long."

"There might be a way around that," Castaneda said, "An unexploded Zohor missile was retrieved from the damaged sections of the Ship's inner hull. We're fairly sure that we can rig it to detonate. And if we do so in proximity to the focusing chamber it will take out the Ship and breach containment on the black hole. When the Zohor are in that system they'll be wiped out."

"But with the Ship's AI down," Tanaka replied, "Someone's going to have to remain aboard to detonate the device."

The discussion stumbled as everyone fell silent. Their best option was a suicide mission, just as Bloom knew it would be...just as she knew it had to be.

She cleared her throat and said, "I've already accepted that. I'll be flying the mission. Captain Tanaka, Commander Castaneda, get the weapon ready."

Benedict was already on his feet. "Colonel!"

"No, Exo. This matter isn't open for discussion."

"With all due respect, are you out of your mind?" Benedict demanded.

"Major, I'm unwilling to sacrifice anyone else's lives on my behalf. This is my decision, my mission."

"We need you down there, Meg! You're our commander."

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“The burden of command will be yours when I leave, Major. I have reason to believe you’ll be far more up to the challenge than I.”

“I can’t accept that!” Benedict was vehement. Bloom just looked sad. She shook her head.

“You don’t have any choice in the matter, Jack. I’m leading this mission, and I’m flying the Ship out of here myself, once evacuation’s complete.”

“Colonel—”

“Major! It’s the only way—the *only* way—that the passengers and crew will be safe! It *has* to be done...and it has to be me.”



It took another six hours for Kalich to find a suitable location in a vast plain buttressed to the southwest by mountains and to the west and north by dense forests. The evacuation began in the middle of the night; the Engineering teams going down first to set up shelters for one hundred and forty four thousand-odd people. Through the moon’s fourteen and a half hour “night” they worked, setting up shelters and infrastructure, including running water from reservoirs dropped from the Ship and electricity from generators rigged from some of the surviving Beetle class of Bug.

Dawn’s first light on the second day of colonization of the world they had christened Midian saw the first Human refugees being evacuated to the surface. It was sunset of the following day, almost fifty hours later, before the last of the

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surviving hundred and forty-four thousand three hundred and seven passengers and crew reached the surface. Only the senior command staff remained aboard: Colonel Bloom, Major Benedict, Captain Decker, Captain Tanaka and Commander Castaneda.

“You won’t be talked out of this will you, Colonel?” Benedict asked, for the hundredth time in three days.

Bloom smiled, shaking her head.

“No Jack, I won’t be,” she said, “You have an important mission ahead of you; a mission far more vital than you could imagine; you’re also the only person who can do it.”

“You want me to return to the Hub, to find a new ship.”

“And then take command of the mission to save Humanity, yes.” Bloom said.

Benedict shook his head.

“God dammit Meg!”

“Jack, there’s nothing you can say or do to talk me out of this. The El-Ahur, Jack? They came from the future. They told me you have to undertake this mission.”

“How can you trust them to have been telling the truth?”

Bloom closed her eyes.

“I can’t tell you that,” she said, “But I can tell you that I have the utmost faith in you and the rest of this crew. What’s more, I have faith in Allison McQuire.”

“What? Why?”

Bloom leaned forward.

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“Because she’s the one who brought you back,” she said, “Because she’s the one that’s saved the Ship twice already. Because after me, she’s the only other person the Grandmaster wanted to speak with.”

“You’re letting an unknown alien talk you into killing yourself.”

“Yes!” Bloom said, “Jack, listen to me when I tell you: I trust the Grandmaster implicitly and what’s more, *so should you.*”

“Meg, there has to be another way.”

“There isn’t Jack,” Bloom said, “And as Commanding Officer, this is my duty, no one else’s.”

“You can’t possibly want to do this.”

“No one wants to die, Jack,”

Benedict’s face squeezed together for a moment, trying unsuccessfully to keep the tears from escaping.

“God dammit Major!” Bloom sobbed, “Don’t you dare start crying! That’s an order!”

Benedict shook it off.

“No, Ma’am!” he said, “No, Ma’am. God dammit, Colonel...I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah,” Rased Bloom, “Me, too.”



“Attention on flight deck: final shuttle leaving in five minutes,” Benedict said into his linx, from the cockpit of the Beetle he was piloting, “Set your equipment to automatic and get the fuck on board, now!”

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By T-Minus Three Minutes the last of the deck crew were aboard and the Beetle was sealed. Colonel Margaret Bloom was now the last living soul aboard the Ship. The Beetle taxied into the launch bed, the launch rails powering up. When the Beetle shot away from the Ship a moment later, curving around and into orbit around Midian, the Ship vanished into time warp, fading ghostlike from the sky. Benedict leaned his head back and closed his eyes for a moment, knowing that out there in the Void, in orbit around a world named Benedict's Hellhole his Colonel, his mentor, his friend, Margaret Bloom was dying, perhaps even now dead. The Beetle hit the atmosphere and Benedict took it in. As they reached cruising altitude, he dropped the Beetle into a flight pattern that would take them to Landing, where the first Human Colony on another world, a Human Colony on the other side of the universe from Earth, was being established.



When she opened her eyes the stasis field had deactivated for the last time. She sat on the Command Deck, at the command station, before her console. She watched as Zohor ships began to appear out of nowhere, surrounding the star system, coming in towards Benedict's Hellhole, a planet of boiling oceans of melting lead very near to its soon-to-be obliterated star. The Zohor had backtracked the hyperlink signals perfectly. Thousands of ships were filling the system, creeping ever more inwards, towards the center of the hyperlink network's web: the Ship.

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Bloom keyed in the arming sequence on the control pad jury-rigged to the side of her console. Wires fed from this panel into the Ship's own network of cables and relays and down to the inside wall of the toroidal black hole's containment chamber. There, the Zohor bomb, its outer skin removed to reveal the intricate workings of an alien super-weapon waited to fulfil its purpose.

The Zohor were closing on the Ship and tactical alerts sounded off that their weapons systems were charging. Bloom fished her last cigarette from her jacket pocket, lit it up and took a long, satisfied haul.

“Hello boys,” Bloom hissed, “Time's up.”

She pressed the button on the side of the console and everything went white.