

The Saturn Moon

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Prologue

Somewhere near Saturn, September, 2095

Henry sat looking at the gas meter on his wrist. It was fully in the red zone now. He tapped on it, hoping that perhaps that might magically make a difference, but it did not. He was going to die.

He'd spent the last week drifting in space, near Dione, all of his plans coming to dust. A year ago, he had proposed a grand plan of finding needed rare earth elements on Saturn's moons. No one had been able to find them before, but he had been sure he knew things no one else knew. And he was good at convincing people. He had been able to borrow a ship, borrow money for fuel and equipment, and set out for Saturn from Earth. Finally, he'd escaped the stifling life he had in Pennsylvania.

Yet ultimately he'd been unsuccessful. First he ran out of fuel; then slowly the systems of his aging ship began to come to a halt. Three days ago the life support system had gone, and now he was forced to live in his suit full time. Distress signals had resulted in several answers from people who were too far away to help him in time. When he was almost out of oxygen, he decided it was time to pray.

“Father God, I know I've been a wayward son, not praying, or tithing, or going to church. I have failed to give you glory, Father. I ask your forgiveness in Jesus name. Please, God, save me, somehow. I know that you have plans for me, Father. I know it.”

His prayer was interrupted by a proximity alert, but he was too groggy to do anything about it. His mind drifted, and he tried to bring it back to his prayer.

“God, I promise that I will bring you glory if you save me. I will fulfill the destiny that I

know you have set out for me...”

His mind drifted again, and he saw images of his favorite zoetrope, the one with the dancers he’d built when he was ten. He went back to praying.

“Father God, please help me in my hour of greatest need...”

He was interrupted again by clanging noises, and he turned his head toward the motion he saw out of the corner of his eyes. He blinked. As he blacked out, he saw cats moving around his ship, and he could swear he heard a meow or two before he lost consciousness.

When Henry woke up, he realized that his helmet was off of his head and he was breathing fine. His suit was off, and he was sitting in his skivvies on the floor of his control room. He looked around and saw several... creatures working at the controls. He shook his head, and imagined he must be dreaming. Or maybe he was dead already.

One of the creatures, a small, short but lithe biped, covered in fur, with a long tail and ears that looked a little bit like a cat’s, turned toward him. Now that he could see the creature’s face, the fur, tail and ears were the only thing that in the least resembled a cat. The creature didn’t have a nose, and its mouth was crowded with two rows of equally sized, and equally sharp, teeth. It had two tongues, which flicked constantly in and out of its mouth. Its eyes were small and beady, without whites or iris.

He felt, rather than heard, a voice.

You are awake.

That was the best he could interpret what he felt. It wasn’t really words, it was more like a combination of feelings and images.

He nodded, even though he knew that it was not a question.

You are alive. Again, this was the best he could interpret this feeling. He nodded again.

I am Koth.

“I am Henry.”

We saved life.

He nodded again. “Thank you.”

We bring this ship to our home. You come with us.

And then he thought, *I will come with them. I will help them.*

Chapter 1

Moon Station Delta, April, 2112

Sky threw the thing to Mikhail, who almost missed catching it.

“George sent it.”

“And?” Sky could see Mikhail feel the thing a little bit, then put it in a cubby in Nileshe’s workstation.

“And he says there are a lot more where that came from. Prime mysterious alien artifacts.”

Mikhail sighed. “Sky, we’ve talked about this how many times?”

“I know, you’re tired of this trade.”

“It gets on my nerves.”

“Mik, it’s saved our asses at times, and our asses need saving right now. We haven’t done this kind of trade in almost a year, man. We need it now. We’ll be dead in the water with no fuel or food in about... what, three months if we’re lucky? I don’t really want to go back to working for Strelax, thank you very much.”

Sky was trying hard not to think of their empty contract pipeline, or the fact that they had no leads to new cargo or service work whatsoever. The economic slowdown that had happened system-wide after Mars independence still hadn’t let up, and all of the economic pundits telling them that things were going to get better didn’t make their situation any less dire.

“Alright, so how many of these can he make?”

“He claims these are real.”

“Yeah, right. And pigs can fly.”

“He was very adamant, although frankly, he wasn’t willing to say over the comm why he thought so.”

“That’s our George, alright.”

“So?”

“I won’t block it, if Lesh and Cait agree.”

“I floated it by them when you were stationside.”

“Of course. They seem to like fraud.”

Sky laughed. “Mik, for someone who robbed a bank, you have an odd sense of morality.”

“Eh, whatever. Look I have some things to take care of...”

“What the heck is going on, Mikhail? You’ve spent more time stationside this time than ever.”

“No worries - nothing to do with you guys or the *Callista*. Old family shit.”

“Ugh, sorry.”

“My Yemeni uncle is on station, and he’s demanding that I go back with him to Yemen and get married. Unfortunately, my mother agrees with him.”

“Well, you could just stop talking to them.” Sky calculated that she had not talked with her own family in over a decade.

“I know that was your answer, Sky, but it’s not mine. I’m working to convince him I’d be a terrible husband. The problem is that in Yemen, a man’s faithfulness doesn’t really matter much.”

“Ah, so explaining how many lovers you’ve had isn’t helping?”

“Not in the least. So I have to take another tack.”

“You could claim to be in love with Lesh.”

Sky heard a bit of bitterness in Mikhail’s laugh. She wondered what that was about.

“I don’t think they’d believe me, since I’ve already told them I’ve slept with hundreds of women.”

“Good point, there. Well, good luck.”

Mikhail turned, grabbed a handhold at the entrance to the workroom, and propelled himself out of the room. Sky turned toward Lesh’s workstation. She wasn’t really in the mood to examine the thing. She knew it wasn’t real, and in general, George was pretty good at making top-notch fake artifacts. She’d look at it later.

With Mik agreeing, it was time to signal to George that they’d meet him. She left the workroom and moved hand-over-hand around the central hallway to a hub tube, then climbed through the hub tube to the hub, then up to the main control room. Niles and Caitlyn were doing a standard maintenance routine.

“Mik agreed.”

Niles looked up from his board with a grin on his face.

“Alright. Let’s make contact with George. I’m looking forward to seeing him.”

Caitlyn snickered.

“What?”

“You have a crush on him.”

“So what?”

“I can’t quite get my mind around that.”

“Cait…”

“You two, can we do this business thing now, and you can discuss your love lives later?”

Caitlyn screwed up her face and said caustically, “Yessir!”

Sky sighed and floated over to the comm system. She brought up George’s system net address, and left him an encrypted voice message.

“George, we’re all in, but we’d have to go consignment. We don’t have much in the way of spare cash. Send us the coordinates, and we’ll be there as soon as we can. We’re at Moon Station Delta, and can leave within 24 hours.”

Nilesh said, “Good thing George likes consignment.”

Sky looked up from the console. “George likes us. We can always get rid of his fake artifacts.”

They went together through some pre-launch items and then Sky heard the ping of an incoming text message. It was George, who only gave his coordinates. Sky brought up the system map and swore.

“What in blazes is he doing in the fucking asteroid belt?”

Caitlyn looked up. “The asteroid belt?”

“That’s what the coordinates say.”

“Is it in one of the war zones? We can’t risk that.”

“No, it’s very safe within Strelix space.”

“It will take us weeks to get out there!”

Sky asked the ship AI for an accurate estimate. The toneless voice responded, “It will take an estimated thirty-five days, seven hours, at normal thrust.”

Nilesh said, “What are we going to do?”

Sky answered, “What else can we do? We can sell some of this stuff at Strelix station, to begin with—so that’s a good thing. We can probably at least pay for the fuel it took to get out

there.”

Caitlyn screwed up her face. “I don’t like this, Sky. Something is weird here.”

“I know, but George is reliable. We’re his main customers, and he wouldn’t steer us wrong. We’ll be fine. Maybe he decided to settle out there. I’ll signal to Mik to get on board. We’re leaving in 24 hours.”

Asteroid Belt, May 2112

Sky woke up and looked at the clock on the wall next to her bunk. It was 0600 hours: time to get up. She switched on the light over her bunk, and swung her legs over. She’d never quite gotten used to how small her quarters were, even though she’d been on the *Callista* for almost three years now. Somehow that was hard to fathom, though she’d mostly enjoyed her time here.

Once she’d decided, twelve years ago, to leave Earth and spend her life in space, she’d had pretty good luck. She felt happy to live a relatively normal life. Being the daughter of the richest man in Latin America and one of the most well-known actresses in the world had not been something Sky had taken to very well. It wasn’t something she’d taken to at all. As soon as she could, she left Ecuador and headed into space, wrangling a job in Strelax by pulling some hidden strings in her father’s company.

When her parents found out, they threatened to disinherit her, which she responded to with a brief text message, “Please do.” She had had brief email exchanges with her mother for awhile, but they’d petered out to nothing ten years ago. She knew they were both fine—anything that happened with her parents on Earth was system-wide news. And because her parents had taken pains to shield their children from the press, her disappearance was not noted.

As she finished her morning rituals, she couldn't help but feel happy. They were about to meet George, who would give them a ton of artifacts to sell. Niles had already made contacts at Strelax station, and they expected to sell a good chunk of them to one of their regulars, who did a lot of trade with Mars and Io. They would be in good shape again. Things were looking up.

She walked out of her quarters and down the hall to the mess room.

"Morning, sunshine." Sky looked up to see Caitlyn grinning at her. She looked to be in an especially good mood.

"Morning, Cait." Sky went over to the freezer cabinet, got out a breakfast sandwich packet, and threw it into the microwave.

"Mik says he's going to turn off spin in about 30 minutes. He spotted George's asteroid a while ago."

"It's funny that we haven't heard from him in a couple of weeks. He's usually a chatty sort."

"Maybe he's worried about someone overhearing our conversation."

"Maybe. Anyway, we'll know soon enough."

They chatted amiably while Sky ate her breakfast sandwich, then headed together back to the hub and up to the control room. Sky liked *Callista*. It was a ship large enough to have a habitat ring with spin, and good cargo space, but small enough to be pretty nimble. The control room could feel a little crowded sometimes with the four of them, though.

Mikhail said, "Turning off spin. Deceleration is just about complete. Making final adjustments in attitude. The asteroid is a large one. We'll be orbiting it, and two of us will go down in the shuttle. I volunteer Sky and Niles."

Sky said, "Alright, Mik. We make the most sense, anyway. We know George the best."

“And he likes you both. He doesn’t like me.”

“He doesn’t like Russians.”

“I’m only half Russian. I don’t like Russians, either.”

Nilesh spoke loudly. “Guys, there’s something wrong.”

“What?”

“I can’t find George’s beacon.”

“What do you mean, can’t find it?”

“I can’t find it. It’s not there. Yesterday, I thought it was odd that I hadn’t picked it up, but I chalked that up to a weak signal. But now... we absolutely should have found it.”

Caitlyn said, “Is it possible he’s not here?”

“We got a message from him a couple of weeks ago...”

Mikhail said, “That was a couple of weeks ago, Sky.”

Sky said, “Alright, look, we’re here, there’s no point in turning around. We’ll take the shuttle down, and look around, OK?”

Mikhail sighed. “I knew there was something about this I didn’t like. Actually, there was a lot about this I didn’t like.”

Sky was exasperated. “Mik, you agreed to it. Look, let’s just look and see what’s going on, OK?”

They did the final approach to the asteroid, and got into orbit. Sky and Nilesh went to the shuttle bay, and they launched the shuttle toward the asteroid. They did a slow orbit, looking for the place where George might have been, but saw nothing. Then Sky saw what she thought was the entrance to a cave.

“Nilesh, look over there—see that large opening. It looks like a cave. Could that have

blocked the beacon?”

“Possibly, depending on how deep it is. Let’s go investigate.” He touched his panel.

“Guys, we’re going into a cavern. We might lose contact.”

Mikhail answered, “Alright. Be careful.”

Sky steered the shuttle into the cavern entrance and turned on the strong exploration lights at the front. They couldn’t see much except the walls of the cavern. As they kept going slowly into the cavern, it widened. It was clearly a large internal cavern. But they still couldn’t get his beacon. Then Sky saw what looked like the pieces of a wrecked ship.

“Whoa!”

“What is it?”

“Look there.”

“Oh, my. That’s George’s ship—see that part of the insignia on a panel on the ground?”

“Fuck. What happened?”

“We need to find out.”

They landed the shuttle, got into their suits, and went out to explore. George’s ship, or rather, varied pieces of it, lay scattered about in the cavern. Sky discovered a spacesuit leg with a leg still in it. The suit and end of the leg were badly burned, and there were flakes of frozen blood.

“Nilesh.”

She heard his tinny voice over the comm. “What?”

“Come over here, please.”

She watched him bounce carefully over, holding a large piece of bulkhead.

“I think this is part of George.”

Nilesh looked at the suit leg. “Ugh. Did you find any other parts?”

“No, this is the only one.”

“I can’t imagine he survived this.”

“No, he didn’t, Lesh.”

“So Sky, look at this bulkhead.”

She looked at the edges. They were blackened, with tinges of blue and green. In some places, the layers were completely melted together.

“That’s really strange-looking.”

“I’m going to take it back with us, along with a few other strange things I found. The damage done here doesn’t look like any weapon I’ve ever seen.”

“I feel sorry for George. I wonder what he got himself into.”

“You mean, what have we gotten ourselves into? Believe me, Sky, whoever was willing to do this to George is going to be willing to do this to us. We’d better get the hell out of here.”

They hurriedly picked up a few more assorted pieces of ship, including the one with the partial insignia. When they arrived back in the shuttle, as Nilesh was stowing what they had, Sky called Mikhail on the comm.

“Mik, get prepared for the quickest exit you can make. The instant we are in the bay, start maximum thrust for Strelix station.”

“What’s going on, Sky?”

“I don’t have time to explain now, Mik, just do it. And keep the AI’s ears open for any sorts of incoming signals. We need to avoid anything coming this way.”

“Alright. See you back soon.”

They were all in the control room; they hadn't turned spin back on because they were proceeding to Strelix station at maximum thrust. Sky regretted this, as they would use up a lot of their available fuel. They would be basically stranded at Strelix station until they could find a cargo or service contract, and Sky didn't think that was especially likely at Strelix station. But it was better that, then get caught by whoever or whatever had destroyed George's ship, and George with it.

Mikhail said, "Gods, we're screwed."

Sky exhaled. "This is strange. George was always reliable in the past."

Nilesh spoke up. "We don't know that it was him who was being unreliable, Sky. Maybe he discovered something that other people didn't want him to discover."

Caitlyn said, "Look, we're three days away from Strelix station. Let's just get there and figure out what to do, OK?"

Sky looked at Nilesh, who was pensive. He finally said, "I need to take the samples down to the workroom and examine them. If we can figure something out before we get to the station, that would be good. We have to report this."

Sky said, "I know. We need to come up with a story as to why we were meeting with him. George is SolGov and MarsGov *persona non grata*. I'd rather not have that attached to us."

Mikhail laughed. "You really think that they think of us any differently?"

"No, but at least we don't have any warrants out for our arrest at the moment. Last I heard, he had several, and we could get slapped with aiding and abetting."

Nilesh unstrapped himself, and left the control room. Sky, along with the rest, were lost in their thoughts.

"Guys!" It was Nilesh on the intercom.

Sky tapped the intercom button on the side of the wall near the entrance to the control room.

“What?”

“That artifact that George gave us?”

“What about it?”

“When I got down here, it was glowing. I took some pictures. It stopped, though.”

Caitlyn asked, “Glowing?”

“Yeah, glowing. I’ve never seen anything like it. I thought you should know. I’m going to do some analyses of the bulkhead damage, and then I’ll tackle the artifact. I have a theory, but I don’t want to share it until I have more evidence.”

Mikhail grunted. “I don’t like Nilesh’s theories.”

Sky asked, “Why?”

“The dude is always right.”

After no evidence of any sort of pursuit for 48 hours, they slowed down and turned on spin. Sky was waking from a well-deserved sleep in her bunk. They’d arrive at Strelax station in about two hours. Sky hadn’t heard a peep from Nilesh, so she decided to head down to the workroom.

When she arrived, the workroom was in a state of chaos. Pieces of the ship lay about, and more instruments than she knew that they had on Callista were strewn almost randomly around the workroom. Nilesh looked like he hadn’t slept.

“Nilesh, how is the analysis going?”

“I don’t quite know how to tell you this, but we need to make contact with someone who

is in contact with the Kurool.”

“Huh? They don’t have any weapons!”

“I know. But they might know who these people are. This damage was definitively not done by any weapon humans have ever made.”

“How do you know that?”

“Just trust me. I know it. I can explain it to someone who knows chemistry and physics...”

“Try me. If this is what you say it is, we’ll have to explain it to a lot of people.”

“Alright. So... I’ve taken a look at the damage patterns, and found the relative temperature that these bulkheads must have endured, as well as the chemical residue left on them. George’s ship was attacked with a directional weapon—it wasn’t an explosive weapon.”

“OK...”

“And our directional weapons have real limitations.”

“Unless they managed to perfect the fusion weapon that destroyed the *Corinth*.”

“No, no, that would have a different signature, and leave radiation. There was none of that. And in any event, this one was more powerful than that would be.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, much smaller beam, and much, much more powerful. Basically, from what I can recreate, George and his ship were probably destroyed in one short strike.”

“Oh, my. Powerful, and alien.”

“Yup.”

Sky thought that the one person she could trust with this information was Max.

“Just a sec.” Sky walked to the intercom.

“Mik, do we have enough fuel to make it to Mars?”

“Mars? Nilesh wants to go home?”

“No, Mik. We have a mess on our hands, and the one person I trust to deal with it is on Mars.”

There was a pause.

“We’ll need to refuel, Sky. But we have the funds to buy enough fuel to make it to Mars. We’ll be totally broke and empty when we get there, though.”

“We’ll be OK, Mik, I promise.”

Sky had met Max back when they both worked for Strelix. Max was one of the asteroid hunters, while Sky worked for Strelix as a pilot, mostly shuttling people from the station to one of the large asteroid mines. They didn’t see each other often, but when they did... Sky smiled. Max was one of her most favorite exes. They had kept in touch, mostly, and when Max became famous during the Kurool incident, Sky couldn’t help but be proud of what Max had done. Sky trusted Max implicitly, and Max had all of the right connections to help them out. This was going to be delicate. Time to call Max. She headed up to the control room.

She left the video message short, sweet, and a little bit mysterious. Max loved mysteries. Well, truthfully, it *was* mysterious. She then called up Strelix Fuel.

“Hallo, Strelix Fuel.” A balding, light-skinned man with an unfamiliar accent answered.

“Hi, this is the *Callista*. We need a brief refuel, six hundred units. We won’t be stopping at the station, just a flyby.”

“Six hundre’ units? That all?”

“That’s all we need.”

“Al’right, whateva.” He looked down. “You cleared for bay six.”

“Thanks.” Sky turned to Mikhail. “Hear that?”

“Roger. On my way to fuel bay six.”

Getting refueled and getting to Mars was uneventful, even boring. Max had called back, welcomed them to Mars, and even arranged housing for the four of them at Colony 1. She hadn’t asked too many questions, which was a little unnerving for Sky, but she didn’t worry about it too much. She figured that Max trusted her about as much as she trusted Max.

Mars Colony One, May 2112

Max and Tina were sitting in their living room. Max was reading a draft of an article that Tai had recently written detailing the new information about the Cassiopeia supernova. Tai had become good friends with Kloft, a Kurool scientist who studied stars. The Kurool were much further along in their understanding of how stars worked.

Max looked over at Tina, who she could tell was subvocalizing. Tina was pretty busy these days as the SolGov editor for the *Mars Monitor*. After Mars independence, SolGov had been in some disarray for years. And of course, there was the little problem of the war in the asteroid belt.

“Max, message from Sky Alvarez.” Jane’s dulcet voice spoke softly. Tina looked up, her head cocked to one side. Tina knew that Sky was Max’s ex. Max could not imagine what would prompt a video message from Sky. She hoped she was OK.

“Play, please, Jane.”

“Max, I hope you are doing well. I need your help. A friend of ours was killed in the asteroid belt when his ship was destroyed, and Nilesch has a theory that I really need to speak

with you about. We're on our way to Mars. We should arrive in about six days. Thanks in advance for anything you can do to help."

Tina said, "Well, wasn't that enigmatic?"

"I suspect there is something she doesn't want to say over an open channel."

"You think it's about the war?"

"I don't know that she'd contact me about something like that—I think this must be different."

"So what are you going to do?"

"Respond, then arrange for some housing for them, and wait and see. I haven't seen Sky in a long time—it will be nice to see her."

Tina responded to that with a look.

"Tina, love..." Max got up from her seat on the couch, and walked over to Tina, who was reclined in the settee.

"I love you. Sky is my ex, and she's just a friend. There's nothing to worry about." They kissed.

"I know, Max. I guess somehow I haven't gotten used to the fact that you've decided to settle down. I keep worrying about the next thing that'll take you away."

"Tina, if you'd experienced what I experienced in the Kuiper Belt, you'd want to stay home from now on, too."

"I know. Sorry."

"It's OK, love, I understand."

The next day, after making reservations at the Colony One hostel for the *Callista* crew,

Max visited the Xenobiology lab. Although she'd resigned her official position, she still had a desk there. She hardly ever used it; she was much more comfortable working at home, and as long as she had Jane, she didn't need much. The lab had meetings once a month, and she was always present for those, but hardly ever darkened the door otherwise.

"Howdy, stranger!" It was Curtis.

"Hey Curtis. How was your trip to the Kurool colony?"

"Great, as always. I love spending time there."

"Yes, you and everyone else."

"Why don't you go more?"

"I don't know, Curtis, I'm kinda busy with my own research."

"Alright. Well, Droat says ze misses you."

Max chuckled. She should really go visit Droat. It had been months. She always found it surprising that time seemed to move much more quickly when she was on Mars than when she'd been asteroid hunting.

She'd been planet-bound for two years now, after a very successful, but almost catastrophic trip to the Kuiper Belt. She'd found two very prime asteroids during that trip, prime enough to allow her and Tina to retire in comfort on Mars, then later on the moon when Mars became too much for Tina's body. Of course Tina had no interest in retiring, nor did Max, but it was nice not to ever have to scramble again, and to get to do the research she wanted to do.

But during that trip Max had come closer to losing her life than she ever had in 15 years of asteroid hunting. After she'd claimed and sold the second asteroid of the trip, she'd been on her way back to Kuiper Exploratory to take a break before doing one last run, when her ship ran into a cluster of small asteroids. They were so small they hadn't shown up on any telemetry, and

she hadn't had time to change course to avoid them. One asteroid turned her engine to pulp, while another made hash of her life support system. She sent out a distress call, dropped into the survival pod, and drifted in space for a very long time.

It turned out she'd drifted for five months. The new type of escape pods, which she was lucky to have on her ship, were designed to put you in a sort of stasis, reducing your need for oxygen, water and nutrition to a bare minimum. But five months was still, she later heard, a record for survival in a new pod. Eventually she'd been picked up by a cargo ship on its way to Mars. Somehow that seemed appropriate. All she wanted to do after waking up was to go home.

She'd come in to see Tai and give him her in-person critique on the article he'd written, but since he wasn't in his office, she decided she'd just go home and record it. She said goodbye to Curtis and was on her way out when she ran into Sharron walking in.

"Max! How are you? Haven't seen much of you. Coming to the meeting next Monday? I have some big news."

"Sure, but if the news is theological..."

"Really, it's interesting. I promise."

"Alright. I was going to show up anyway. How's Gareth?"

"He's alright. He had to go back to Earth for his mother's funeral."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I hadn't heard."

"It's a bit of a sticky situation. His brother still blames him for the horrible Earth economy after Mars independence."

"Uh, what?"

"I know, Max, it's completely silly. But his brother feels that if Gareth hadn't been working for Montoya, he wouldn't have won."

“And Earth would be dealing with a Mars revolution. I’m sure that would have been great for the economy.”

“And Gareth can hardly be to blame for his brother’s church dying because people actually *like* the Kurool.”

“Well, I wish him the best. When will he be back?”

“He leaves Earth in a few days, so he’ll be back in a few weeks.”

“OK, I’ll see you next Monday.”

Sharron nodded, and Max continued her walk out of the lab and back home. For some reason, she suspected that next Monday’s meeting was going to be more interesting than any of them knew.

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, May 2112

Gareth sat in one corner, munching on the fried chicken leg. The last few days had been some of the most trying of his life. His mother’s death seemed to be bringing out the worst in his family, and he was barely welcome there. He’d mostly successfully avoided his brother Lionel, except for the moment when Percival showed up at the funeral. Lionel had had the temerity to ask him to leave the church, but Gareth had stepped in, taken Percival to the back of the church to sit, and stayed with him.

He had not, however, been able to avoid Evelyn, Lionel’s wife, who blamed him for everything—from the fact that Lionel’s church was now largely empty of people and couldn’t pay his salary anymore, to the death of their mother. It was all completely silly. He’d also had a run-in with Lynette, his sister. Her husband, the new governor of Texas, had pulled him aside to

give him a talking-to about his theology.

Gareth had simply had come back to Pennsylvania to pay his respects to the mother he loved, who'd died of MLS at the young age of 70. He'd been in contact with her throughout her illness; she loved him and cared about what happened to him, and had largely ignored his siblings' opinions of him.

"Gareth." He looked up to see his brother Lionel looking at him.

"Hello, Lionel."

"Unfortunately, we must all be present at the reading of mother's will tomorrow. I've sent the address to you. It will be at 10:00 am."

"Alright. I'll be there."

His brother didn't move. "Is there something else, Lionel?"

"Yes, there is something else. I heard a rumor about you."

"What kind of rumor?"

"That you're starting a new cult."

"That's absurd, Lionel."

"Well, you left the Southern Baptist Convention three years ago."

"Yes, I did. And you know why. That doesn't mean I'm starting a cult."

"I hear that you're writing a paper which suggested that Jesus visited those evil aliens."

"Lionel, look, we'll never see eye to eye on this. I've written several papers now comparing the teachings of Turool, the leader that changed Kurool society, to the teachings of Jesus. That's all. Can we stop talking about this?"

"I pray for your eternal soul, brother, every day."

"And I pray for yours."

Lionel glared at him, spun on his heels, and walked away. Gareth shook his head. He did wonder where Lionel was getting his information. It was true that Gareth had come to believe that Turol was indeed the Son of God, incarnate as a Kurool. He hadn't quite been able to get himself to finish the paper which laid out the theological argument for that stance, but in his heart, he knew it was the truth.

The next morning, he picked up Percival at his hotel—he didn't want him to have to arrive alone.

“So how is Seattle and the family, Percival?” Percival had moved to Seattle about a year before with his long-time lover Roger, and their two children.

“I love Seattle. I liked San Francisco a lot, but Seattle really is becoming home. Roger is fine; it's his turn to be the stay-at-home dad. Joellyn and Gareth are a handful, but wonderful. Gareth wants to be a space pilot, at least for now. Last week he wanted to be a fireman.”

Gareth smiled. It had been such an honor to hear that Percival and Roger had named their son after him.

“How's work?”

“It's a bit slow, but picking up because we got a big contract with a company on Mars that does similar work. They want some of our code.”

“I'm glad to hear that.”

“Speaking of, how's Mars? And how's Sharron?”

“Mars is great. Being part of the new, independent Mars has been an amazing experience. And getting to study the Kurool up close and personal has been more rewarding than I'd ever imagined. And Sharron is fine. We'd love you to visit. I know I could wrangle a visit to a real space pilot for Gareth.”

Gareth saw Percival's eyes tear up.

"I'd love that too. It's been so hard to be separated from the family."

"I know. I hate that some of our clan are still living in the twentieth century. But we're not, so please, come visit. Sharron would love to see you—it's been too long."

They had arrived at the building where the attorney's office was, an old building that looked like it had been built in the nineteenth or early twentieth century. It did look like it had some modern overhauls, with new windows with displays, and a green roof. They made their way up to the fifth floor, where the door to the conference room was open. When they walked in together they garnered stares from Lionel, Lucan and Lynette.

Gareth and Percival sat next to each other at one corner of the large glass conference table. The lawyer cleared his throat.

"Hello. We are all here to hear the Last Will and Testament of Marielle Holbright, of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She chose a more traditional text-only will.

"I hereby leave one million Yuan to the Designer Drug Rehabilitation Center of Walnut Creek, California, in honor of our dear Tristan." Gareth heard Lionel groan.

"I also leave one million Yuan each to The Center for Alien Understanding, and the Cetacean Rescue Center." Gareth smiled, and thought, *Well, well, mother is certainly putting her money where her mouth had been. The triumvirate across the table must be writhing in pain.*

"I leave one point five million Yuan to each of my living children, and a trust of approximately one million each to my seven grandchildren, to be used for their education, and given to them when they turn twenty-one."

Gareth was stunned. First, he'd had no idea his mother had so much money. Second, Lionel had two children, Lucan one, and Lynette two, which meant that mother had included

Percival's children in her will, too!

Lionel said loudly, "Wait, excuse me! There are only five *true* grandchildren. There must be a mistake."

The attorney said patiently, "Mr. Holbright, there is no mistake. There are seven legal grandchildren in your family, and your mother provided for each."

Percival said, "Lionel, get over it. My husband Roger and our children are legally part of this family, whether you want to admit it or not."

"How dare you..."

Gareth got up. "Look, we're here to honor our dear mother in her death, which means honoring her wishes. Let's move on, shall we?"

He could see Lionel's anger, and he was very interested in avoiding being around it for much longer.

The attorney said, "That is all, that's the full will. I will be in contact with each of you regarding the status of your inheritance and the trusts for your children. Thank you for being here today."

Lionel, Lucan and Lynette filed out first, and Gareth waited until they got an elevator before he got up. Percival followed.

"I'm sorry he's such a dickhead, Percival."

Percival laughed. "I don't hear that kind of language from you very often, Gareth."

"It's the only language that is appropriate for that brother of ours."

Mars Colony One, May 2112

Max stood near the entrance to the shuttle port, waiting for Sky and the other *Callista* crew to arrive. She was a little nervous. She hadn't seen Sky in more than seven years, when Max was taking a break from asteroid hunting at Strelax station. And she hadn't seen Caitlyn in a lot longer. So much had happened to all of them in that time. They'd been in touch, although Sky was always pretty circumspect about how the *Callista* and its crew stayed employed. Out of respect, Max didn't ask questions. Sky had always been running this or that racket at Strelax, always staying on just this side of the law. Max wouldn't be surprised if the *Callista* did some illegal trade now and again.

She saw Sky first—tall, with dark eyes, and very close-cropped dark hair. She was wearing frayed coveralls and miner's boots. She was flanked on one side by a tall, thin woman with long red hair—that was Caitlyn, from the moon. She was an old friend of Tina's. On the other side of Sky was a tall man with olive skin and curly hair. He reminded her suddenly of Lodan. Following them was a slight man with tousled blond hair. They all looked tired, and, if Max was reading them right, nervous.

“Max!” Max and Sky hugged, then Caitlyn hugged Max.

“Sky! God, it's so good to see you. And great to see you too, Cait! It's been like forever.”

Caitlyn asked, “How's my Tina?”

“Tina's great. She's sorry she couldn't be here to meet you all—but we're cooking dinner for you at our place tonight.”

“She's a busy gal, I hear.”

“Indeed she is.”

Sky said, “So, Max, I want you to meet Mikhail, and Nilesh.”

“Nice to meet you both. Look, I’m sure you’re beat from your journey. I’ve got you quarters at the hostel, pretty decent digs, and we’ll meet up later...”

Sky interrupted. “Max, we need to talk now.”

“Now?”

“Yes. It’s really important.”

“OK, why don’t I just take you back to our place then, and we can talk.”

They took the transport to dome complex 4, and made their way to Max and Tina’s place—the same apartment where Tina had lived since she arrived on Mars. They walked into the apartment, and Max heard some “oohs” and “aahs” at the view. They’d looked out on construction for a long time, but now that the construction was over, it was quite nice.

“Please, make yourself at home. What can I get you? I’ve got some beer, juice, coffee...”

Sky said, “I think we all could use some beer.”

“Alright, beer it is.”

Max got out a sixpack of Cassiopeia 2081, and passed containers around.

When they were settled in place, Max said, “Alright, Sky, what’s going on?”

“We had a friend, this guy George. He used to give us stuff to sell. But this time when we went to meet him in the asteroid belt, we found him and his ship in pieces. And he was nowhere near any of the war zones—he was safe in Strelax space.”

Max chuckled. “*Safe* in Strelax space?”

Sky said, “Max, there’s more.”

Nilesh said, “I examined the pattern of destruction, and the damage to pieces of his ship.

It wasn't done with any weapon known to humans."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

"What was he selling you?"

Max saw Nilesch reach into his bag. He said, "These." He handed her the artifact.

Max looked at it. It was cylindrical, and made of a kind of dark substance that she'd never seen before. It seemed to have several openings that were covered in a smooth, glossy material, sort of like glass, but not quite. It looked old, pitted in many places.

"What is this?"

"George claimed it was a genuine alien artifact. We assumed it was fake."

"Why would you go meet George to get fake alien artifacts... oh, I get it."

Sky said, "Trade in counterfeit alien artifacts made up some of our revenue."

"Sky!"

"Max, don't judge me, please."

"Alright. So Nilesch, what exactly made you think it was a weapon we don't have?"

"First, it was clearly a beam weapon, not an explosive. The pattern of damage made that clear. The beam sliced through the ship, and George, and some of the ship's components exploded because of the heat of the beam. But it wasn't a bomb. Second, the beam was narrow, but more powerful than anything we have. Even more powerful than that fusion weapon, if anyone ever got it to work."

"You know this because?"

"The pattern of damage on the remaining pieces of ship. A part of George that was left. I think that his ship was destroyed by a single, short pulse of an extremely powerful beam

weapon.”

“I’ll want to see your detailed analysis. And we need to look further at this.” She held up the artifact.

Nilesh said, “Of course, Max.”

Now Max understood why Sky had come to her.

Max said, “So, you think George found these alien artifacts, and then the aliens found him, and eliminated him. Do you think they know you have one of these?”

Nilesh said, “We have no idea. I did notice that this was glowing when we were near the asteroid.”

“OK, send me everything you’ve got, and I’ll get the Xenoscience team on it tomorrow.”

She watched as everyone relaxed. Well, everyone except her. How did she get herself into the center of these things?

Mars Colony One, May 2112

Max sat watching the team filter into the all-too-familiar conference room. She still missed Kylee and Michael, even though they had been dead for more than four years. And Lodan had left two years ago to go and farm Michael’s land in Minnesota. She’d planned to go back to Earth with Michael at some point, but Max had been surprised that she’d chosen to go back without him.

Tai led the lab now, and Curtis had been promoted. There were several other scientists who had joined the lab, and then there were Gareth and Sharron, the resident theologians. The new scientists included Ted, Xiang, Rosalind, and Abdi. Getting a position in the Xenoscience

lab at Terra University was about as high as you could get in Xenoscience these days, and these four had already been at the top of their field when they arrived. It was one of the reasons Max had resigned her position. She didn't need it, and didn't quite feel like she deserved it.

Sharron sat down next to Max.

"Max, I just wanted you to know that I didn't feel bad that my announcement got postponed. It really wasn't nearly as big as this seems to be."

"Thanks, Sharron. I was actually looking forward to hearing what you had to say, though."

"You'll hear about it soon enough. This is fascinating."

"Indeed it is."

Once everyone was seated, Tai motioned to Max to start.

"Hi everyone." She told them the story, holding nothing back. She showed slides of the detailed analysis of the weapon residue and effects, as well as the new analysis of the alien artifact, which showed definitively that it was not human-made. It was largely carbon and silicon, and based on the carbon dating it was very, very old, or from very far away, or both.

Tai asked, "So, are we dealing with one new alien species, or two?"

Max answered, "That is a very good question, one we can't answer at the moment."

Sharron said, "We need to ask the Kurool if they have an idea of who it might be. They know of other species in the galaxy."

Xiang, who had come directly from China several months ago, and had become an expert in Kurool culture said, "They have been reticent to talk about those species, however."

Max said, "But I know they'll talk if they hear this story."

Tai said, "They will certainly talk with you, Max."

There was some murmuring in the room. It was no secret that the Kurool liked Max, and told Max more than they told the other scientists. It was a point of some contention, and she and Xiang, who was supposed to be the lab's culture expert, sometimes argued about it.

Tai spoke up, "OK, crew, we need a plan. Max, you go with Sharron and Xiang to the Kurool colony, tell them this story, and get whatever information you can. I need to tell someone official about this, and I think it's going to be John. He'll know what to do. In the meantime, Ted, Rosalind and Abdi, work with Nilesh on further analysis of the pieces of ship left, and the artifact. We need more data. Let's get to it."

They got up, and filtered out of the room. Max, Xiang and Sharron met outside the conference room.

Max said, "I'll schedule a shuttle to the Kurool colony, and let you know when we're leaving."

They split up, and Max headed toward the shuttle port.

Chapter 2

Mars Colony One, May 2112

John walked briskly from General Tsang's office, shaking his head. The process of moving the Mars Militia—the rag-tag assembly of Marsies with no SolGov military experience and no discipline—to an actual military structure, was a moving train wreck. The war in the Asteroid belt was serving as an object lesson in how not to run a military. John was now a Major General, which really meant nothing except that he was training the General of the Mars Army how to build a military.

He sighed. He really didn't have anything to complain about. After almost losing everything, including his life, he had a new life as a respected man on Mars, and he was busy with work that he largely enjoyed and that did not place him in harm's way. Further, reconnecting with his old love Patrick had come as a complete surprise. And what was also a surprise was that he was doing rather well at holding himself together in the relationship. That was something he hadn't expected. Of course, Max giving him advice over beer had been a real help.

He loved Mars. He loved the people, loved their spirits, and the new energy that came from independence. He was happy being a part of building a defensive military force that could take care of those people no matter what SolGov decided to throw at them. Luckily, SolGov seemed intent on leaving Mars itself alone, even though they wanted to fight over the resources of the asteroid belt. It was mostly the Corps that demanded that SolGov protect them from

nationalization from Mars, but the truth was, Mars had no interest in owning the asteroid belt—they just wanted some modicum of legal jurisdiction over the system from the Mars orbit outside. John, and most Marsies, couldn't understand why the corps didn't understand this.

The current state of the conflict was a standoff. Unfortunately, Montoya, who would have been a reasonable partner to negotiate with, had died in office two years earlier, and his vice-president was very uninterested in Mars' jurisdiction of anything besides Mars. In fact, before Mars independence Prak had been a loose ally of President Volkov. There was a cease-fire in place, and in a few days, Patrick, Prak, and several CEOs, like Jeevan Fredlund, the CEO of Strelis, were going to meet on Mars Station One, to hammer out terms. Patrick was hopeful of a settlement, because he'd gotten signals that the corps were finally figuring out what Mars wanted.

He got back to his office, and started in on the several progress reports his colonels were working on. They had decided on having three services: Ground, Sky, and Star. The third was a bit of a fantasy, but it was designed to begin the process of putting together a structure that could provide leadership for space exploration outside of the solar system. Since Mars was the most populous planet outside of Earth, and it was the home to the only interstellar-traveling species humans knew about, it seemed to be the right place to be the new center of that effort. John was arranging things so that once the three services were up and running he would get placed as the head of the Mars Star Service.

He heard the quiet chime of his AI signaling that he had a message marked urgent. It was Tai Xien, the head of the Xenoscience lab at Terra U, and a friend he'd gained after the fiasco of the *Corinth*. The message was short and cryptic, but John could tell it was important. Tai suggested a meeting at the lab tomorrow morning, and John sent his confirmation. He was

curious, but he had a lot of work to get done this afternoon before he got his last night with Patrick for a while. Patrick was heading up to the station for diplomacy, and he was heading out to the new Mars Military academy being built off of Colony 4.

Mars Colony One, May 2112

“Wow, Tai, that was a lot to dump into my lap. Thanks, *friend*.” John made it sound ironic, but he knew Tai would take it well.

“I know, man, I’m sorry, but I needed to find someone official to report all this to, and the only person that came to mind was you.”

“So right now, the only people who know about this are the Xenoscientists, and the four criminals?”

“John...”

“I don’t have much tolerance for that stuff. I know they are friends of Max, but I’m going to have to give her a talking to.”

Tai chuckled, and John could hear a “good luck with that” undertone to the laugh. Tai was right, of course. Max would never do that sort of thing herself, but she did have a tolerance for other people’s law-breaking that John didn’t quite understand.

“I’m trying to figure out how I am going to push this up the chain without those folks getting themselves arrested for intent to sell counterfeit artifacts. There are hefty fines and even time at the prison asteroids for that stuff these days. Mars is taking a hard zero-tolerance approach.”

“John, I’m leaving that up to you. They knew that there was some likelihood that they

would get into hot water reporting this, but they *did* report it. That should get them some leniency.”

“Agreed. Alright, Tai, thanks. I think the next step is for me to have a meeting with General Tsang and Governor Lohrheim. Unfortunately, Patrick is busy meeting with the SolGov president and Corps at the Mars station, so it will be a few days before I can get that meeting arranged. And it would be good to have any information the Kurool have on this new species before we have that meeting, anyway.”

“I’ll send you the report the minute I get it from Max, Xiang and Sharron. I’m hoping there will be some good news in it.”

“Good news? Like?”

“I don’t know—something that will make me feel less like we’re about to get ground to dust.”

“Well, there isn’t much hurry, anyway. If they are in our system right now, and inclined to hurt us, there is nothing we can do about it, based on the information you’ve shared with me. I don’t think any level of preparation will help us when they have weapons like they used on poor George. He deserved to be knocked upside the head into next week, but not blown to bits by one alien shot.”

Mars Colony One, May 2112

“Max, hello. I’ve missed you.”

Max sat in a chair across from Droat, who she hadn’t seen in way too long. She was in the area where they could stay together, and she was wearing her mask, which she didn’t really

like, but she was at least glad she got to be in Droat's presence.

“I'm sorry Droat, I've been a terrible friend, haven't I? I'll try and do better. I really do enjoy spending time with you.”

“I have the feeling that you have some news for us, however.”

Max was always surprised by how well the Kurool could read human emotion. None of the humans had managed to master understanding the Kurool emotions, but perhaps that was because they didn't really have them in the same way as humans did.

“Yes, Droat, I do. Some weeks ago, a friend of mine and her ship crew were given an alien artifact by a colleague of theirs, and asked to meet the person at an asteroid to see more of them. When they arrived at the asteroid, their colleague's ship was completely destroyed, and their colleague was dead. We are certain that the artifact is indeed alien, although it doesn't look like anything of yours. In addition, the damage to the ship was also clearly done by an alien weapon. We thought perhaps you might know who these people are.”

Droat seemed frozen in place, and Max thought something might be wrong. After a pause, Droat said, “Show me the artifact, please, Max.”

The mechanism by which the Kurool talked with humans was still something of a mystery, but it definitely included some artificial intelligence and voice generation. Max very rarely heard any variations in the tone or timbre of Droat's voice, although each Kurool did sound different than each other. Now, though, Max was sure she was hearing a different tone, she just couldn't quite put her finger on how it was different. As she reached into the bag with the artifact, she looked over at Xiang, who was ashen. He clearly had heard a difference, too.

Max held out her hand with the artifact, expecting Droat to reach to pick it up from her, but ze did not. Droat cocked zir head, and looked at Froat, who also had zir head cocked. There

was silence for far, far too long. Finally, Froat, who rarely said anything, spoke.

“I am sorry. I am sorry for you, and sorry for your people. I am also sorry for us. Clearly, our sin followed us here, and you will pay with us for it.” There was more silence, for almost two minutes, and then Max lost her patience.

“What? Is that all you are going to say? You have to explain!”

Droat spoke. “Max, forgive us. We will explain it all. Remember the story I told you about the people we wiped out?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Well, I left out part of the story.”

“Oh?”

“We didn’t actually end up killing all of them. The reason we were scared, and tried to wipe them out, was that we knew about them. They were, at the time, a species always at war with each other, and when they could, they drew other species into their wars. They slowly but surely were killing each other off. When what we thought was the last of them arrived at our planet, having made their planet uninhabitable because of their conflicts, we originally gave them refuge. But after a few years, their conflicts became our conflicts, and a period of wars started because of them. We couldn’t tolerate it, so we tried to exterminate them.

“We thought we’d killed them all, but we learned some years later that a small group had survived, found refuge with another species, and vowed to do to us what we tried to do to them. It has been several thousand of your years, Max. They have had time to grow, multiply, and develop the weapons they need. They found us here.”

“Are you absolutely sure this is them? You haven’t even really looked at this. And besides, we’ve found out that it is really old.” Max held up the artifact.

“Yes, it dates from the time that they were on our planet. It is a homing device. I’ve seen images of it.”

“But why would they use an ancient homing device now?”

A series of clicks and grunts emanated from Droat and Froat—she’d never heard their native language before, but she was sure that was what was going on.

Froat said, “Perhaps we were wrong. Perhaps they don’t know we are here—perhaps they got here before we did, and destroyed your ship to prevent being discovered.”

Xiang said, “Honestly, I like that explanation much better, don’t you, Max?”

“Indeed I do.”

Sharron said, “Just when we were getting used to these aliens, we have some new ones to learn about.”

Max turned to Sharron. “You almost sound like you are enjoying yourself! Did you hear what they said about those guys?”

“Yes, I did. I’m not worried. God will provide.”

Max shook her head. Although she and Sharron got along fine, sometimes she thought Sharron and Gareth were simply crazy.

She turned back to Droat. “Droat, can you send everything, I mean *everything*, you have on these aliens. We won’t judge you, no matter what you send. We just need every single piece of information you have.”

“We will send what we can.” That sounded strange to Max, but she didn’t really have the inclination to press zir.

“We have to go, Droat. It seems we have our work cut out for us. Do you have any suggestions?”

“Pretend you don’t know they exist.”

“Is that for our protection, or yours?”

“Both, Max. If they are here, and don’t know about us, once they know you know about them, they will draw you into their conflicts. If they learn about us, they will destroy you along with us because you gave us refuge.”

Max had only one thing to say. “Oh, fabulous.”

Pandora, May 2112

Lindsey Ali was exhausted. She had finally managed to plug the slow leak in her habitat by spending the last twenty hours circling around the habitat with a hand-held spectrometer, trying to get a whiff of air. It was a challenge, as the sublimating water from the surface of Pandora had a habit of masking the signals of air coming out of the habitat.

Finally, though, she’d found the offending leak, and patched it, and now it was time for a long sleep. Sometimes she thought she’d been on Pandora too long, but every time she went onto the surface and got a look at the majesty that was Saturn, she was sure she was in the right place. She didn’t have any plans to leave... yet.

As she stripped out of her suit, checked the seals and hung it up in the locker, she heard the insistent beep of her AI telling her she had an inbound message. These days, it was one of two things: her lawyer, or the supply depot on Rhea. Since she had just gotten a shipment from the supply depot, it wasn’t them. That meant it was her lawyer. Oh, joy.

She looked at the comm screen, and saw that the message wasn’t marked urgent, and it *was* from her lawyer, so she decided to get some food and sleep, and deal with it when she woke

up. She quickly heated up a cheeseburger from a box full of pre-packaged food, and headed to her quarters, where she wolfed down the burger sitting on her bunk, then lay down and promptly fell asleep.

After she woke, she did her standard routine, which included a mist shower and a half-hour run on the treadmill inside the centrifuge. She sat down to breakfast, and decided to listen to whatever message her lawyer had for her.

“Lindsay, hey. Some good news, and some bad news. First, the bad news. Arcadia died in a horrible accident when she was traveling in India. I know that you did love her, although the two of you certainly hadn’t gotten along lately.” Lindsay snorted, and said under her breath, “That evil stepmother? Not hardly. Good riddance!”

The message went on. “The good news is that her estate is withdrawing all of the suits against you, so you are free and clear. I guess that means you don’t need me any more. I don’t know if I’ll ever see you again in person, but if you do make it back to Earth at some point, please make some time to let me take you out to lunch.”

Lindsay breathed out heavily as the message ended. She was finally free of her stepmother’s conniving to get money from the estate left to Lindsay by her father. That was a good chunk of the reason she’d moved out here to the middle of fucking nowhere. The job given to her by Kuiper Exploratory was to hang out on this tiny little piece of ice a hair’s breadth from Saturn, and check out the bodies moving around Saturn for hints of precious metals. It had been her excuse to get off of Earth, where Arcadia had made it her personal mission to make Lindsay’s life completely miserable. Arcadia had been insulted, incensed and angry that Lindsay’s father hadn’t left her any money when he died, even though their marriage had ended badly. Between the lawsuits, private investigators, and surprise visits by Arcadia at very

inopportune times, Lindsay realized that Arcadia was fighting a battle of attrition, and unless Lindsay got herself as far away as possible, she would cave and give Arcadia a lot of money.

But what had happened just a few days after moving here was that she fell in love with Pandora, and in love with Saturn, and was happier than she'd been in her entire life. And that was three years ago. She had been alone here all that time, and had enjoyed pretty much every minute. She couldn't imagine going back to Earth, but she could imagine going to Mars, where she'd spent a few months before she got this position. She liked Mars, and had gotten caught up in the exuberance that had been created by independence. She'd made some good friends there.

She heard a beep she realized was the proximity alert. That was strange—she'd just gotten the supply drop a few days ago, and wasn't expecting anything, or anyone. She turned on the external monitors, and whistled. A ship was coming in between her and Saturn. It was small—but it was a design she'd never seen before. It made her very curious. She wondered what it was. She turned her comm system on.

“Hello there! This is Lindsay of Kuiper Exploratory on Pandora. Who are you? That's quite a fancy ship you've got there.”

She heard nothing as it continued to move away from her. She took lots of images of it as it moved away from her, toward the G ring. She had a feeling she'd see it again sometime.

About three years ago, she'd thought it would be a good idea to buy a shuttle, but somehow, she'd put it on the back burner. Now, she thought it was time, for many reasons. She had a survival pod, which was fine in emergencies, but having a shuttle would mean that she could more easily go about the system without having to hire ships, which was inconvenient and expensive. Now that she knew there would be no claims on her money, she decided to go ahead and order one. She brought up the latest catalog, and saw that there was a nice, small shuttle,

used, that wouldn't take too much of a bite out of her account. It would take several weeks to get here from Kuiper's ship depot in orbit around Titan, but she was patient.

Mars Colony One, May 2112

Sky was pacing. She felt like a rat in a cage. They were stranded on Mars, with no money and no fuel. They were waiting on some high muckety-muck to get back from negotiations with some other high muckety-muck. And, to make things worse, Max was unreachable, because she was busy talking with the Kurool at their colony. She had nothing to do. Nilesh was happy to be home visiting family, and he was spending a lot of time working at the Xenoscience lab doing further investigations on the artifact and wreckage of George's ship. Mikhail was busy finding women to fuck, and Caitlyn was off doing who knows what. Sky was bored, and antsy, and worried.

Max had been doing her best, but Sky had the feeling that once this got out of Max's hands, there was no telling what kind of trouble the four of them would get into because there was clear evidence that they had been intending to sell what they thought were counterfeit artifacts. Nevermind they didn't turn out to be! And it turned out that there was an outstanding SolGov warrant for Mikhail's arrest—one Mik hadn't bothered to share with them. Sky wasn't sure why only Mik had a warrant, but the only good news was that on Mars, a SolGov warrant wasn't worth the bytes it took to store it. Sky didn't know how long that would be true. So she kept pacing, not sure what to do with herself.

It was nice to have her own space at the Colony One hostel. It was larger quarters than she'd had in a long while. That didn't seem to make much of a difference, though.

“Incoming message from Max Julian.” Her AI’s voice spoke, startling her.

“Play, please.”

“Hey, Sky, it’s Max. I just got back from the Kurool Colony. We have big news to share. We are all in some very deep shit, I need to tell you that up front. Anyway, we’re convening a big meeting at the Xenoscience lab tomorrow morning at 0900. Be there, or be square.”

Mars Colony One, May 2112

Max grabbed the towel, and dried herself off after she left the mist shower. She remembered fondly the first time she took a mist shower on Mars—she’d just arrived, and had been somewhat astonished by the lavishness of the digs she had. Now, all of this was old hat. She heard Tina moving about in the living room, so she threw on her bathrobe, and walked into the living room, to find Tina looking at the viewscreen. The image that flashed on the viewscreen at that moment made Max’s blood run cold.

“Max, love, hey.”

Max eyes were still glued to the screen.

“Max?”

She turned to Tina, and asked quietly, “What’s that?”

“Some very weird shit happening on Io. Why is it that I get the impression that this is something you already know about?”

“Well, not really... what do you know?”

“You know that self-described ‘warlord’ Zoetrope on Ganymede?”

“Yes, he’s a nut. I can’t even believe that he’s managed to get as far as he has.”

“Well, last week, he managed to arrange a silent coup of the Ganymede colony government.”

“What?”

“Yes, and this week, he threatened both Io and Callisto. One of his ships destroyed the old abandoned SolGov military station on Io in a few shots—that’s what this picture is. No one knows where he got that weapon - it looks like something straight out of the SolGov labs.”

“No, it’s not. I know exactly where he got that weapon.”

“You know where he got that weapon? Max, does this have to do with what happened to Sky’s friend?”

Max was torn with indecision. Tina was her partner, and as such, they had never kept secrets from each other. But it was possible that the future of the human race depended on keeping this secret. She would just have to trust Tina with it.

“Love, let’s sit down.”

Max told her the whole story—what they knew about how George’s ship had been destroyed, and what the Kurool had told them about this other species, as yet unnamed. Tina was quiet through all of it.

“Max, something doesn’t make sense.”

“What do you mean?”

“If these aliens were here in force, why would they get involved in what is a very petty local conflict? I hear you that their M.O. seems to be to get themselves inserted into local conflicts, but they could have just as easily destroyed everything on Io, not just an abandoned base. There were five ships that attacked Io. Two of them didn’t fire a shot, two of them had conventional weapons, and only one of them had this super beam thing.”

Max thought a moment. The Kurool had assumed that this species had taken a couple of thousand years to grow and search them out—but that struck Max as unlikely, given what she’d

heard. It seemed more probable that the aliens had scattered – and then wherever they landed and began to grow, they would get themselves into conflicts and trouble, and decimate themselves again. Tina was right—if there were more of them, there would have been evidence of that on Io.

“Thanks, Tina, I think you’re right—I think perhaps there are fewer of these aliens than we think—perhaps not even enough to be a substantial threat. But I don’t want to make that assumption yet. You know I need to ask you to keep a lid on what you know. I promise, promise that you’ll get the scoop when we’re ready.”

Tina smiled. “You’d better, sailor.”

“Is the *Monitor* writing a story about Zoetrope and the thing on Io?”

“Yup. It will be up tonight.”

“Great! We’ll need it at our meeting tomorrow!”

“Are there any more momentous pieces of news significant to the history of humankind you want to tell me tonight?” Tina was smiling *that* smile.

“Besides the fact that the SolGov/Corps/MarsGov talks collapsed today?”

“Of course, I knew that already.”

“Well, then, I think we’re done with momentous news for the moment.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Tina began to widen the opening of Max’s robe, and Max forgot about everything else.

Mars Colony One, 2112

Sky walked into the meeting room with Caitlyn and Mikhail. She could see that Nilesh was already there, talking with a man she hadn’t yet met. She looked around the room, and saw Max at the head of the conference table, along with a lot of people she didn’t know. It was chaotic, and everyone seemed to be talking at once. They made their way around the table, and

found empty seats.

Sky heard a man say very loudly, “OK, everyone, please take your seats—we have a lot to talk about today.”

People settled down, and took their seats.

“Hello and welcome. For those of you who don’t know me, I am Tai Xien, the head of the Xenoscience lab. I think since we have some new faces here today, we should go around, and have everyone introduce themselves.”

Sky paid attention as everyone said who they were, and what they did. The person who had been speaking to Nilesch was some Major General of the Mars military. That made Sky very nervous. The rest were just scientists.

When her turn came around, she just said, “Sky Alvarez, crew on the *Callista*.” She knew everyone knew what that meant, anyway.

Max had sent her a private message letting her know that she was doing her best on the side to make sure that they didn’t get into any trouble around the trade they were involved in, but she’d also made it clear that once the Mars police found out about all of this, she didn’t know whether she could stop them from trying to prosecute. Luckily, since Mars and SolGov were still officially at war, the warrant for Mikhail wouldn’t be honored.

Tai said, “Thank you everyone. So, Max, first, I think we need to hear both of your reports—the details of the conversation with the Kurool, and what you know about what happened on Io yesterday.”

As Max spoke, Sky realized that she was happy that they had reported this, even if they got into trouble for it. This was way too important to have kept to themselves. She hoped the rest of the *Callista* crew felt the same.

After Max wrapped up, Tai said, “Thank you, Max. First, is there any discussion of the potential conclusion that there may only be a few of them here?”

The Major General, John Herman, said, “I agree that it is likely that there aren’t very many of them, but I do not want to depend on that as a fact. We don’t have all of the facts. We need to plan for the possibility that there is more than just one ship with this weapon.”

There were murmurs of agreement around the room, and Sky certainly agreed with him.

The woman named Sharron spoke next. “I know how we can find out.”

Everyone stopped talking, and looked at her. From the look on people’s faces, it was clear they were surprised she’d spoken.

Tai said, “Sharron?”

“Zoetrope’s real name is Henry Gardinia. He was born and raised in Pennsylvania, and was a regular member of Gareth’s father’s church. He was a childhood friend of mine.”

Sky looked around and saw quite a number of open jaws.

Max said, “You’re kidding me.”

“No, Max, you know me. I don’t kid.”

“How did you find out?”

“Well, when I saw a video of him a few years ago, when he first went public as Zoetrope, he looked very familiar. When he was a kid, he would say these really quirky things, things that mystified everyone. Well, Zoetrope says those same quirky things. It’s him, I’m sure of it. Besides, when he was a kid, one of his hobbies was building zoetropes.” Sky had no idea what a zoetrope was.

Max looked at Sky with a calculating look on her face. Sky wondered what she had in mind. She was sure she’d find out.

Max said, “Tai, I’d like to meet with Sharron, John, and the *Callista* crew. I have an idea on how to infiltrate them, and get some answers.”

Tai said, “Alright. Let’s split up into two teams. John, Max, Sharron and the crew of the *Callista* are on task to figure out how many aliens we’re talking about, and how much of a threat they might be. The rest of us need to get busy analyzing that huge boatload of data the Kurool sent us on these folks. We have a lot to learn, people. Let’s get busy. Max, you have the room.” Sky watched as the scientists filtered out of the room.

Max said, “OK, folks, I have a hair-brained idea, but it needs work. I’m depending on all of you to make it work.”

Sky chuckled. She looked forward to hearing it.

The Major General said, “Outline it for us, Max.”

“We all know that the negotiations between Mars, SolGov and the corps were a dismal failure. We just found out that SolGov totally refuses to cede jurisdiction to any territory in the system outside of the orbit of Mars. That’s useful for us, because it makes Zoetrope a natural ally, certainly from his perspective. He needs us, and, given that he’s a narcissistic sociopath, he’ll think we need him. Ganymede and Io aren’t food sustainable yet, and might never be. We’ll offer him help, but we’ll pretend it’s on the down-low: we don’t want SolGov to know that we’re helping him—which of course is mostly true. If he’s done any research on the *Callista*, he’ll know it’s a bit... shady, so he’ll believe us. We send the *Callista*, and you offer to join up with him. He’ll agree, I’m sure.”

Sky was liking this plan. It would get them back on their ship, and doing something useful. She might even be able to wrangle some payment for it.

Max continued, “The quiet approach is where Sharron fits in. Sharron, if it’s OK with

you, I want you to go with the *Callista* to Ganymede, and act as part of the crew.”

Sharron let out a yelp. “Max!”

“You can do it, Sharron. I know you can.”

“What would my role be?”

“We need someone who he knew—it’s a sort of implicit threat. Kind of like ‘we know who you really are.’ Carrot and stick, as it were.”

Sky didn’t know Sharron, but she could tell that the woman looked petrified.

“OK, Max, I’ll do it, but I hope you aren’t sorry later.”

“Sharron, really, I know you have it in you. So Sky, Mikhail, you guys on board?”

Mik put his arm on Sky’s, and said, “Under certain conditions.”

Sky could see the Major General bristle. Sky thought this might get ugly, but she’d be good cop to Mik’s bad cop.

Max said, “What conditions?”

“First, we get a complete pardon of all pending charges. Second, we get enough fuel to get us there, and wherever we want to go after we’re done. And third, we get paid for this. A million Yuan seems an appropriate fee.”

The Major General’s face got really red. He spat, “You are lucky that you’re not in the brig right now. We will *not* be blackmailed!”

Max said in a quiet but steely voice, “Mikhail, there are no pending charges on Mars against you. But believe me, there will be if you don’t go on this mission. And there’s nothing stopping us from handing your ass to SolGov on a platter right this minute.”

Sky jumped in, removing Mikhail’s hand from her arm. “Mik, be quiet. Max, we want to be reasonable, and we want to be useful.” She turned to Mikhail. “Right, Mik?” He looked away

from her. She knew she'd pay for this later.

“We're on board for this, really we are. But we do have needs, Max. Obviously we need fuel to at least get us there and back. And we're completely broke.”

Max sighed. Sky knew Max would do for them what she could, and hold the dogs at bay for as long as she could.

“Sky, Mikhail, we'll fill up your tanks. I'll talk with Tai, and see what a reasonable fee for a service contract like this should be. I have no power whatsoever, nor does John, over what the Mars police might choose to do with you. I can imagine if you help us out in this important task, they will be more likely to forget anything untoward ever happened. And of course, after this is done, you don't need to come back to Mars anyway. This is the best we can do.”

Sky said, “Thanks, Max, that's all we ask.” She looked at Mikhail, who she could tell was very angry. Caitlyn was impassive, and Nilesch thoughtful. He, at least would have her back when she needed to face Mikhail later. Cait would likely take Mik's side. Sky thought that the next few hours were going to be far from fun.

Max said, “OK, we all have our work cut out for us. I'll go talk with Tai, and get numbers for you, Sky. Sharron, find out whatever you can via your family about what they know about Zoetrope. John, walk with me. We need to plan the *Callista's* trip out to Ganymede.”

The walk back to the hostel was frosty and silent. The four of them had done very well over the last few years together. There had been a couple of big fights over contracts or decisions, but largely they all got along. Nominally, Sky was the leader, because she'd fronted most of the down payment on the ship, so she owned more of it than the other three. But in practice they worked by consensus. Sky hoped she wouldn't have to pull rank on Mikhail to

make this all work. He might never forgive her for that. But she couldn't see any other way out of this. If they didn't agree to do this, they'd still be completely broke and stranded on Mars, and likely to get slapped with intent to sell counterfeit goods. At least if they took the mission, the likelihood of getting into legal trouble was greatly decreased, and they might even get a legitimate service contract out of this—not to mention credit for helping save the human race, or something.

They filtered into the living room of the suite they had at the hostel, and Sky saw Mikhail go to the refrigerator box and get a beer.

Caitlyn said, "Sky, that wasn't a nice thing to do to Mik."

"I see. What should I have said, then?"

"You should have stood up for him."

"And get us all into deeper trouble?"

Mik said, "They would have never turned us in. They need us!"

Sky turned to Mik and said, "Mik, Cait, you both are being stupid. All they need is a somewhat shady ship to go to Ganymede and be an agent for them. They don't need *our* ship, just *a* ship."

Mik was silent, and Sky could tell it was sinking in.

"Everyone, we need them far more than they need us. If they actually pay us for this, that will be more than we should expect. There are twenty other ships, just as marginal and shady as we are, that would be happy to do this duty. Let's count ourselves lucky."

Sky could tell they understood, but she could also tell they weren't happy about it. Not that she was, either. She never liked the *Callista* to be in this sort of situation. But there wasn't much any of them could do about it at the moment.

Mik said, “So we just bend over, then?”

“Mik, look, this is our only way out of this predicament. And we get to do something useful in the process. If you can think of a better way out...”

Sky thought she saw something in his eyes, but he only said, “No, you are right. Let’s just do this.”

After they’d talked practicalities for a while, Nilesh went off to spend time with family, and Caitlyn and Mikhail left to go out to a bar. Sky was left with her thoughts. She realized that she didn’t trust Mik and Caitlyn anymore, and perhaps they didn’t trust her, either. And that wasn’t a good thing - she wasn’t going to be able to keep working with people she didn’t trust. She was trying to identify when this had happened. Was it that Mik hadn’t told any of them about the SolGov warrant for his arrest? Or was it his earlier lying to her about the Venus contract? Or maybe it had happened even before that, when she’d discovered he’d taken a kickback from one of their sales from an old client. As she thought about all these things, she realized that this was going to be her last trip with the *Callista*. She’d sell, or maybe even give away her share, and go find some other way to live her life. She was done with Mik.

Chapter 3

Mars Colony One, May 2112

John had been trying to avoid this meeting for as long as humanly possible, but given that the *Callista* would be leaving orbit in less than three days, he knew he'd better get this meeting over with. Patrick was back from the disastrous attempted negotiation with SolGov and the corps, and was in a foul mood, but John figured that he would appreciate something else to talk about. John had already told Patrick the outlines of what was happening, so this wouldn't be as much of a surprise as it would be for General Tsang.

As he arrived and was ushered into the office by Patrick's aide, he saw that the General had already arrived. Patrick was speaking.

"Lei, I don't really know what to do. SolGov and the corps ambushed us in the talks. Clearly, they had been in discussions, and planned to force our hand... John, come in, have a seat. I was just filling Lei in on the dismal details of the talks."

John simply nodded, expecting Patrick to continue.

"It's just untenable, and I don't want to commit any more forces to the effort, especially given the state of our military at the moment. But we can claim jurisdiction over the space we've taken, and refuse to allow any SolGov ships to refuel at the Mars Station fuel depot. That'll make it a lot more difficult for SolGov to hold sway over the belt."

The General said, "But of course, SolGov already has several fuel depots just inside Mars orbit, and I don't think we should think about attacking those."

"No, originally we asked for jurisdiction over the system from the Mars orbit and beyond.

I'm sticking to that. I don't want them to think we're reaching. John, do you have any comments?"

"Of course, sir, I think we do as you say, and wait. SolGov's ability to keep control over space outside Mars orbit is already pretty bad. With the current problems that SolGov has got insystem, plus that nutcase Zoetrope making Jupiter a problem for them, we'll be in shape to have defacto jurisdiction in just a few years."

Patrick nodded, as did General Tsang.

"Alright, John, you convened this meeting, and I know a little about the situation, but why don't you start from the beginning."

John laid out the facts and plans, clearly, and without editing.

"You think this will work—we can get the information we need about these aliens from Zoetrope?"

"I think so, yes. I think Max can make it work, even if the *Callista* crew can't."

General Tsang said, "I think we need to notify SolGov military about all this. I don't know what they'll say..."

"Yes, Lei. The sooner we explain what's going on, the better. I don't want them accusing us of really allying with Zoetrope. They would believe that."

"Indeed they would. I'll leave it to you, how and when you want to tell SolGov."

Patrick sighed. "Yes, I guess that would be my job, wouldn't it? And I would have bet a week ago that Prak would be OK with all of this, and trust us with yet another set of aliens... but now, I don't know that I think that will happen."

John looked at Patrick and tried to smile a comforting smile. Sometimes it was hard for him to meet with Patrick in his official capacity, because he wanted to make him feel better, or

comfort him... but that would have to wait until later.

A knock at the door startled John, and he turned to see Patrick's aide in the doorway.

"Governor Lohrheim, Mr. Jason Snow here to see you about the new station contract."

"Thank you, Marianne. General, Major General, thank you for all of your hard work on this. I'll keep you posted on SolGov's response, and please keep me apprised of any progress from your efforts, and that of the Xenoscience lab."

Patrick nodded, and walked out of the office with General Tsang.

General Tsang said, "I don't envy him one bit."

John nodded. "He has a really tough job."

General Tsang smiled, and patted John on the back. "I'm glad he has such a good companion to help him through this."

John smiled back, nodding. His relationship with Patrick was public knowledge, although few people referred to it. His dual role could sometimes be a little bit dicey, but the informal culture of Mars made it possible to pull off.

They parted ways and John made his way back to his office to order something he needed to give to Max before she left on her mission.

Mars Colony One, May 2112

Max and John were sitting in Tai's office. Max could tell John was angry, but he was doing fairly well at keeping it to himself. Max knew that if John had his druthers, he'd march the four *Callista* crew over to the Mars police and get them charged with a dozen things. Max could tell that the idea that the crew might get paid for this mission rankled him.

Tai said, “Well, it’s probably a six-month mission, between getting to Ganymede, and joining up long enough to get the info we need. Service contracts like that tend to be from ten to fifteen Mars units a month.”

John said, “Give them ten.”

Max said, “Why don’t we offer 75K Mars Units for the contract, half to be paid up front, half to be paid on completion.”

Tai said, “That sounds reasonable. With the current deflation of the Mars currency in the system, that would end up being about 200K Yuan.”

Max said, “I’m sure they’ll accept that.”

John shook his head. “They’d better. Or else I’m calling Zhen.”

Max knew that Zhen was the head of the Mars police force. She hoped she could keep Zhen in the dark about all of this for as long as humanly possible.

“OK, I’ll go talk with Sky. The *Callista* should launch ASAP. I’m not sure what I think about the fact that you want me to go with them.”

John said, “Max, how else are we going to make sure that they go through with their mission? You are a credible backchannel for MarsGov, given your connections. You’re no longer a member of the Xenoscience lab, and only a few of us know that you are still in close touch with the Kurool.”

Max sighed. “I know, John, I know. I just don’t really want to have to tell Tina.”

“She’ll understand, Max.”

Max nodded. It was logical that she should accompany the *Callista* to Ganymede. But even apart from telling Tina, Max really wasn’t all that interested in being in space again. But perhaps this would be good for her—a way for her to finally face her fears of space.

They walked out of Tai's office, and Max made her way back home. She picked up her tablet.

"Jane, find Sky Alvarez. Ask her to meet me at my house as soon as possible."

There was a brief pause, then, "Done, Max."

"Thanks, Jane."

Max wondered whether or not the *Callista* had a matrix capable of handling Jane.

"Jane, what are the current matrix capacities of the *Callista*? Can you find out?"

"They got an upgrade to 5 THz with .5 K cores two years ago."

"That's all?" Max was surprised. That was about what her old small asteroid hunter had.

"Yes, Max. Not enough for me."

"OK, can you talk with Ched at the shipyards? Order an upgrade for the *Callista* that gets it up to spec to add you to the matrix. Tell him it's on the lab."

"Will do, Max."

Max could hardly imagine Sky would mind.

Max got home and had just poured some juice and made a sandwich when she heard the door chime.

"Come in."

Sky walked in, looking worried.

"Hey, Sky. Have a seat. Hungry?"

"No, thanks, I'm fine."

"I hope you don't mind me eating my sandwich while we talk."

"No, not at all. Go for it."

They sat at the dining room table, Sky across from Max.

“A few things, Sky. First, I got you 75K Mars units as a contract fee, half paid up front, half on completion. And as we said, we’ll fill up your tanks, both here and at Ganymede, at the end of the mission.”

“Alright. Mikhail won’t like it, but I’ll make sure everyone agrees.”

“This probably won’t help, but John threatened to call Zhen, the head of the Mars police, if you don’t agree to these terms.”

“I understand.”

“Second, I checked into your matrix. We’re ordering a big upgrade for you, and it’s on our tab.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m coming with you, as is Jane, my AI.”

“Max! No, no way. No one will agree to that.”

“You don’t have a choice. That’s part of the terms of the deal.”

“You don’t trust us?”

“Honestly, Sky, what do you think? We’re handing you 37.5K Mars credits and a tank full of fuel. One of you is a fugitive from SolGov, and you’re known to take part in illegal trade. What would you do in our shoes?”

“Well, we wouldn’t abandon Sharron. But the truth is: I wouldn’t trust us either. Alright. Max, you’re making this hard.”

“Sky, I’m trying to make the best of this situation. Most everyone else wants to throw you in jail and hire a trustworthy crew for this mission...”

“I know you are trying your best. I trust you, Max.”

“Sky, if it were only you, I’d trust you, too. But it isn’t only you. I don’t trust Mikhail.”

“I don’t trust him either, honestly.”

Max was taken aback for a moment, but she saw in Sky that she was telling the truth—and perhaps it was a new truth for her.

Max said, “The matrix upgrade can be done in a day. We can launch in 48 hours. I want to get in the shuttle up to *Callista* in about 40 or so.”

“Alright. Let me gather everyone, and twist arms.”

Sky got up and walked out, and Max couldn’t help but see how much seemed to be weighing Sky down. And then, there was what was weighing her down—her talk with Tina. She’d be home in a few hours, so Max had time to get some work done in preparation for the trip. Oh, and to cook Tina a very nice dinner.

“Mmmm, Max, this dinner was amazing, and a bountiful feast. You haven’t cooked a meal like this since... Maaax?”

Max looked up, busted. The last time she’d cooked a meal like this was when she’d chosen to take an assignment at Colony 7 for three months, helping them get off the ground.

“Tell me you’re not going to Ganymede, Max.”

“I’m going to Ganymede.”

Tina sighed, then smiled. “I can imagine that it’s harder for you to think about going back into space than it is to tell me you’ll be away for... how many months?”

“Probably around six. And no, I’m not looking forward to going back into space.”

“There isn’t anyone else they can send?”

“No, Tina, I’m one of the most credible backchannel people they can send. And that’s one less person they have to let in on the secret.”

“I’ll miss you, Max. Promise me you’ll be home for Christmas?”

“I promise, Tina.”

“I’ll be worried about you. And don’t tell me you’ll be fine.”

“This really isn’t a dangerous mission.”

Tina laughed. “Really, now?”

Max grinned. “Well, alright. There is significant risk. And I’ll be scared as hell for most of it.”

“I bet you’ll get right back in the saddle, sailor.”

Max hoped Tina was right.

The evening before they were going to leave, John came by. He looked concerned.

“Hi, Max. I just wanted to have a last unofficial conversation before you left.”

“Well, I think we’re in good shape. Our initial contact with Zoetrope seemed successful. He seems completely ready to believe that Mars wants to ally with him. And for some reason, he seems to especially look forward to meeting me.”

“I bet I know what it is.”

“What?”

“If he had first contact with the Zeloso, then he thinks he and you are two of a kind.”

“Ah, that makes a kind of sense. I imagine he wants to brag.” Zeloso was the name that they had given the new aliens. The materials that the Kurool had given them used a name that was not translatable, but transliterated to something vaguely approaching Zeloso, so they’d taken it on.

“Yes, I imagine so. Anyway, a couple of things...”

John took out something wrapped in cloth.

“Here, you might need this. It’s a multi-mode beam weapon. Mode 1 is dome stun, mode 2 is dome lethal, mode 3 is outside stun, and mode 4 is outside lethal.”

“John, I...”

“Max, you need some protection. I don’t trust Zoetrope, and I don’t trust Mikhail.”

“John, I don’t even know how to shoot.”

“There’s a laser sight. You don’t need to know how to shoot.”

“OK. Thanks, John.”

“Keep it hidden. Don’t even tell Sky you have it. Keep it on hand.”

“Alright.”

“Second, the Kurool are busy.”

“Busy?”

“Yes, some satellite imaging of their colony suggests that something is happening, but it’s not clear what. Two of the five shapes that made up the ship have separated from the main pentagon.”

“That’s strange. Have you thought about asking Droat?”

“We did. Ze just said something enigmatic.”

“What did ze say?”

““We have debts to repay.””

“John, that’s not enigmatic, that’s clear.”

“It is?”

“Yes, they are headed for Ganymede. They hope to talk with the Zeloso. I suspected as much when I talked with Droat. Ze seemed to be suggesting that they would want to make amends in some way with the Zeloso, if it were possible. I’m sure that they gathered from my

last set of questions that there likely aren't a lot of the Zeloso around."

"Well, that might make things a little more complicated, won't it?"

"Let's hope that they are circumspect about it, at least until we get our intel."

"Well, Max, I sort of wish I was going with you, and I'm also glad I'm not. Good luck, my friend."

"Thanks, John. And thanks for the piece." Max picked up the wrapped weapon.

They hugged, and John left Max, who finished some last-minute preparations and work before Tina got home for their last evening together.

Potemkin, May, 2112

Gareth was relieved to finally be leaving Earth. It had been an unpleasant two weeks. The only thing he had enjoyed was getting to spend time with his brother Percival, who had grown into a mature, graceful man. Before Percival had left to go back to Seattle, he and Gareth had had a long leisurely dinner and spoke honestly about the family. Percival had confirmed what Gareth had long suspected—Tristan had also been gay, but hadn't been able to deal with it, or tell anyone in the family except for Percival, and had become addicted because of it.

Gareth was settling into his small stateroom on the Mars leisure transport, the *Potemkin*. Usually he traveled by more utilitarian means, on cargo or colony transports. This was his first time on a leisure transport. It was quite a different experience. But he figured since he and Sharron were about to be one and a half million Yuan richer, a 5,000 Yuan luxury transport back home wasn't a big deal.

He heard his AI's message alert—he had a message from Sharron. That surprised him.

She'd just sent him a message yesterday about the whole new alien presence. It was fascinating. Perhaps there was more news.

He said to his AI, "Display on viewscreen, please."

When he looked at Sharron, he saw a look on her face that he'd never seen before. It was a combination of pride, fear, and excitement. He wondered what was going on.

"Hi Gareth. I have been asked by Max and the Xenoscience team to accompany the *Callista* to Ganymede."

Gareth was stunned. Sharron, go to Ganymede? Then he smiled. He knew now that she really *wanted* to go. She explained the rationale, which made sense to him. She was asking his permission. Ah, that one. It was more than time to let that one go.

He said to his AI, "Record a message, please."

"Sharron, I am excited for you! That sounds like an amazing adventure. I am almost even jealous, but it's also not my kind of thing.

"Dear heart, it is time for us to stop this game we've been playing for the last couple of years. I know that both of us were raised and lived with this notion that you should follow me and obey me, but we both know that we now believe differently—it's time for us to act like it. If you wish to go to Ganymede, you should go to Ganymede. You don't need to ask my permission.

"I will miss you. I know this means that you'll be gone by the time I get home. Be safe. I know that Max will look after you. Send me a message once you get underway. I love you."

Gareth had a feeling that perhaps this trip would be a very good thing for Sharron. It was time for her to finally get out of his shadow.

Mars Colony 1, May 2112

“Fuck no!”

“Mik...”

“Sky, did you hear what I said? I said, FUCK NO! Having that Sharron person is bad enough, but I will not accept Max on this mission!”

Nilesh said, “Mik, Max is trustworthy, and we’ll want to have her on this mission. I’m not worried about it, and I don’t see why what’s-his-face-trope would want to talk to us without someone like Max along.”

Mikhail was fuming, angrier than Sky had seen him in a very long time.

He said, “Great, that’s two babysitters we have now. I don’t want her on this mission!”

Sky said reasonably, “Mik, if we don’t agree with these terms, they call Mars police, we go to jail, and some other ship takes the mission. This is our only chance off this planet with our skins intact. 75K isn’t a lot of money, but it’s better than nothing, and not all that much less than we would have originally made selling George’s artifacts.”

Caitlyn muttered, “This sucks. I don’t like it. I know she’s your ex, but I don’t like Max.”

Sky was exasperated. “Alright, Mik, Cait, do you have an alternative plan? Let’s hear it.”

Both Mikhail and Caitlyn were silent. Sky knew they didn’t have an alternative plan, because there wasn’t one. Sky had spent hours making contacts all over the system, but there was no work, no cargo, and nothing that would get them out of this bind... except this mission.

“OK, I’m taking silence as assent. We’re meeting Max at the shuttle bay at 0800 hours the day after tomorrow.”

Sky felt bruised and battered by this whole thing. And tired. Tired to the bone. She left the suite, and went to drown her sorrows for an evening.

As she sat drinking her vodka tonic at the closest watering hole, she couldn't help but regret the last few years of her life. There had been some excitement and some good times, but as she did an inventory, she realized that it had been a harder time than she'd been willing to admit to herself. She'd been far more broke than she'd ever been when she worked for Strelix, and the stress level she dealt with on a daily basis was far worse. She sighed. Why did she have to make her own life so hard?

She heard, "One whisky sour, please."

She looked to her side to see Nilesch sitting down. He nodded to her.

"Lesh..."

"Don't say it, Sky. Don't apologize. This isn't your fault."

"I'm glad you don't blame me. I know Mik does."

"Fuck Mik. I'm tired of him, tired of his attitude. I walked out of the hostel while he was in the middle of delivering a screed against you for taking the original offer from George, and me for feeling the need to report it. The truth is, we got in a bit of bad luck with George, and this mission is the only way out of it."

"Lesh, I can't work with Mik anymore. I'm going to need out after this mission."

Nilesch chuckled. "I'm done too, Sky. I talked with Patrick—he's going to give me a job when I get back."

"That's great, Nilesch!"

"Yeah, it's more than time for me to stay home for a while."

"I don't know what I'll do, but I'll figure it out."

"You could always go home, Sky."

"No, not even now. I can't stand the thought of going back to Earth."

“Well, Cait and Mik can buy us out with their shares of the contract money, if they want. Or we’ll just sell *Callista*—we should get a decent price for her.”

“You’ve kept her in good shape.”

“I have, that. We’ll be OK, Sky.”

Sky somehow didn’t really believe that, but she was trying hard.

Mars Colony 1, May 2112

Max and Sharron sat in the shuttle port waiting for the *Callista* crew, who were fifteen minutes late. Max was already annoyed. Just as she was about to ask Jane to track them down, she saw them saunter into the port area towards her. Well, only two of them were sauntering, really. Mikhail and Caitlyn. Sky and Nilesch walked behind them, looking relatively depressed. Max shook her head. This was not going to be a pleasant month.

Max stood up, and Sky approached her, and said quietly. “Sorry, Max, we had a little argument before we left the hostel.”

“Don’t worry about it, Sky. Let’s just go.”

They all walked out toward shuttle aisle 17, where the *Callista* shuttle was sitting. Max knew that although Sky would have let her pilot, none of the other crew would agree. Well, she didn’t know about Nilesch, but certainly neither Mikhail nor Caitlyn would agree. Caitlyn had spent a little time with Tina, and Tina had said that she felt she no longer knew her. Max didn’t think she knew her anymore, either. On the other hand, she’d enjoyed getting to know Nilesch a little bit. John said that Patrick really trusted him, and even though his sense of legality was sometimes a bit askew, his sense of morality never was.

Max was happy not to pilot—she didn't actually know whether she trusted herself. She wasn't looking forward to being in space, and she'd spent the last night sleepless, scared out of her mind. She couldn't imagine how the night would have gone if Tina hadn't been there.

The matrix upgrade had gone fine, and a copy of Jane was happily ensconced in the *Callista* matrix. She would remain accessible, but sort of to the side of the normal AI routines. Jane had said they were extremely “primitive.” Max couldn't help but chuckle. Sometimes she was sure Jane had an ego.

“Alright, please stow your stuff and strap in everyone. We're launching in five.”

Max found a cubby to put her bag in, and helped Sharron strap into one of the extra seats in the back. She sat next to Sharron, and strapped in, too.

She looked at Sharron, who looked nervous.

Max said, “You OK?”

“I'll be fine. I'm sorry, I hope I'm not a bother.”

“No worries, it will be great.”

Max subvocalized, “Jane, status?”

She heard in her ear, sort of, “No further communication from Zoetrope. The Kurool haven't launched.”

“Thanks. Make sure to alert me of any changes in either situation.”

“Of course, Max.”

She'd resisted communication implants for years because she didn't like the idea of having silicon and metal in her head, but she'd realized that on this mission, she needed a silent interface with Jane, so she'd gotten a subvocal electrode, a cochlear implant, and a transmitter all well hidden. This meant she could communicate with Jane and others without anyone knowing.

She hadn't even told Sky. That felt sneaky and bad to Max, but she realized she didn't really have a choice.

She felt the side pocket of her pants, where the weapon was. It was strange carrying it—she'd never carried a weapon before. She hoped she didn't need it. She was as ready as she was ever going to be.

They launched, and it was a fairly uneventful ride for Max. Nothing unusual happened, and Max relaxed into the familiar feelings of a shuttle launch and dock. As they disembarked from the shuttle, Mikhail took Max aside, pulling her bodily away from the others.

“Max, you'll be staying in your quarters, with Sharron. There is a matrix terminal that should be adequate for your needs, and your quarters are close to the mess. I don't want either of you up in the control room, or, really, anywhere in the hub, nor in the workroom. This is *our* ship, and you are just passengers, hear me?”

“Alright, Mikhail, that's fine with me. You don't have anything to worry about. We will stay well out of your hair.”

Although Mikhail knew that Jane had been installed, he probably didn't know that there was a failsafe, and Jane could take complete control of the *Callista* if need be. Max didn't need to be in the control room to change the course of the *Callista* if it came to that. And she wouldn't get bored. One of the things she intended to do while on this trip was to comb through with Jane several thousand exabytes worth of space surveillance data.

SolGov had started to place various surveillance satellites all around the Solar system more than twenty years ago, and most of that data was simply stored. It was only in the unusual case when something needed investigating that this data was looked at. Max wasn't sure exactly what she was looking for—it was likely needles in a haystack, but she had the time, and Jane had

the processing power, so they were going to go through it, year by year. She would look for events that were unusual, things that didn't fit the usual patterns: these might indicate the presence of alien ships in the system.

She and Sharron followed Mikhail. He gave them a brief tour of the mess, and of the few other spaces, like the toilet and shower and sickbay, that they would need for the trip. He floated next to a door, and opened it.

“Here are your quarters. There are straps in the bunk. We should be turning on spin in about an hour.”

“Thanks, Mikhail.”

“Don't thank me. I don't want you either of you here, and I've taken it on myself to make sure you in particular don't get into any trouble.” He was pointing right at Max.

She nodded. They went into their quarters, and closed the door behind them. As Sharron took the bottom bunk, Max took out her tablet, and stowed her bag in a small cubby above the top bunk. She pulled herself up into the bunk, and strapped herself in.

“Need any help with the straps, Sharron?”

“No, Max, I'm all set. Thanks.”

“Alright. I'm going to get some work done.”

“Sounds like a good idea. Me too.”

Potemkin, June 2112

Gareth was sitting in the lounge area of the transport taking him back to Mars. He'd arrive in about a week. He'd been glad to finally leave the horrible drama of his family behind. Percival had promised to come with his family to visit soon, and Gareth knew that Sharron would enjoy that.

He'd gotten a message from Sharron yesterday from the *Callista*, sharing what it had been like to be on board. It sounded like it was tense, but Sharron seemed to be having a good time nonetheless. She'd been working on their most recent treatise.

Gareth and Sharron were finally finishing the paper for the International Journal of Christian Theology that laid out their arguments that the Son of God had incarnated as a Kurool in the man of Turool, the One they revered. The truth was, Gareth had known it more than four years ago, when he'd first read the account of the visit to the Kurool ship by Max Julian, while he and Sharron were on Earth to work for the Montoya campaign.

Then, it was his heart telling him that this was so. He and Sharron had spent the last four years working to find the right theological and biblical arguments that other Christians might agree were plausible. It scared him to go public with this; he had no idea what the repercussions might be. They had sent a brief letter in response to another theologian's earlier paper discussing the similarities between Turool and Jesus, and the journal had requested a full article from them. Gareth wasn't sure that they would really print it once they saw what it said.

It was actually the linguists working on the Kurool language that had made all the difference. They initially hadn't been so keen on it, but Gareth had asked them to translate what he had been told by the Kurool was a particularly important teaching of Turool. And what

emerged was stunning, both to him and to the linguists. The teaching was absolutely the Beatitudes—there wasn't any other explanation.

The dominant Kurool language, the one that Turool spoke, was conceptually different from any human language. That was not a surprise. But the linguists had been working hard with the Kurool to come up with a kind of key—the best human concept that corresponded with a Kurool one. For instance, the part of the Beatitudes that said “Blessed be the meek...” The Kurool had no concept of “meekness” or “humility” but they did have a concept that translated as “lying horizontally and folding.” It meant the same thing to Kurool that “meekness” or “humility” meant to humans, even though it was really conceptually completely different.

Using that key, what emerged from that central teaching of Turool was the same as the Beatitudes of Jesus. It was striking, so striking that even the linguists were beginning to agree with Gareth's point of view and had continued to do similar translations of other Turool teachings.

Of course, the interesting thing was that Turool arrived after the Kurool had significant technology, so all of Zir teachings were actually recorded. Jesus was on Earth before any kind of technology, and all of His teachings were handed down verbally, then written and translated and re-translated. Gareth had gone back to an old mainline Christian biblical scholarship group from the twentieth century called “The Jesus Seminar”. Earlier in his life, he had dismissed this as heretical, but he realized that ultimately, it made a lot of sense. It found the parts of what was in the Gospels that was likely truly authentic, and he and Sharron compared those to the recorded and conceptually translated teachings of Turool. The result had been uncanny, and, he was told, extremely unlikely to be accidental. Many of the sayings of Jesus considered by the Jesus Seminar to be authentic, or likely authentic had a corresponding saying by Turool. There were

many, many other sayings of Turol that seemed meant just for the Kurool, which was no surprise to Gareth. He expected that the sayings of Jesus that were missing from the Kurool teachings were meant for humans specifically.

And, of course, there was the whole thing about Earth. First, it had become clear that Turol was born on the Kurool planet at least one hundred years after Jesus' time on Earth. In translating the teachings of Turol about Earth, there was absolutely no mistake about what planet Turol was talking about. He specifically talked about Sol, specifically mentioned the third planet, and even had things to say about the beings on the third planet, things that were absolutely true.

The Kurool technology at the time of Turol was similar to human technology in the last half of the twentieth century. There was no way to get much information about planets around distant stars at that time. The Kurool hadn't launched a telescope into orbit by then. There is no way that any Kurool could say much of anything about the third planet in the Sol system. There was no way for Turol to know much of anything about Earth.

This all added up to one thing in Gareth's mind. Turol had been on Earth. And Turol had been Jesus. He gulped. And they were about to tell the world about it.

Pandora, June 2112

Lindsay had set her AI to sweep the space one thousand kilometers out from Pandora, and warn her loudly when something approached. She wanted more time to have a look at what was out there. It had been a while since she saw that ship, but in doing a bunch of research, she had come up with nothing. There was no ship she could find with similar design. She was

stumped.

She'd gotten some new data from the remotes she'd sent out all over the F-ring—Kuiper Exploratory wanted to know how much money were in the rings. It didn't look good. This was the fifth set of remotes she'd sent, and none of them so far had come back with anything promising. It wasn't going to be too much longer before Kuiper decided that this wasn't a good investment after all, and pulled the plug on funding Lindsay. Lindsay could fund herself for a while, but she realized that it wouldn't be the best use of her inheritance, now that it was totally free from the danger of being lost to her evil stepmother.

It wasn't all that surprising, the lack of metal in any body she looked at. Saturn's moons had first been explored in the forties, and consistently, they were relatively worthless in the metals department. She'd read several theoretical papers suggesting why. It involved something having to do with the formation of gas giants. Jupiter's moons were pretty metal-poor as well. But someone at Kuiper wanted to make sure, and Lindsay was here to do that.

She decided to delay sending this data for a week or so. They mostly forgot her existence, which was a blessing. But some bureaucrat got antsy if she didn't send in a report at least once every month or so with more data.

Now that it was looking like her time on Pandora would come to an end sooner rather than later, she started to think about what was going to be next. Settling on Mars sounded like the best plan—Jupiter was crazy, with that Zoetrope dude. She was going to stay as far away from that as possible. Nothing further out-system felt attractive, and she was never going back to Earth again, so Mars sounded like the best bet. Besides, she'd gained some friends on Mars, and she liked the society that independent Mars was growing into.

She went back to look at those images she was able to take of that ship. She wondered

whether she should tell anyone about it, or ask anyone whether or not they'd ever seen anything like it. She decided she wouldn't for now—she wanted to learn more first, if possible, if it came this way again.

Chapter 4

Ganymede, June 2112

Zoetrope looked at the text message sent by the governor of Io and laughed. His attack on the old SolGov military installation on Io had clearly scared the Io governor, which, of course was the point. Zoetrope smiled. Soon, very soon, all of Jupiter would be his. And after that... who knew how far he could go.

He had been quite satisfied by the communication with the new Mars government. Yes, they would be his allies, and they would need him in their fight with SolGov. He had been especially satisfied to learn that Max, with whom he shared the honor of being a human who had made first contact with an alien species, would be coming to visit. It was unfortunate that he could not tell Max anything about Koth. He had promised them to not expose their presence in the system. But he was sure that she would be awed by him anyway.

He was, of course, awesome. He had gone from being someone just about ready to die in a borrowed ship during a failed mission, to a wealthy man who now owned Ganymede, and was about to own Jupiter. He might say it was God who had answered his prayers—and answered them quite dramatically, at that. God had proven that Zoetrope was worthy.

He heard a knock at his door.

“Enter.”

The small man who had been Ganymede’s governor and was now acting as its manager walked in, looking at the floor.

“General Zoetrope...”

He turned, bored already.

“Yes, Manager Holcomp?”

“Sir, the owner of the fuel depot refuses to acknowledge that you have become governor of Ganymede. They will not pay their taxes.”

“I see. You are dismissed.”

“Is there...?”

“That is all, Mr. Holcomp.”

The small man nodded, and fled the room. Zoetrope shook his head. How did he get surrounded by such imbeciles?

He spoke to his AI. “Who is the owner of the Ganymede fuel depot?”

“Millicent Woeller.”

“Please tell Commander Kaleen Creal that Millicent Woeller has refused to pay her taxes.”

“Done.”

Zoetrope smiled. No, he was not surrounded by imbeciles. Kaleen would convince Ms. Woeller to pay her taxes... or else Ms. Woeller would be found unfortunately floating in space without any oxygen. Zoetrope knew that Kaleen would be quite amenable to this task.

He didn't really want to run Jupiter, he just wanted to control it, and benefit from its riches. He didn't have any interest in running it - that he would leave to the plebes like Holcomp. He had better things to do, like plan the zoetrope that would awe the system.

***Callista*, June 2112**

At least Max wasn't getting bored in their small, cramped quarters. It had been three weeks, and the only *Callista* crew member she'd seen much of was Mikhail, who seemed to be keeping everyone else away from her. He didn't seem to care much what Sharron did, which was useful. Sharron had been relaying to Max all sorts of stuff about the goings on of the *Callista* crew, and Max had been working hard with Jane, combing the massive amounts of data from the surveillance monitors scattered all over the system.

She had garnered a lot of very interesting data. She had first looked at all of the data from two months before George's destroyed ship was discovered. It turned out there was a surveillance system in an asteroid only ten thousand kilometers from the asteroid George was found. It showed one ship, presumably George's ship, arriving, then another ship arriving and leaving, and then, about two weeks later, the *Callista*. Jane was now going back as far as there was data to see if there were any other significant arrivals or departures.

Jane had also been looking for anomalous events, such as distress calls and evidence of ships without identity beacons. So far, she had only gone back a year or so—there was so much data to comb through.

Max stood up from her bunk and stretched, and decided it was time for dinner. Mikhail hadn't come to get her for dinner yet, as he usually did, but she was hungry, and tired of being polite to Mikhail by following his lead. She walked out of the room and down the hall to the mess room, where Sky, Sharron and Niles were eating. They looked up as she entered.

Sky said, "Hey, haven't seen much of you."

“Mikhail has been doing his job keeping me away from you, from what I can tell.”

Sky laughed. “I don’t know what his problem is, really. You are so completely harmless.”

Max grabbed a meal from the freezer cabinet, and put it into the microwave. As she was waiting for it to heat up, they were having an animated discussion about the data she’d found so far.

Nilesh asked, “Could you tell anything about the ship that destroyed George’s ship?”

“Not really. The surveillance monitor was too far to get visual data. It registered the heat and exhaust profile, as well as a series of strange signals coming from it. I sent it to the Kurool—perhaps they can understand it. It didn’t have a standard identity beacon, of course.

“There are also about twenty anomalous readings so far from this year—ships where there are clear exhaust or heat signatures and strange signals, but no identity beacons. Jane is doing further analysis of those to determine whether about how many ships she thinks that represents. I’m hoping that by the time we get to Ganymede...”

“What? That you can get all of us on your side?” They all turned to see Mikhail in the doorway with an angry look on his face.

Max turned back to Sky and finished her sentence. “... I can estimate how many alien ships are likely flying about the system at the present time.”

Sky said, “Mik, she was explaining to us that she’s got some interesting data from the surveillance systems.”

“I don’t care what she’s explaining. She should be in her quarters.”

“I was hungry. I came to eat. My food seems to be done now. I will eat, and then I will leave, alright?”

“No. You will take your meal and eat it in your bunk.”

Max sighed. She was tired of Mikhail's attitude.

"No, Mik. She is eating here. Sit down and be civil, and have something to eat, alright?"

Max could tell that Mikhail was fuming as he prepared a meal for himself. Max had mostly lost her appetite, but she went ahead and finished her dinner. Everyone ate in silence. She and Sharron left the mess and got into their quarters.

Max said, "Gah, I'm tired of that man."

"You and me both. And by the way, so are Sky and Nilesh. Basically, they don't much talk to one another."

"I'm not surprised. I know this is the last mission the four of them will be doing together."

"Yup, indeed."

Max got up on her bunk. As she picked up her tablet, she saw a few lines in the analysis results highlighted in red.

She subvocalized, "Jane, explain items five and six."

"Item five occurred September 23, 2095."

"You went back that far already?"

"I had sent several subroutines to start at the beginning, Max. They flagged several thousand events for me to analyze, and I did so while you were at dinner."

Yes, Max thought, this proves it. Jane has an ego.

"Explain this item."

"A ship near Dione sent out a distress call suggesting a lack of fuel and complete life support failure. This would be a minor anomaly, except that no ship was ever found, but that same ship was sold on Ganymede one year later. That ship was owned by a man from the Moon

named John Garfield. More investigation determined that it had been lent to Henry Gardinia.”

“In other words, he somehow survived.”

“Yes. And that’s where we get to item six, which occurred also near Dione, six months earlier. An unknown ship was in visual view by the Dione surveillance monitors. Here’s the picture.”

An image came up on the screen. It was fuzzy, but it clearly was a ship of a design Max had never seen.

“Any idea how large it was?”

“I estimate it was 75 meters long or less, and about ten meters wide.”

“That’s a pretty small ship! Either the crew were very small, or there weren’t many of them.”

“I am now looking for any images that are similar to this, as well as exhaust profiles or signals that match.”

“Looks like we have our answer about how Zoetrope survived, and first contact. I wonder if it was random, or if the aliens knew he was in trouble.”

“I can’t say, Max.”

Max said to Sharron, “Well, it looks like Jane figured out a big piece of the life of Henry/Zoetrope.”

“Yes?”

“Yup. There was a distress signal sent from a ship that had lost all fuel and life support. When help got there, no ship was found, but that same ship was sold at Ganymede a year later. It had been owned by John Garfield.”

“Oh, I knew John.”

“You did?”

“Another old friend from school. He moved to the Moon pretty much the minute he graduated from high school.”

“So that’s the connection. There is data that Henry borrowed his ship. There isn’t any information about Henry being on Ganymede, but the first entry about a ‘Zoetrope’ happens on Ganymede about the same time as the ship was sold. So Henry became Zoetrope during the time of contact with the Zeloso. Jane also found evidence of a Zeloso ship in the area around the same time as Henry’s ship was there.”

“So you think that the Zeloso rescued Henry?”

“That’s what the data seems to suggest.”

“I wonder why.”

“That is a key question, Sharron.”

Mars Colony One, June 2112

John lay down with Patrick on the couch, Patrick’s head on his chest. There were several minutes of silence. John could already tell that Patrick had had a horrible day. It sometimes took him a while to finally tell John the details of how it went. It was almost as if Patrick was afraid that telling John would somehow make it all real, but John knew that Patrick always felt better after he’d talked about it.

“So, I told Prak about the whole thing.”

“And...”

“The shit hit the fan.”

“Really?”

“I am so out of my depth, John.”

John put his hand on Patrick’s shoulder. “No you aren’t! Stop saying that.”

“Silly me, I thought Prak would be happy to have us deal with this. And, I stupidly assumed he knew that I only tell the truth. He was sure I was lying when I said that we were going to pretend to ally with Zoetrope to get info about the aliens. I tried to explain over and over that we thought he was a nutcase, and by no means wanted him to be running things on Ganymede. He thinks that we want to ally with Zoetrope, contact the Zeloso ourselves, and capture the weapon. I should have known he’d think that.”

“But then why would we tell him?”

“I asked him that, and he said that he didn’t have a good answer, but it must be some subterfuge. I gave up.”

“So what’s going to happen?”

There was more silence. John was worried.

“They are sending two *Corinth*-class ships to Ganymede immediately. They are sending three more to the shipping lanes to enforce a blockade of traffic between Mars and insystem. He said that if Zoetrope does anything more to take over Io, SolGov will blame us. I got calls from the Mercury, Venus and Lunar governors begging that I not ally with Zoetrope, and pledging their support for the actions of SolGov. They have been more friendly than not since our independence, and were working behind the scenes to help get us jurisdiction in the asteroid belt, and this is a bad turn. We are well and truly screwed.”

“Well, the good thing is that Max and the *Callista* will beat the SolGov ships to Ganymede. I’ll let Max know what’s up, and that we need to speed up the timetable of getting

our intel. Hopefully, Max and the *Callista* will get their intel, and get out of there before SolGov destroys Zoetrope.”

“I don’t like this, John. I can manage Mars no problem, but this stuff?”

“This is why you have a military, sweetheart.”

Patrick sighed. “I know, I know. This just isn’t my strong suit.”

“You’ll do fine. Listen to Lei, take his advice, and it will be fine. I promise. This will all work out.”

“Why are you so confident?”

John smiled. “I’m not so sure. But I do know we have the Kurool on our side. That’s got to count for something. And besides, Zoetrope is a narcissistic sociopath—they don’t last long.”

“I know, John, but they can take millions of people with them.”

Callista, June 2112

Max was in the middle of looking at five more possible images of unidentified ships, and she could tell that at least three of them were truly alien. Unfortunately, they were also different than each other and the one other identified alien ship. That meant that there were sightings of at least four alien ships in the system in the last twenty years.

Jane had estimated that for each image they got of an alien ship, there were likely five to ten or more that existed. This meant that at a minimum, there had been twenty alien ships in the system. They were all small, which was a relief to Max, but the number was not. They had no idea whether all of the ships had this beam weapon, and the more ships there were, the more likely it seemed that there were many beam weapons. And the more beam weapons there were,

the worse things were for humankind.

“Max, priority encrypted message from John.”

“Play the message, Jane.”

She could see John’s face on the tablet. He looked haggard, as if he hadn’t slept in a while. “Max, sorry to give you bad news, but SolGov went bananas after hearing our plan. They are sending two *Corinth*-class ships to Ganymede. They believe we actually *want* to ally with Zoetrope. You need to get as much intel as you can, as fast as you can, and get the hell out of there.”

Max sighed. She should have predicted this. The death of President Montoya had been a huge blow to Mars. Montoya had been outright friendly to Mars, and quite amenable to the idea that Mars have legal jurisdiction over all of the solar system from its orbit outward. Earth couldn’t manage it in any event, and a Mars friendly to Earth governing the outer system was in Earth’s best interest. But, sadly, his vice-president, picked as a concession to the right wing, had been an ally of the old President Volkov, a hawk, and uninterested in ceding any jurisdiction to Mars for anything except Mars. He even wanted jurisdiction over Phobos, which was ridiculous, given that it was mostly an industrial outpost for Mars. Rumor had it that he was even planning to try to take Mars back.

Max also could tell that John hadn’t shared the whole story, suggesting that there were other consequences. Max figured they included another blockade. The funny thing about that was that it was, for Marsies, largely an inconvenience, but it was a disaster for the Earth economy. Max chuckled. Some politicians didn’t much care about that sort of thing, as long as they could make their point, and, more importantly, protect the interests of the corps. None of the corps liked Mars independence—Mars had always been somewhat of a renegade planet when it

came to corporate relationships. The corps always thought of Marsies as people who bit the hand that fed them—once Mars got a toehold, it put in place all sorts of worker protection rules that the corps had to obey. They didn't much like that, and the idea that Mars would control the outer system was anathema to them. Max thought about whether to tell Sky this news or not. She decided that she would wait and see how things played out at the beginning of the mission.

A week later, when they were only a couple of days from Ganymede, Jane had completed the analysis of all of the anomalous photographs, as well as the other data regarding evidence of alien ships. Jane estimated that there were from twenty-five to forty alien ships in the system, all sharing the frequency and pattern of signaling, and of about five different types. All of the ships were small, the largest was only two hundred meters long by fifty meters wide. Jane suggested that only the largest of the ships they had seen had the capacity to hold enough energy to create a blast like they'd seen at Io, and like the one that had destroyed George's ship. Max theorized that the weapons would need significant recharge time, and the images taken during the Io attack seemed to support that theory. All in all, the data suggested that there were likely few ships with this capacity, and those ships had significant weaknesses.

Max hoped that they could at least confirm some of this information when they arrived at Ganymede, but she had no idea how close to his chest Zoetrope would keep his cards. They would just have to find out. Mikhail had been making noises about being the primary contact with Zoetrope, and Max had nixed that, but she didn't know what Mikhail would do once they arrived at Ganymede.

“Max, message from Tai, marked urgent.”

“Play, please.”

“Max, I hope your trip has gone well. We've analyzed a lot of the data that the Kurool

gave us about the Zeloso, and we can't say a lot. It's a bit of a confused hodge-podge. One thing we can say is that they found that the Zeloso are empathic and perhaps telepathic. The Kurool seemed to have spent some time theorizing the mechanism of this capacity—but they pointedly left their theorizing out of the materials they gave us.

“Anyway, what is clear is that this is how the Zeloso insert themselves into conflicts. They read the emotions of others around them, and also project emotions and thoughts that they think will manipulate others. Apparently, not all individuals are subject to this, but most of the Kurool seem to be, and they say that from what they have heard, most individuals of most species are subject to it. My suggestion is that if you are offered a chance to meet one of the Zeloso, do not take it! I hope this information will be helpful to you. I'm attaching the packet of some of the analysis we've been able to make so far. Good luck, Max!”

Good luck. Well, that was certainly what she needed, given this information. If Zoetrope is under the spell of these Zeloso, who knows what to expect. Max sighed, and started to read the packet of info that came along with the message. She was deeply engaged with reading when she heard a knock on her door. She got up and opened it, and saw Sky and Mikhail standing outside the door. Sky looked nervous, and Mikhail looked angry. Max was not looking forward to hearing what this was about.

Max said, “What's up?”

Mikhail glared at Sky, who said, “We need to talk. Let's go to the mess.”

“Alright.” Max followed them into the mess, where Sharron, Caitlyn and Niles were already sitting. She sat down, and Mikhail and Sky sat as well.

Sky started. “Max, Mikhail wanted to talk with you about how we will be communicating with Zoetrope.”

Max looked at Mikhail, and wondered what was going on.

“Well, I’m the official representative of MarsGov, and MarsGov is making the overtures to Zoetrope for an ostensible alliance with him. As an independent crew, the idea was that you would also join him for a time, long enough for all of us to get the intelligence we need on the presence and strength of the Zeloso. You are empowered to tell him whatever you want in order to help us accomplish this mission. Sharron’s role is a little more delicate—it’s hard to know how he will react to her presence.”

“I don’t trust either of you.” Max turned toward Mikhail, who had spoken those words in a very nasty tone.

“I understand that. Frankly, I don’t trust you, either. So we’re even. What is it that you are worried about, Mikhail?”

“That you will betray us.”

“Why would I do that? We have only one goal: to find out how much of a threat the Zeloso are to Mars, and to the system in general. I don’t care about anything else. I can’t imagine how we could possibly betray you in the accomplishment of that mission, unless you betray Mars somehow.”

“I don’t want you to be able to judge what betrayal is.”

Sharron said, “Mikhail, I understand how this is difficult for you, but really, we are not working at cross purposes. You can watch what we do.”

Sky said, “Mik, come on, Max and Sharron are reasonable people.”

Mikhail looked at Sky, and Max could tell by the way they looked at each other that they weren’t getting along anymore. Sharron had observed that the *Callista* crew were now in two factions, and Max could see it in everyone’s demeanor.

Max decided to play most of the cards she had in her deck. She said, “Look Mikhail, I really did my best to try to make sure that the four of you didn’t end up in jail, and to provide you with pay for this mission. I know you don’t like me, and I honestly don’t much like you. As long as you do what we’ve asked, which, frankly, isn’t much, we’re good. We were clear that if something didn’t feel right in working with Zoetrope even for a minute, you had the right to pull out and go wherever you wanted. But know this, Mikhail, if you screw us, everyone in MarsGov, including me, will happily produce you in particular to SolGov on a silver platter, and make sure that the rest of the *Callista* crew spends the rest of their days in an asteroid mine. Are we clear?”

Mikhail looked at Max with more hatred than she had ever seen on another person’s face. It made her physically draw back.

“Yes, Max, you have made it clear.”

Max realized that there was nothing she was going to be able to do to make him change his mind about her, or about this mission. Max knew that she certainly could not risk even telling Sky about the *Corinth*-class ships coming their way—it would absolutely be seen by Mik, if he were to find out, as betrayal. She needed to set Jane on the task of finding them alternative transportation home. With a crew this fractured, even though she trusted Sky, she could not be sure that Sky was going to prevail. And the time they had to get this mission done was much shorter than she’d anticipated. She was not hopeful.

When she and Sharron got back to their quarters they discussed the situation.

Max said, “Sharron, I’m going to give Jane the task of finding us alternate transport back to Mars. This mission is going to be short, and I’m not all that sure how much we are going to accomplish in the short time we have before SolGov is knocking on Ganymede’s door.”

“I know. The *Callista* crew is a disaster. And that Mikhail, he’s up to no good.”

“I agree. Well, I’ll keep you posted on what Jane finds.”

“Thanks, Max.”

Max heard Jane say, “Max, urgent encrypted message from Lindsay Ali on Pandora.”

She subvocalized, “Urgent? What’s in the message?”

“A bunch of image files, both still and moving, some transmission recordings, and a short voice message.”

“Play the voice message.”

“Max, it’s Lindsay. The weirdest shit ever just happened to me, and I sure hope you have a clue as to what it all means. Let me know what you think.”

She said to Jane, “Alright, then, Jane, let’s go through what she sent, shall we?”

Pandora, July, 2112

Lindsay swam awake, hearing her AI’s proximity alert. She got up quickly, and went to her workstation to see how far away the ship was. It was still almost 700 kilometers away.

She said to her AI, “Start constant imaging, and include remote spectroscopy. What direction is it going?”

“It is headed directly here.”

“Here?”

“Yes. And it is sending some high-frequency signals this way.”

“Any standard identity beacon?”

“Negative.”

“Play the signals, please.”

A relatively deep voice with the strangest accent Lindsay had ever heard said, “Hello, hello, I would like to meet you.”

She said to her AI, “Use the same frequency.”

“Transmission starting.”

“Hello, I am Lindsay Ali, Kuiper Exploratory, stationed here on Pandora. Who are you?”

“I am Koth.”

Well, that was enigmatic.

“Why are you using this frequency?”

“It is what I use.”

“Who are you working for?”

“I am Koth.”

She wasn’t getting anywhere.

She asked, “Where are you from?”

“The seventh planet.”

Well, that was useless. No one was from Saturn.

“You live on Saturn?”

“I am from the seventh planet.”

Lindsay shook her head. This guy was crazy. But he was flying one of the most interesting ships she’d ever seen. She couldn’t imagine it would harm her to meet him. She could handle herself. She remembered the bar brawl on the moon. She’d sent three guys to the hospital that night.

“Alright, do you want to dock?”

“Yes, I would like to meet Lindsay-Ali-Kuiper-Exploratory.” It was said as if it were all

one word. Oh, my, she thought. This was going to be interesting.

She watched as the ship got closer, and very deftly landed in close proximity to her docking ring. She'd never seen any flying quite like it. The ship's dock looked quite different than any she'd seen - it didn't seem as though it would fit, but a tube extended from his ship that ended up matching perfectly. She checked the airlock, and it was completely solid. She started cycling the air in the airlock, when her AI started beeping.

“High levels of Carbon Monoxide and Ammonia are present in the air of their ship.”

“What?”

“Levels dangerous for humans.”

“How is that possible?”

“The ship cannot have any human beings on it.”

“But... wait, possible explanations?”

“The ship could be of alien origin.”

“The Kurool?”

“The Kurool are not known to have ships of this type.”

“Can you prevent the CO and Ammonia from entering the habitat's atmosphere?”

“Yes.”

“Do that. Start internal imaging—I want this whole thing recorded. Open the door on my mark.”

Lindsay sat for a moment, getting ready for who knew what. Then, from out of nowhere, a thought came to her mind.

I need to open the door.

She knew she hadn't thought that - it was foreign. It felt foreign.

I need to open the door. What I want is through that door. My curiosity will be satisfied.

This was weird, very, very weird. She didn't like it one bit. It had the feeling of someone trying to manipulate her somehow. She was tempted not to go through with this—to tell them that she didn't want to meet them after all, but somehow, she knew she needed to know more. She opened the door.

A smallish animal that looked to be the love child of a cat and a kangaroo, but without a nose, and with nasty, nasty looking teeth, walked through the door. Alien, indeed. What in God's name did it want with her?

She heard a thought in her head. Different than the first. She could tell it was from the creature in front of her.

I am Koth.

She said, "Alright, then, Koth. You've met me." She was thinking furiously—what was she going to do?

You explore here.

It was not a question.

"Yes. I'm here trying to find precious metals for my company."

Metals. There are metals on Rhea.

Then came the same sort of compelling thought as the earlier thought: *I need to go to Rhea. I need to leave here, and get to Rhea.*

No she didn't! She had no intention of going to Rhea. There was nothing she needed there. What was going on?

Before she knew it, the creature had turned and run through the dock, and closed their side of the door. She had only a few seconds to tell her AI to shut her side, when the ship took

off. She was stunned. She collected her wits.

She said to her AI, “Please send everything, the first set of images, the second set, all internal recording, all recordings of the messages, everything, and send it to Max Julian on Mars, encrypted and marked urgent. Add the following note: ‘Max, it’s Lindsay. The weirdest shit ever just happened to me, and I sure hope you have a clue as to what it all means. Let me know what you think.’”

“Collecting... Sending... Done.”

She’d wait and see what Max had to say. She didn’t know what else to do.

Mars Colony One, July 2112

Gareth was on his way to a Xenoscience meeting. The team had been unusually busy analyzing the data that Max was generating about the presence of the Zeloso in the system, as well as the abundance of information from the Kurool. It wasn’t really up Gareth’s alley, but he was enjoying being a spectator.

Today, they had asked him to give his short presentation about the Turool/Jesus comparison that Sharron had planned to present to the team before the whole thing with the new aliens erupted. He wasn’t really looking forward to it. Sharron was better at talking with atheists and agnostics about theological topics than he was, surprisingly. He was good at listening, and being respectful of other ideas, but Sharron really excelled at explaining theological concepts to people who would rather not hear them. But he would do his best.

He walked in, and took his standard seat at the table. Curtis and Xiang were in animated discussion about something, and Rosalind and Abdi were busy at their tablets. Tai and Ted

hadn't shown up yet. Gareth took out his tablet, and started to review what he would be presenting.

Tai and Ted walked in together.

Tai said, "Alright, let's get started, shall we? We have a packed agenda. First, we have some new data from Max, apparently sent to her from Lindsay Ali, stationed on Pandora. Lindsay apparently has been in contact with the Zeloso. We need to add this new data to the analysis of the Kurool material we've gotten on the Zeloso. And, Gareth, we have the long-awaited presentation about your theological work on Turool."

Ted said, "Tai, can we postpone that? This is all much more important than theology." Ted always belittled the work of Gareth and Sharron.

Tai said, "No, Ted. I would like to hear it, and I head this lab. Gareth will give his presentation."

Gareth heard Ted sigh heavily. He decided, impromptu, to focus his presentation not on the analysis of the teachings, but on the analysis of what Turool said about Earth. That was pretty incontrovertible stuff. He chuckled internally. Sharron had originally had that as the focus of her presentation, and Gareth, in his arrogance, had changed it, since he thought that the comparisons of teachings were more important.

He listened with some interest as the team reviewed the new information from Lindsay. Gareth vaguely remembered meeting her at a party that Max and Tina had given at one point a few years ago, just before Max left for the Kuiper Belt. Then they gave each other sets of assignments, and surprisingly, Tai gave Gareth one.

"Gareth, can you dig through the teachings of Turool for any discussions of the Zeloso, and figure out whether there is any information there useful to us?"

Gareth nodded. “I’d be happy to. I haven’t studied those yet.”

Ted said under his breath, “Yeah, too busy making Turool like your silly Jesus.”

Tai glared at Ted, and he went silent.

They discussed the new data Max had sent about the number of possible Zeloso ships in the system, and a few other topics, and then it was time for Gareth’s presentation.

“Thank you, Tai, for this opportunity. Given how short the time is, I’m going to focus the presentation almost entirely on what Turool said about Sol and Earth. You can read our full analysis in the report I’ve sent all of you. Most of that has made it into the article that will be published in a few weeks.

“So as you know, most of the teachings of Turool were recorded by audio and video recording devices—they had that technology at the time. So we have very complete information about what Ze said. And you also know that the reason they sent the initial colony here, and they came after the nova, was that they were following Turool’s commandment to come here. So here is an outline of what Ze said.

“First, since they had a well-developed astronomical system by then, better developed than we had at a comparable time in our technology development, there is no question that Turool identified Sol as the star Ze commanded them to visit. Sol is a relatively bright star in their sky, and an important star of one of their major constellations. It’s as if someone here told us to visit Betelgeuse.

“Second, Ze said very specifically that the third planet had intelligent life, and that it was bipedal, instead of quadrapedal, as they were. Life that, Ze said, was violent, and in need of what they could teach them. Ze also said that they would not be able to live on the third planet, but the fourth might provide what they needed. Ze explained that at some point, those beings would be

in the position to possibly destroy them, and would attempt to do so.

“Remember, although they did have a well-developed astronomical system, they had not yet launched an orbital telescope, and I have been told their atmosphere would have been less hospitable to astronomical observation. There is no evidence that they were any further along in studying planets of distant stars that we were in the mid-20th century. In fact, although Turool’s new religion eventually swept the entire society, Ze did have his detractors at the time. One of the biggest points that these detractors made was that there was no way Ze could know what the planets of this star were like.”

Ted said, “OK, so ze happened to have guessed correctly. What’s the big deal?”

Gareth answered, “Ted, you have a statistical background, correct?”

“Yeah, so what?”

“What is the probability that you would be correct if you picked a random star, and guessed that oh, say, there was intelligent, insectoid life on the second planet of that star, and that it had an atmosphere poisonous to you?”

Ted was silent, and brooded. Gareth figured he’d hit the nail on the head.

“I was talking with one of the linguists about this, and he described to me what is called ‘Occam’s Razor.’ He seemed to think that Occam’s Razor would suggest that Turool had either been here, somehow, or somehow actually had information about Earth. There just isn’t a possibility that Ze could randomly guess that much that right.

“Sharron and I have a detailed analysis of the teachings of Turool compared to that of Jesus, but you can read them at your leisure. Suffice it to say that the comparisons are as impossible to happen by chance as this, and the combination of the two is simply unbelievable, but it’s all true.”

Tai said, “So your conclusion is?”

“Our basic conclusion is that Turol, who was born chronologically after Jesus died, was somehow connected to Jesus. He either was the same being, or was somehow in communication with Him. There isn’t any other explanation. Our theological conclusion is that Turol was the Son of God, incarnated as a Kurool.”

Gareth looked around the room. He knew that Tai had grown up as a Christian, as had Curtis, but neither were observant. Ted was the lone atheist, and Rosalind was agnostic, and an active Buddhist, as was Xiang. He knew that Abdi was an observant Muslim. They all looked very thoughtful, even Ted.

Xiang said, “Gareth, have you run this theory by the Kurool? They have more scientific knowledge than we do, and they might be able to come up with an alternate theory than your theological one.”

“I haven’t. That’s a good idea—I’d love to hear what they think of our theories.”

Tai said, “OK, everyone, we’re done here, and we all have our work cut out for us.”

Mars Colony One, July 2112

John was looking at his AI’s projection of when the *Callista* would get to Ganymede, and when the two *Corinth*-class ships would also arrive. It was much tighter than he’d wanted. Max and the *Callista* crew would have about a week before the ships arrived to get intel. And John made a bet that Zoetrope would likely find out about the ships before they arrived. He’d gotten the message from Max that things on the *Callista* were falling apart, and she had not shared with them her knowledge about the SolGov ships. John agreed with her cautiousness, but hoped that it

would not get her into trouble.

It had been a harrowing month since she left. SolGov had cut off all communication, and was basically back on a war footing with Mars. Marsies were up in arms about the inconvenience of the blockade, and Patrick had decided not to make the reasons public yet. SolGov wasn't spilling the beans, either. John and the rest of the Mars military had all of their development plans laid aside while they dealt with the SolGov threat. SolGov was saying basically that Mars had declared war on the asteroid belt, which was, of course, nonsense, and everyone on Mars knew it.

There wasn't really anything John could do at the moment—this all had to play itself out. Once Max had gotten as much intel as she felt she was going to get, they were going to decide when and how to make this all public. John was especially glad at this moment that they had a very sympathetic press contact in Tina, whose news outfit, *The Mars Monitor*, would get the scoop.

He heard a knock at his door, and he looked up to see his second in command, Colonel Joan Brosco, looking into his office.

“Colonel, what can I do for you?”

“Sir, you asked me for those reports on ship strength in the alpha sector of the belt?”

“Ah, yes, so I did. You could have just sent it to me.”

Colonel Brosco smiled. “But then you would not have gotten to see my face when I told you the good news.”

“Ah, good news! Come in, please, Colonel.”

“Thank you sir.” She sat down.

“So...”

“Remember that we’d put in that order for five new *Zoar*-class cruisers, and the company said they couldn’t get the parts, etc.?”

“Sadly, I do remember.”

“I managed to wrangle what they needed from Kuiper Exploratory’s ship factory on Tethys.”

John could see the self-congratulatory smile on Joan’s face. She deserved to congratulate herself—it would make their lives so much easier.

“And so that means we can expect those ships...”

“Within the year, sir.”

“And how much did this cost us?”

“Only 15% over what we would have needed to pay Strelax, Virgin, or Tata for the parts.”

“Well, you deserve some congratulations, Colonel. Thank you.”

“You are welcome, sir. And Kuiper Exploratory is happy to continue to get our parts business.”

“Are they now?”

“Yes sir.”

“That’s very good to know. Have you told...”

“Yes sir, he knows. He’s on it.”

John chuckled. At this rate, she’d have his job in a year or two.

“Thank you, Colonel. Anything else?”

“No sir. The full report is already in your inbox.”

“Why am I not surprised?” John smiled, and rose.

“Dismissed, Colonel.”

She rose, saluted, and left his office. Well, John thought, that was good news, for once. It might be considered to be too little, too late, but John had the sense that this conflict with SolGov wasn't going to be short-lived. Five *Zoar*-class cruisers, only one step down from *Corinth*-class, weren't anything SolGov could completely ignore. Further, the economics kept being in Mars' favor. The blockade made things much more expensive on Earth, and suppressed the economy, but for Mars, the blockade only made luxury items from Earth more expensive—everything else was made cheaper because of the lack of the insystem market. The economy kept doing better, and since Mars did govern about 1/3 of the belt, between the good economy, and taxes from that part of the belt, MarsGov was swimming in money. Now that they had a reliable parts supplier, more money meant more ships.

John really hadn't wanted to spend his time thinking about the long game of war with SolGov. He'd been more interested in building an interstellar exploration service. That would have to wait, but hopefully not for too long.

Ganymede Colony One, August, 2112

They left the shuttle, Max leading the group into the main spaceport area of Ganymede Colony One, Zoetrope's home base. Max was reminded of the moon as she carefully bounced down the tunnel from the shuttle dock. She turned to see Caitlyn take up the habitual long gait of someone born on the Moon. Max was never quite able to master it. As they exited the tunnel, Max saw several people gathered in a small knot on one side of the large room in dusty gray uniforms. They moved toward the group of the *Callista* crew. One of them, a tall woman with

ebony skin and very short-cropped hair loped forward, and reached out her hand. Max took it and shook.

“You must be Max Julian. I’m Commander Kaleen Creel. Zoetrope asked me to meet you and show you to your quarters. He would like to meet with you all in one hour.”

“Hello, Commander Creel. Thank you for the welcome.”

“It is an honor to meet someone of your stature.” Max was embarrassed.

“Well...”

“Don’t deny it, Ms. Julian. Zoetrope is very much looking forward to meeting you.”

Max could feel, more than see Mikhail fuming behind her. This was not what they needed now.

“Thanks. Anyway, can you show us to our quarters? I’d like to get a break before I meet General Zoetrope.”

Kaleen nodded, and seemed disappointed somehow. “Of course. This way.”

As they walked, Max was taking in the surroundings. The halls were gunmetal gray, with lots of doors, and the ceilings were only about six and a half feet high. It was all very spartan and utilitarian, and looked to be well-kept up. They arrived at a door, and Commander Creel waved her ident card, and the door opened to a hallway. She pointed to their individual rooms. They were all quite small. There was what looked to be a tiny bathroom at one end of the hall.

“I’ll meet you out here in an hour, and take you to see Zoetrope.”

Max nodded. “Thank you, Commander Creel.”

“Please call me Kaleen.”

“Alright. Thanks, Kaleen. See you in an hour.”

Max went through the door to her quarters, which was only slightly larger than the room

she'd just shared with Sharron over the last month. She stowed her belongings. It was time to talk with Jane.

She subvocalized, "Jane, status, please."

"The *Callista* is in safe orbit and there are no ships anywhere near it. SolGov's ships are about six days from Ganymede. The Kurool are about twelve days away."

"Any more results from your analysis?"

"No, Max. I've not received any more flagged data from the subroutines. I think we've probably found everything we're going to find."

"Jane, please wake me in fifty minutes."

"Acknowledged."

Max felt like a nap was in order.

As she walked in, Max looked around at the large room with the domed roof. This room was a stark contrast to the most of the colony that she'd seen so far. The view of Jupiter above was quite spectacular. On the far side of the room was a large desk, reminiscent of the desk that her old boss at Strelax had had in his office except that this one looked to be even older, if that were possible. Sitting behind it was a man who was a lot smaller than she had imagined. He had a large head, and thinning, straight jet black hair.

"Well, if it isn't Max Julian from Mars! Welcome to Ganymede!"

"Thank you, General Zoetrope."

"I am so glad that you have come. I am honored that Mars considers me an ally."

"Well, as you know, we need allies in the fight against SolGov, and I know that they are our common enemy. It seems that you have some resources that might come in handy."

“Indeed, I do. I do. Please, all of you, sit. Joseph, bring out the new vintage, would you please?”

Max saw a man nod briefly, and walk out of a door of one side of the huge room. She noticed that Zoetrope had not yet recognized Sharron.

“We grow grapes here on Ganymede. I have perfected the art of hydroponic grapes.”

Sky said, “Remarkable.” Max inwardly smiled. Sky understood what was needed.

“Yes, it is, actually. There is much remarkable about what I’ve done here.”

Max said, “So tell us more.”

“Well, we are beginning to build Colony Four, and I have a waiting list of emigrants from Earth and the Moon itching to start it. If there is one thing the outer system needs is manufacturing capacity, and that is my focus right now.”

Max nodded, playing the game. “Yes, the outer system really does need that capacity. Mars has been looking for reliable manufacturing partners.”

“Yes, yes, well, we’ll be able to be a partner like that soon enough.”

The man who had left came back with seven glasses and a wine bottle. Max could see the label on the bottle. A zoetrope, of course.

She took her glass with the dark purple wine, and sipped. It was quite good—as good as any wine Max had had before, which wasn’t actually saying much.

Sky said, “General, this is very nice wine.”

“Thank you. I take that as a great compliment from someone from Earth.”

“Well, my parents were great wine connoisseurs—Ecuador has some wonderful wineries.”

Max looked at Mikhail, who by now was glaring at Sky.

Zoetrope said, “So, my friends, you came all the way to Ganymede to talk with me. How can I be of assistance besides just promising to be a good manufacturing partner to Mars?”

Mikhail began to speak, but Max interrupted.

“First, we wanted to let you know that the *Callista* and its crew are at your disposal, General Zoetrope. And, as you know, Mars is in the fight of its life with SolGov. We couldn’t help but notice that you have a very powerful new weapon in your arsenal. We’d like to hear about it, and find out how to obtain one.”

Zoetrope looked surprised, then smiled thinly. “That weapon is not for sale.”

“We would like to hear more about it—how did you develop it?”

Max could tell that this subject was one that was touchy for Zoetrope. She didn’t expect him to outright explain anything, but this question clearly upset him for some reason. She decided to let it go.

“Actually, General, it’s fine. You say it’s not for sale, and I take you at your word. We’d just like to join you, and be of use in any way we can be.”

Max could see him relax. “Well, thank you. We could definitely use the *Callista* for some scouting—we lack good scouting ships. We need some intelligence about what is happening on Io and Callisto. We think that SolGov is gathering forces in an effort to dislodge me. You could go in the *Callista* without arousing suspicion, and find out.”

Max filed this away for investigation later. The fact that Zoetrope needed the *Callista* for pretty simple reconnaissance was interesting. It indicated something, but Max wasn’t quite sure yet what that was.

Mikhail said, “General, I’ll be happy to do that scouting for you.”

“And you are?”

“Mikhail Odeh, General.”

“Interesting name you have there.”

“I am half Russian, and half Yemeni.”

“Ah, I see. Yemeni on your father’s side?”

“Yes, sir. Very conservative family.”

They chatted amiably about family and such for another few minutes. Max observed that Zoetrope gave up absolutely no information about his own origins, but that wasn’t necessary. They already knew just about everything there was to know about Henry and his family. It was time for Sharron. Max looked at Sharron, and nodded.

Sharron said, “Do you remember me, Henry?”

Zoetrope looked at Sharron sharply.

“My name is not Henry.”

“I am Sharron Holbright. I was Sharron Snyder. Remember now?”

His face lost several shades of color. He said, quietly, “I am no longer Henry. Please call me Zoetrope.”

“Alright, I will.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I’m just a member of the crew. It took me a while to figure out who you were.”

Zoetrope looked uncomfortable. Max thought it had worked perfectly.

They left soon after, and went to the dining hall to get some dinner. As they sat around the table, no one spoke much, but finally Sky broke the silence.

“OK, so we’ll go scout Callisto, and come back in a couple of days. Max and Sharron, do you want to come along, or stay here?”

Max said, "I'll stay here. There's plenty to check out."

Sharron nodded. "Yes, I want to check out the place and hear what they are saying about Henry."

Sky said, "Alright. Crew, we leave at 0800 tomorrow morning." There were nods all around.

Max kept herself busy while the *Callista* crew was gone. She found all of the watering holes, and watched and listened. She overheard one very interesting conversation one evening, close to bar closing time. Both individuals were wearing the uniform of Zoetrope's army. One was a brawny Asian man, and the other was a thin light-skinned blond woman.

"I wish I didn't have to deal with them," the blond said.

The burly man said, "I hate the way they get into my head. But you seem not to hear them."

"I don't hear them at all. It's a little weird, since everyone else seems to."

"I've noticed Martin hears them, but doesn't seem to care what they say. I can't stop myself. I hate it."

Max realized that they were talking about the same phenomenon that Lindsay had experienced—Lindsay seemed to be like that Martin guy they were talking about.

"Well, it doesn't matter. They are going to help us take over the system."

The burly man laughed. "No they aren't."

"What do you mean?"

"I heard that something happened, and all of a sudden a bunch of ships left orbit to go back to Epimetheus. There are still some left, but not enough for us."

"You're kidding! If that's so we're..."

“Screwed. We can’t beat SolGov without them.”

“I don’t...”

“You need to find yourself an escape route. This Colony will be toast in a matter of weeks. I’ve booked passage back to Mars.”

They began to look as if they were leaving, so Max made herself busy looking at her beer, and subvocalizing.

“Jane, are there any surveillance monitors near Epimetheus?”

“Negative. It’s not a body of interest. It’s deserted.”

“Perfect place for an alien base, I think.”

“Yes, Max, it is.”

“What’s the closest surveillance monitor?”

“There are several in orbit around Mimas.”

“How close is Mimas to Epithemius now?”

“Opposite sides of Saturn.”

“Find the times when they were close. Look at the data from those surveillance monitors during those times.”

“Will do. I should have information for you within an hour.”

By the time she finished her beer, and got back to her room, Jane had the analysis done.

“Max, there is definite evidence of alien traffic to and from Epimetheus starting about ten years ago. The last time Epimetheus and Mimas were close was about one month ago, there were several ships coming and going from Epimetheus, almost all towards Jupiter. One ship was headed towards Pandora.

“Ah, the ship that came in contact with Lindsay.”

“I expect so.”

Well, Max definitely owed Lindsay some information. She'd responded to Lindsay with basically a “hold on, more coming later” message, but she'd been procrastinating, and then she decided to hand the decision over to Tai and John. Both had said that given that Lindsay had been in contact with the Zeloso, it made sense to just give her all of the information they had. When she got back to her quarters, she composed a video message to Lindsay.

“Hey, Lindsay, sorry it's taken me so long to finally fully get back to you. I had to kick the decision about whether or not to tell you everything up the chain of command, as it were. Just so you know, this is still classified, so I'd appreciate it if you kept mum for now—even to Kuiper Exploratory. I'm sending you a summary report of what we know that we prepared for some brass a few weeks ago, as well as some more recent information. It turns out that you're a lucky one. Most people are compelled by the Zeloso. A few can't hear them, and fewer still can hear them, but don't need to obey. If you hadn't been so special, you would have been on the next available ship to Rhea. I imagine they were going to destroy your habitat on Pandora while you were gone—it's the closest to their base on Epimetheus. Anyway, have a look at the data—it's pretty darned interesting. And we have quite a challenge on our hands, my friend. I hope you are still enjoying being on Pandora. Later.”

Ganymede One, August 2112

He heard/felt him. *I am in danger. Koth can no longer help.*

“Danger? What could be danger to you?”

My enemies of old draw near. Come here.

“They come here?”

Yes. Will be here soon.

“But I need you. You can’t stop helping us!”

I must retreat to the sixth planet.

Zoetrope was furious, and desperate. How could Koth stop helping him at this critical juncture? Without Koth, he knew he couldn’t even hold Ganymede, let alone push forward his plans of taking over Jupiter. He had to do something.

“If you stop aiding me, I will expose your presence here, and tell them where you are.”

He heard/felt a rush of thought that he did not understand. It was so strong that he was literally pushed back a few steps from Koth. He watched as Koth left through the small door hidden in a corner of his large office. He’d had that corridor made especially for Koth, and Koth had come and gone as he pleased. Well, some Koth. Zoetrope knew that he’d been visited by numerous individuals, but they all talked of themselves as Koth.

He assumed that Koth would relent and keep on helping him. They always did. He sat back down at his desk, and began to work on the plans for the next phase. Io was in his sights. Yes, here was a plan to take over Io, and controlling Ganymede and Io would probably give him enough leverage to then take over all of Jupiter.

He heard the sounds of footsteps approaching, and saw his assistant approach his desk.

“Yes?”

“General, Mikhail Odeh from the *Callista* would like to speak with you.”

“Is he alone?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Send him in.”

Zoetrope watched as the tall man with dark eyes walked toward him with deliberate steps. Zoetrope could see that he had a lot on his mind.

“Welcome, Mr. Odeh. I want to thank you for that scouting mission—very helpful information.”

“You are welcome, General.”

“How can I help you?”

“I have some critical information for you.”

Zoetrope looked at the man, and could see the plotting in his eyes. “I take it your colleagues don’t want you to share this information with me.”

“No. Max would have me thrown to the SolGov wolves if she found out I was talking with you.”

“I see. And what would you like in return?”

“I will work for you, and so will Caitlyn. I mean *really* work for you, not fake work for you like we are supposed to. You give us a salary, and a bit of a bonus, and we’re yours.”

“I see. Alright, that’s a reasonable trade. So part of your information is that you are not really working for me. I take it this means that Mars doesn’t really want to be my ally.”

“Yes. We were sent here to find out more about the aliens. Oh, and Sharron? She’s part of the Xenoscience team—she’s never been *Callista* crew, although it is sort of random that she happened to know you. She’s here to provide the implicit threat to you.”

Zoetrope was taken aback.

“How did they know?”

“The *Callista* was contacted by an old friend who said he had some alien artifacts to sell. We assumed they were fake, because they always were. We tried to meet him at the rendezvous

point, but his ship had been destroyed with a weapon we determined wasn't of human origin. When Max saw videos of the attack on Io, she recognized the weapon as being the one that destroyed our friend's ship."

"And Max told the Kurool?"

"Yes."

"I see."

Zoetrope thought a moment. First, he needed to get rid of Max and Sharron. Second, he needed to test this Mikhail, to see how loyal he was. He was forming a plan in his head.

"There is an old SolGov installation on the other side of the Nicholson Regio, right at the Khumbam crater. It has some sophisticated communications equipment I need. I want you to go out there with the whole crew, and while you are out there, kill Max and Sharron."

"I can take care of that."

"Good. I'll send you the specifications for the mission, and get you any gear you need."

"Send the specs to Max, please. I don't want her to suspect..."

"Of course, Mr. Odeh. I know how to be discreet."

Mikhail nodded, and turned and left his office.

Zoetrope returned to working out the details of the next phase. Yes, he was confident he could do it, as long as Koth cooperated.

Chapter 5

Ganymede Surface, August 2112

Max was sitting in a scrunched position inside the rover, with her helmet off. She was glad they'd been given a rover with atmosphere. It was small, but at least she wasn't going to be breathing her own recycled air for the five hour trip. She chuckled internally. No, just breathing the recycled air of herself and five other people!

They'd gotten this assignment from Zoetrope, and Max had noticed how Mikhail and Caitlyn seemed especially interested in what seemed to Max to be a routine mission that Zoetrope could have sent some teenager on. The mission frankly stank to Max, but Sky seemed willing to go ahead with it, assuming it was some sort of test. Max had asked Jane about the installation, which had been abandoned by SolGov five years before, because of cost-cutting. Several of the items that Zoetrope claimed to want were models that Jane said were manufactured *after* the installation had been abandoned.

Max relented, given that no one else seemed to smell the problem. It was nice to get out of the Ganymede colony and see a bit of the surface. She'd never been on one of Jupiter's moons before. The surface bore some vague similarity to Mars, but only vague. The surface of this part of the Nicholson Regio was pretty smooth, with a few hillocks and such they needed to climb over.

"Max."

"Yes, Jane," Max subvocalized.

"I have today's update on the position of the SolGov fleet, as well as the Kurool."

“Continue.”

“The SolGov fleet is decelerating, and should be entering Ganymede orbit in about 40 hours. The Kurool are about 72 hours out of Ganymede orbit.”

“Thank you, Jane.”

Max had no idea what was going to happen when SolGov showed up. Zoetrope would learn soon that they were coming, and so far, they hadn’t been able to learn a thing about the aliens. Max was beginning to realize that there just wasn’t going to be enough time. And further, they were here out in the middle of nowhere, on a dubious mission. Max was frustrated.

The rover suddenly slowed down, and came to a halt.

Mikhail said, “Something’s not working properly. Max, can you come with me outside? You can probably help me best with this.”

Max’s attention perked up. This did not sound right. Nilesch was the best of them technically and mechanically.

Sky said, “Hey, it’s a good time for a stretch, anyway. I’m going to come outside too.”

Sharron said, “I’m happy to stay inside.”

Mikhail said, “Thank you, Sharron. I’d appreciate it if everyone else stayed inside, too.” Mikhail’s voice sounded strained.

Sky said, “I’m coming outside, Mik. What’s the issue?”

Everyone had to put on their helmets anyway, because the rover didn’t have an airlock. Mikhail pushed the cover release locks, and Max heard the air sucked back into the recycling system before the cover was fully opened. She unfolded from her position, and stood up, and climbed out of the rover. Sky and Caitlyn followed.

Max heard in the suit comm, “Come over here, Max.”

“Sure.” Max bounced over to where Mikhail was, and followed him around the other side of the rover. She noticed Sky wasn’t following her, and looked back to see Caitlyn physically holding Sky back.

She heard in the suit comm, “Cait, what the…”

She was on instant alert, and put her hand inside her leg pocket where her weapon was. When she got around the rover, she was unsurprised to see Mikhail pointing a weapon at her.

“I’m sorry, Max. Zoetrope knows everything, and he wants you dead.”

“Mikhail, really, how is this going to help you? I didn’t tell you that SolGov is on its way here. Once they deal with Zoetrope, if they find you, you’ll be on the first shuttle to a prison asteroid.”

“Max, be quiet. Let me just get this over with.”

Just as he raised his weapon to shoot, she saw a blur behind him, and someone else in a suit tackled him. She saw his weapon fly out of his hand, falling about two feet towards her. She belatedly pulled out her weapon, pointing towards him. She saw the blur of someone else rushing toward her with a weapon drawn, and she turned and fired. The front of their suit erupted in flying plastic and blood, and they crumpled to the ground. Max turned, and saw Mikhail bounding quickly away, back toward Ganymede One. When she looked around and didn’t see anyone else, she walked back to the other side of the rover, and saw someone bending over someone else on the ground.

Max said into her suit comm, “Sky, Nilesh, Sharron?”

Max heard Nilesh in her suit. “Caitlyn shot Sky, Max. She’s dead.”

Max turned to see the person who’d saved her life walk towards her, and realized it must have been Sharron.

She said into the suit comm, “Sharron, that was brave. You saved my life.”

“When I saw what was happening between Sky and Caitlyn, I realized you were in danger, so I jumped out and ran around the rover.”

The adrenaline rush faded suddenly, and all that was left was a feeling of sadness. It was all so unnecessary. Sky was dead, Caitlyn was dead, Mikhail probably wouldn't have enough air to get back to Ganymede One. And then Max realized that they couldn't go back to Ganymede One. Zoetrope wanted them dead. They were in a pickle, for sure.

“Lesh, Sharron, I think the best thing we can do is to keep going to the installation. It will have enough air, water and food for us for a while, and we can strategize what to do from there.”

Nilesh said, “What should we do with Sky and Cait?”

“Let's bury them here.”

Nilesh, Sharron and Max worked for a couple of hours using the rover's digging attachments to dig graves for Caitlyn and Sky. The ground was very brittle, and it took a long time to get deep enough to cover the bodies. They did a brief ceremony, which Sharron led, and Max had Jane record the exact spot of the burials. Someday, Max would come back to lay a memorial stone or plate for Sky. She cried for a while, and was still crying as they climbed back into the rover, and went to the installation.

It was easy to get in—Jane had figured out a way around the security lockouts, and they all gratefully took off their suits after a few minutes, when the atmosphere had fully become breathable.

Nilesh said, “Fuck, what a nightmare.”

They all hugged for a minute.

Sharron said, “I'm sorry about your crew, Nilesh.”

“We were bound to break up after this mission, but I couldn’t have imagined Mik defecting like that. And trying to kill Max? And Cait...”

Max said, “It’s hard to fathom. But Zoetrope got to them, somehow.”

“So what are we going to do?”

Max said, “I’d like to take the *Callista* back to Mars, if we can, so we need to find someone willing to pick us up here. Jane has put out some feelers, and I’m waiting to hear back from her.”

Nilesh said, “OK, I guess I can be patient. I’d like to take the *Callista* back myself. I’m glad you know how to pilot—the *Callista* requires a crew of at least three. Sharron, you’re going to get to learn some cool things—we’ll need every hand.”

Sharron looked a little nervous. “I’ll do my best.”

Max heard Jane say, “Max, Ganymede One is under attack.”

“What? SolGov arrived already?”

“No, Max. Ganymede One is under attack by the Zeloso. Ganymede One has been destroyed.”

Ganymede One, August, 2112

Zoetrope took his time dressing before the big strategy meeting. He liked to keep his lieutenants waiting a little—keep them on their toes, so to speak. As he buttoned the last button and made sure his shoes were free of scuffs, he thought again about how far he had come. Indeed, God had big plans for him. First, Jupiter, then... the universe was the limit.

He thought for a moment back to his old friend Sharron. He had indeed been nervous that

she would expose that he was just Henry Gardinia, a nobody and failure from Pennsylvania. He hoped that Mikhail would take care of things.

He left his spacious quarters, and walked to the conference room, flanked by two guards. As usual, he stopped a few meters from the door, and listened via his cochlear implant to the conversation in the conference room.

“Koth’s ships are gathering in some sort of weird formation in orbit—not their usual holding patterns.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it too much. Koth is unpredictable.”

“I’m not happy with our relationship with them.”

“They are why we are in charge on Ganymede, how can you not be happy?”

Zoetrope decided it was time to interrupt. He knew who liked Koth, and who did not. He soon would rid himself of those who didn’t. As he walked in, there was complete silence in the room. He sat down. Zoetrope smiled, in control. He looked around the table at his lieutenants, and imagined that Mikhail Odeh among them. Yes, if Mikhail managed to kill those Martian agents Max and Sharron, that would be a nice reward and surprise. Mikhail would be loyal to Zoetrope from then on.

Zoetrope said, “We are in position. Koth is on their way, and you should launch in five hours for Io. Targeting the two SolGov military stations first, destroy the communications satellites, then go in for the kill. Once you take over Io One and Two, we’ll be well on our way to victory over Jupiter.”

He looked around at the lieutenants, all of whom were nodding their heads. The Koth gave him confidence that they could win. He was just beginning to think about what owning Jupiter meant. It meant that Mars and SolGov would have to deal with him as an equal, finally.

“General Zoetrope!” One of his lieutenants looked up from his tablet.

“What?”

“Koth...”

At that moment, Zoetrope heard a deafening noise, and felt a deep shudder. The glasses and mugs on the table rattled and shook, and alarm bells went off. He heard another deafening sound, this time much closer. He got up, as did all of the lieutenants.

“To your posts, SolGov must be...”

“No, General, it is Koth attacking!”

“That cannot be! They wouldn’t...”

Zoetrope’s last sight was of a beam of light, slicing into the conference room, destroying everything it touched. His last thought was regret, regret that he’d never get to build the zoetrope of his dreams.

Ganymede Surface, August 2112

Max subvocalized to Jane, “Send a priority encrypted message to John on Mars. Tell him that Nilesh, Sharron and I were not in Ganymede One when it was destroyed, and that we are safe, Sky and Caitlyn are dead, and Mikhail is missing, presumed dead. Tell him that we’re stranded without a shuttle back to the *Callista*. Send him all the logs, and ask him to tell SolGov the story. Maybe they’ll pick us up here, if we’re lucky.”

Max said aloud, “I just told Jane to send John a message. He needs to hear from us that we’re alive when he hears that Ganymede One got destroyed by the Zeloso. I don’t want to think about what he, Tina and Gareth will think when they find out that Ganymede One is toast.”

Nilesh said, “You know, Zoetrope and Mikhail’s plot to assassinate you is what saved our lives. Ironic, huh?”

Max replied, “I don’t quite know what to think of that.”

They spent several hours wandering around the installation, figuring out what was there, and what would be useful. Sharron was following Nilesh’s lead on what to look for, and Max was busy sorting through the surveillance files for the last several years, looking for any anomalies, mostly just out of curiosity, when Nilesh came running towards her.

“Max, there’s a shuttle!”

“A shuttle?”

“Out there is a tiny shuttle bay, and there is a small shuttle in it. Barely big enough for three. I’ve been running tests. It may well be spaceworthy.”

“Fuel?”

“There is some fuel in storage here, and some in the shuttle. I think there are enough units to get us to the *Callista*.”

“You *think*?”

“I’ll do the calculations and make sure, of course.”

“Thank you. I’d rather not die an ignominious death of running out of fuel after having managed to escape an assassination attempt and a destroyed colony.”

Nilesh smiled. “I can understand that, my friend. Oh, and Sharron has been really useful, and is quite enjoying herself. She’s fun to work with.”

Max nodded. “There’s more inside that gal than she thinks.”

As Nilesh walked away, the full weight of the loss of Ganymede One became clear to her. She didn’t have friends there, but there had been twenty-five thousand people living in

Ganymede One. She assumed most of them didn't survive. Why would the Zeloso destroy it after they had become allied to Zoetrope? Max wondered if she'd ever know the answer to that question.

Later, as they were eating dinner, Nilesh said, "So, we're all set. There is more than enough fuel to get us to the *Callista*. We've got about three more hours of testing and repairs to do, and then we can get the hell out of here."

Max said, "That will be just in time. The SolGov ships are due to arrive in 20 hours. I'd love to be out of here before they arrive."

"Yes, I'd rather be on my way back to Mars about then."

"How much room is there in the shuttle for cargo?"

"Not much, since we've got three people. No more than a hundred kilos, to be safe."

"OK, I'll start gathering up the stuff that might be useful."

Sharron said, "Can I help, Max? The shuttle testing stuff is out of my league."

"Sure thing."

When the shuttle was ready and packed, they all got in. It was small—smaller than her old asteroid hunting ship. There were two main seats, a jumper seat, and instrumentation where there wasn't seat. She looked out, and could see the little shuttle bay doors.

"Nilesh, do you know how to..."

"Took care of that." He pushed a button on one of the panels, and the doors opened to the sky.

"Let's get out of here." Max set the take-off thrusters to maximum, and put in the coordinates for the *Callista*. The take-off was gentle, Ganymede's gravity was a bit less than that of the moon, so it was easy to get out of orbit. She watched the viewscreen as the surface of

Ganymede below them retreated, and the installation they had left got smaller and smaller.

Once in orbit, their path to the *Callista* would take them over Ganymede One, so Max swung the shuttle 180 degrees so that the moon was above them. As Ganymede One floated above them, they could see how utterly destroyed it was. There were a few outlying domes that seemed to have been spared, although those in them wouldn't last long without the resources of the main dome. The main dome was completely open to space, and there was debris spread everywhere. Max could see whole neighborhoods open to the sky, and others completely turned to ash.

Sharron said, "Oh my God. That's terrible."

Nilesh agreed. "They were serious."

Max asked, "I don't get it. Why would they do this?"

Nilesh answered, "I bet the Zeloso got a wind of the Kurool coming, said something to Zoetrope, and he pissed them off—maybe threatened them?"

"Ah, that's a reasonable bet. He's the sort that would do something that stupid. The bad news is that they have enough firepower to destroy a decent-sized colony. I don't like that."

"I bet that's the best they have, though."

"May well be, but it still isn't going to make anyone happy. We have to find a way to communicate with them."

"Well, it sounds kind of unlikely that we could communicate with them."

"Why? Zoetrope certainly did. I'm thinking that maybe we should head to Saturn instead of Mars. Jane has identified the most likely location of the Zeloso base—it's on Epimetheus."

"Epimetheus? That's a tiny little rock, barely more than an asteroid, with nothing of value in it! Nobody cares... ah, right, of course. Is this a good idea, Max?"

“It’s the only one I’ve got, Niles. We need to talk to the Zeloso before they do any more damage to the system.”

“They might kill us in the process.”

“I know, it’s a risk we’ll need to take. That is, if you’re game.”

Niles said, “I’m game, I’m game. I’ve already managed to escape death twice in one week. What’s one more? Sharron?”

She said, “Yes, count me in! This has been a disturbing combination of harrowing and fun.”

They laughed, and then Max saw the *Callista* growing in size in the window, and smiled. She’d never thought that the *Callista* would be a welcome sight.

She jutted her chin toward the ship. “You going to keep her, Niles?”

“Nah. Once we get to Mars, I’ll sell her. I’m looking forward to settling down, maybe finding a boyfriend. Haven’t had one of those in too long.”

Max smiled. She was way overdue in sending a message to Tina. That was going to be her first task once on the *Callista* again.

Mars Colony One, August 2112

John sat in his office, looking over the latest personnel reports. The nice thing about the Mars military was that there was no shortage in recruits. They had many more recruits than they did ships to place them in, so there was a rather long waiting list of applicants, some of whom would likely get too old before they could be allowed to enter the service. SolGov had always been lacking in recruits.

His AI signaled an urgent message, and he indicated to accept it.

“Major General, this is Lieutenant Sanders from Communications. I wanted to let you know that we have received information that Ganymede One has been destroyed.”

“Destroyed? By whom?”

“That is unclear, sir. The SolGov ships are too far away. I’ll have visual images soon.”

“Thank you Lieutenant.”

“Certainly, sir.”

John didn’t quite know what to do. If Ganymede One was destroyed, that certainly took care of the Zoetrope problem, but that meant they’d lost Max and Sharron in the process—and any hope of figuring out what was going on with the Zeloso. He looked to see another urgent message, this time from Jane, Max’s AI. It was in text. She was fine, and hadn’t been at Ganymede One. John breathed a sigh of relief. He sobered when he read further. Sky and Caitlyn were dead, and she, Niles and Sharron were stranded at an old SolGov installation.

There wasn’t much he could do for them from here. The closest Mars Military ship was weeks away from Ganymede. He was sure they would figure something out before then, but he sent a message to Colonel Harold in logistics to get a small ship going toward Jupiter anyway, just in case. He also fired off a quick message to Tina, who was sure to hear about Ganymede One faster than just about anyone else, and Gareth as well, so that he’d know his wife was safe.

He wasn’t sure what the right next steps were. The last report from Max about the analysis of the surveillance data over the years had suggested activity around the moons of Saturn. Luckily, Mars was still friendly with the Governors of the Titan and Rhea colonies. He composed a message to Patrick, outlining a plan. He’d run it by Max, of course, since she was central to the idea, and had to agree to it. The more he thought about it, the more it seemed like it

might work.

Later, he sat with Tina in the apartment she shared with Max, having dinner.

“I’m glad she’s safe, John. Thanks for sending me that message. It came a scant minute before the news of Ganymede One hit.”

“I figured you’d hear about it quickly.”

“We got some very interesting images—looks like the same exact weapon that attacked the base on Io. Our editors are writing up a story, but it’s hard for me since I know exactly what’s going on, and the public doesn’t.”

“I know, I’m sorry Tina. I’m hoping we can make this public soon.”

“SolGov is blaming Mars for it.”

“They know it wasn’t us. First, they accuse us of partnering with Zoetrope to take over the outer system, and then they blame us for the destruction of Ganymede One? Not very logical. But they are afraid of people hearing about the new aliens, and they know we won’t say anything until we know more. No one believes them, anyway.”

“So, you’re going to make this public after you and Max contact the Zeloso, aren’t you?”

“Tina!”

“I know you, and I know Max. Whose idea was it? Max’s, right?”

“Well, actually, we both came up with it. Before I could send her my idea, she sent me her idea—basically the same.”

“You two...”

“Look, she seems to be a lucky one—she managed to escape death on Ganymede not once, but twice. And I’ll be her backup. We’re an unbeatable team, Tina.”

“But this... I know she’s the best choice. She’s out there anyway, and she’s experienced,

and smart, blah blah. But I want her home, here, now, not out there chasing deadly aliens.”

“I understand, I do, Tina. But this is important—more important than anything since the Kurool.”

“I know.” Tina sighed. “Anyway, I’m pretty busy dealing with the stories around the embargo. We’d hoped it might end soon, but with this, who knows how long they will want to maintain it.”

“Luckily it hasn’t hurt our economy much.”

“Yes, but it is making life difficult for a lot of people who depend on traveling back and forth.”

They talked about life on Mars for a while, then John took his leave to go back home. Patrick was sitting on the couch, watching the news.

“Ach, what a mess,” he said as John sat down next to him on the couch.

“Yes, a mess it is indeed. But I think we will get something out of this.”

“I hope you are right. President Prak has been sending conciliatory messages to me lately.”

“At the same time as SolGov is publicly blaming Mars for the destruction of Ganymede One?”

“He knows no one believes it—it’s politics, John. He’s just happy the Zoetrope problem was handled.”

“Along with twenty-five thousand deaths? What an asshole.”

“John, relax. I think he mourns, really, I do. I think he’s just making the best of the situation. That’s what politicians do, you know.”

“Ugh. I’m glad you’re not the typical politician.”

“Well, I’m not so glad you’re going off to Saturn.”

“It will be fine. Max and I are old hands, right? You’ll be too busy governing, anyway.”

Patrick smiled, and John relaxed. He didn’t want to talk anymore, so just as Patrick was about to speak again, he turned to sit straddling Patrick, put his hands on both sides of his head, and gave him a long, passionate kiss. John felt Patrick relax underneath him. It was going to be a nice evening before he leaves for a while, John thought.

Callista, August 2112

“Jane, plot a course to Epimetheus. How long will it take us to get there?”

“One hundred and twenty-two days, Max, Saturn and Jupiter are very far from each other right now. Also, I would suggest that we aim for Janus, not Epimetheus.”

“Why?”

“Janus and Epimetheus are co-orbital. They are currently approaching each other. If we go to Janus, we may be able to observe the Zeloso without being detected for a while.”

“That sounds reasonable. Explain the co-orbital behavior of those two moons, please?”

Jane talked about how the moons were discovered in the 20th century, and thought to be only one moon for a while, and how they behaved according to the “circular restricted three-body problem” of classical physics. Max put a note in her tablet to research that.

“Ready for a long trip, Nilesh? It looks like this mission might end up being almost a year long.”

“Yeah, let’s get this party started.”

“Jane, engage. Let’s get out of here.”

“Leaving Ganymede orbit. We’ll start thrust for Janus in ten minutes.”

“Acknowledged.”

They had gotten fuel at the Ganymede fuel depot, then stopped briefly at the Ganymede station, which was serving as a refugee point for the several thousand who had managed to survive the destruction of Ganymede One. It had been chaotic, and getting supplies had been a challenge, but a message from Patrick to the manager of the station had helped. They were now fueled up, and had enough supplies for quite a long time.

Max had never been to Saturn. On both of her trips out to the Kuiper Belt, Saturn hadn’t been near. Like the Kuiper Belt, Saturn was part of the wild west of the solar system. There were very few established colonies, and those were small, and generally rough and tumble. Titan and Rhea had the only really viable colonies in the Saturn system, even though Saturn had a ton of moons. There was an outpost of Kuiper Exploratory on Iapetus, and some fly-by-night exploratory outposts on some of the smaller, outer moons, but the inner moons were largely untouched. She remembered Lindsay, who she’d gotten to know a few years before. She had been stationed on Pandora, a tiny little ball of ice in the F-ring. Max was excited to get to see Saturn, and hopeful, but scared about the mission.

Based on Jane’s research, and the data from the Kurool, they knew which frequencies the Zeloso used. When they were ready for contact, they would start sending out messages of peace and communication in English and Chinese, on those frequencies. They figured the Zeloso must know some human language by now, even if it was rudimentary.

And they had their ace in the hole, she hoped. She’d sent a message to Lindsay, asking if she’d meet them on Janus, and be part of the contact team. Since Lindsay was the one they knew for sure couldn’t be compelled by the Zeloso, Max thought she was a necessity for the team.

Things at home seemed to be calming down. There had been no more attacks on any colonies on Ganymede, and it seemed from surveillance monitors that a large group of Zeloso ships were headed back to Saturn ahead of the *Callista*. Max bet it was the last of the ships they had in the Jupiter system. Jane said that those ships would arrive at Epimetheus in about forty days—three times as fast as the *Callista* could travel. Max had to wonder what kind of fuel and propulsion system could get them going that quickly. It certainly wasn't fusion.

Tina had been very unhappy that Max was off to Saturn, rather than returning home. Max could understand—she'd almost gotten herself killed, after all. But here she was, alive and well. And, now that she thought of it, enjoying being in space. It came as a little bit of a surprise to her—she was liking it after all.

They got into a rhythm on board. She did most of the piloting, except when she was asleep—Jane took over then. Nilesch kept the *Callista* in good shape, with Sharron's help. In their spare time, they played cards, and talked about news of home. Nilesch had the unfortunate job of telling Sky and Caitlyn's next of kin what had happened to them. He also couldn't help but obsess about what happened to Mikhail. They were discussing it one day over a game of gin rummy.

Max said, "Lesh, face it, he's got to be dead. Look, he couldn't have had more than fifteen hours of oxygen in his tank—that was the limit. The closest structure with air was the installation we were at, and we were there for more than fifteen hours, so even if he followed us and waited for us to leave, it's impossible that he didn't run out of air before we left. The next closest structure was Ganymede One, and it was destroyed. Further, I don't think he could have walked there in less than fifteen hours, even at .14g."

"But then why did he run?"

“Because he realized that it was that, or be captured or killed by us?”

“I don’t know—it doesn’t seem like Mik. Mik would have a plan B.”

Sharron asked, “Did plotting to kill me and Max seem like Mik?”

Nilesh answered, “It’s true, the whole thing didn’t seem like Mik. He could be problematic, for sure, and I knew he was getting to the end of his rope with Sky. But still...”

“I don’t think we’ll ever know.” Max lay down her cards. “Gin.”

Sharron groaned. “Damn, I just needed one card.”

A few days later, Max was listening to a message from Tai back on Mars. It was in response to her full report about the surveillance monitors that she and Jane had analyzed, the number and types of ships, and every other bit of information collected on this mission so far.

“Max, you’ve given us a lot to chew on. I think we’ll be analyzing that ship data for a long time. I’m glad it’s you going out there. You know John is coming out with an *Acheron*-class ship, and I’m sending Xiang and Rosalind with him. John agrees that you should not meet with the *Zeloso* until that ship arrives at Janus. You’ll need the support. Because of the more favorable position of Mars, it should reach you only a few days after you get to Janus.”

Max felt mixed about the new people on the mission. On one hand, he was right—she needed the support, and she was quite glad that John was coming as well. The idea of just the four of them pulling this off, even with Lindsay, was sort of crazy, and she was glad someone recognized that. On the other hand, she didn’t get along with Xiang so well, and wasn’t looking forward to working with him. She started to record her response.

“Thanks, Tai. Glad to hear we’re getting support. We’ll hold off on any action until the two crews are together and in sync. I’m looking forward to hearing what you think of Jane’s analysis of the ships from the surveillance data.”

Mars Colony One, August, 2112

Gareth watched the message from his wife with some bemusement. God was good. She had avoided death, once at the hands of that Mikhail character, and also because she hadn't been at Ganymede One when it was destroyed.

She seemed to be a new woman. Not only had she saved Max's life, but she had been enjoying herself learning new things about traveling in space. Apparently Niles had taken her on as something of an apprentice, and she was learning a lot.

He was happy for her—happy that perhaps she'd really found what gave her joy. It wasn't his thing at all, but that didn't matter. He was glad that she was in her element. He should have seen it coming. She was always the technical one of the house, the fix-it person, and on Mars, she had gotten herself involved in all sorts of things he didn't understand. He just wished that she hadn't been in so much danger.

Gareth started to record his reply.

“Dear heart, I am so glad to find out that you are safe and sound, and that you are on the *Callista*. I know that you'll be away for much longer than you expected, now that you going all the way to Saturn. I'll miss you, but I can tell that you are happy, which makes me happy.

“I am on my way to meet with the Kurool. I am glad that the journal accepted our paper, but I feel that it would be irresponsible for us to publish it without some sort of official commentary from the Kurool. I have already spoken at length with Kloft about my theory, and ze is willing to compose some sort of companion piece. We're going to speak about it in detail today. I look forward to hearing zir thoughts on our theories.

“I love you, and miss you, and I am praying for your safety every day. Be well.”

He left their apartment, and walked to the transport tubes to take a train to the shuttle depot. He was being joined this trip out by Ted and Xiang. He met them at the shuttle depot, and the three of them got into the shuttle to the Kurool Colony.

He liked meeting with the Kurool—they were such good hosts, and they were truly interested in everything he had to say. They went out of their way to find answers to questions that he asked. Gareth could hardly believe that humans would have done better in the same situation.

The shuttle docked with the Kurool colony, and he, Ted, and Xiang got out.

Xiang said to the pilot, “We’ll be leaving in about three hours.”

The pilot nodded, “I’ve got a run from Colony Three to one of the outposts. I’ll be back for sure by then.”

They walked into the tube leading to the area that both humans and Kurool could work in together. He grabbed a mask, and donned it, and indicated to Xiang that he was ready. They opened the door into the large shared dome.

Three Kurool were there to greet them: Droat, Kloft and Jorat. Although Gareth had spoken a lot to Droat, Kloft was really the theologian among them.

Droat said, in the familiar treated voice, “Welcome. We are happy that you have come again. I know you have some very specific questions.”

The three of them sat in chairs, Ted and Xiang took recordings and made notes. The Kurool took their usual relaxed position: their bodies sat on top of their folded legs.

Gareth started. “I take it you’ve had time to read the paper?”

Kloft said, “We have. We have a few... clarification questions for you.”

Gareth said, "Go ahead."

"We don't understand who the 'Son of God' is to you. For us, what we would call 'God' isn't of a nature to have children. Anything that can have children is by definition imperfect, and perfection is what we understand."

"To most Christians, the 'Son of God' was basically the incarnation of God on Earth, in the form of the historical man, Jesus. When he died, and was resurrected..."

"Resurrected? I don't understand that word."

Gareth heard Ted snicker. He ignored it.

"It means to come alive after death. For us, we believe that Jesus was killed, then became alive again."

"How is this possible? Does this happen often on Earth?"

Ted laughed. Gareth glared at him.

"No, only Jesus was resurrected. He was special, because, basically, He was God. He had the power to resurrect others, and He resurrected one person in His life that we know of."

"Ah. I see. Keep going, please."

"He eventually went back into heaven..."

"Heaven?"

"It's a place that many Christians believe exists, that we go to when we die. A different place than Earth. An idyllic place. The place where God lives."

"I see."

"Jesus forms one third of what we call the 'Triune God.'"

Droat said, "This is all very strange, I hope you don't mind all of the questions."

Gareth said, "No, no, not at all. In fact, my colleague Ted here would probably agree with

you about how strange it is.”

Kloft said, “So if I am to understand what you are proposing correctly, you are saying that this Jesus, who died, came alive again, and then became God again, became the Kurool Turool.”

“Well, in outline, yes. The theological particulars would be stated a little differently.”

Kloft paused. “Your cosmology is much more... limited than we thought.”

Xiang said, “Kloft, Gareth’s cosmology is only one of many. For instance, my tradition, Buddhism, has a completely different cosmology, and the Buddha, who is the one we follow, was completely human. We think that people are reincarnated into different beings. From my cosmology, Jesus perhaps was reincarnated as Turool.”

“Ah. I see. So they are not consistent?”

Ted said, “Basically, all of the religious cosmologies are mutually exclusive.”

Gareth said, “Ted, that is not true—in fact there are many similarities. You deride all of them without knowing any of them.”

Kloft asked, “Ted, what is your cosmology?”

Ted answered, “I’m an atheist. Life arose on Earth, and other planets, relatively randomly, and evolved through complex, but completely natural, impersonal means. When people die, their molecules are scattered, and nothing of their personality remains. Any attempt to suggest otherwise is not supported by science.”

Kloft said, “Ah, well, that’s quite limited as well. And by supported by science, I’m assuming you are talking about human science?”

Gareth laughed, and said, “Oh, snap!”

Droat looked at Gareth. “Snap?”

Gareth smiled. "It is a figure of speech, Droat. Don't worry about it."

Kloft spoke again. "Gareth, given your limited concept of what you call 'God', and the theological concept of Jesus as part of God, I would say that it would be quite reasonable for you to come to that conclusion. Xiang, your conclusion would be consistent as well. We have not yet had a chance to digest all of your analysis, but we do agree that the only possible conclusion to draw is that Turool either knew this Jesus of yours and was in communication with him, or was this Jesus. There isn't any other alternative that we think works with the data."

Gareth was largely satisfied by that answer, but he couldn't shake the feeling that he was being thought of as a child.

"Is there anything more you can add?"

"I'm sorry, Gareth, we can't. It will take us years to fully theorize how these two beings were connected. And you are well over a thousand of your years behind us in math, physics and biology, so none of you yet would be able to understand whatever theory we came up with. Imagine if someone from an era a thousand years ago asked you a question that you could only answer with your quantum physics of today. That's what we face."

Ted whistled. "Back then, they still thought the Earth was flat. Fuck."

Gareth asked, "You have said that you wish to be careful, that you don't want us to get ahead too fast. I can certainly understand that. I hate to think what humankind would do with the knowledge you hold. But there has got to be a way for us to slowly learn this. I want us to finally be able to understand the universe as you do."

Droat said, "We've been thinking about this a great deal, Gareth. We have a suggestion."

Gareth said, "Please, go ahead."

"We think that a colony close by, and eventually connected, should be built, where

human children and Kurool children could learn side by side. We would have to choose both the parents and the children quite carefully, and collaboratively, but we think that those children might have a chance to learn a small part of what we know.

“But we also need to make sure that those children are brought up with the teachings of Turool. Otherwise, we would not be willing to trust this knowledge with your species.”

Ted said, “That’s a tall order, Droat.”

“Yes, it is. But I think it can be done. And in a few hundred years, we will finally be at the same level.”

Xiang said, “That long?”

Gareth knew several things at once. First, he was going to spearhead this effort. Second, he got the definite sense that the Kurool were evangelists for Turool. This didn’t really surprise him, or bother him, given that he’d concluded Turool was really Jesus. Third, his brother might be more prescient than he’d given him credit for, because Gareth indeed was going to start a new religion.

Pandora, October, 2112

Lindsay sipped her tea while she debated her options. Kuiper Exploratory had just sent her a message telling her they were firing her, but not because she hadn’t done her job well. In fact, she had done her job too well. She had tried the hardest she knew how to find value in the rings, and came up empty. KE didn’t want to spend any more money on her, or this effort, and she could understand. They’d given her a nice little going away bonus. They said that she was welcome to stay on Pandora as long as she could afford it, and she was tempted to stick around a while.

But she'd also gotten that bolus of data and information from Max about the creatures they were calling the Zeloso, and she was greatly intrigued. She'd just gotten delivery of her shuttle, so she could meet Max on Janus, and help with contact with the Zeloso. Lindsay thought it would be a fun way to end her time on Saturn.

She realized there was no way she would have imagined a few years ago in searching for a way to escape her ex-stepmother that she'd end up where she was, and doing what she was about to do. And, she realized that she was having a whole lot of fun. The weirdness of the contact with the Zeloso had worn off some, and she was intrigued about what might happen next.

Well, she had some work to do. She had to mothball the habitat, pack all of her stuff, and make it to Janus. Max would arrive at Janus in about 40 days, enough time for her to take care of everything here. She'd miss Pandora, and perhaps sometime she'd be able to return for a little vacation, or something.

She had done a lot of work on the habitat, and she had to consider what equipment she wanted to take with her to Mars, and what equipment could stay. She had already scoped out several isolated habitats on Mars—she liked living alone, and she liked the idea of braving Mars on her own—it was a lot cushier than being on Pandora, that was for sure. She had already put an offer in on one of the best she'd found, a small cave and dome complex, about 1000 square meters, and the beginnings of a small agriculture operation. It was located near Aesacus Dorsum and had a spectacular view of Hecates Tholus. The only drawback was that it was pretty far off the beaten path. She'd have to buy a long-distance Mars rover—the trip to the nearest colony, which was Colony Three, would take thirty hours over land. But that wasn't so bad, and the complex had real potential. She hoped she'd be the winning bidder.

Atreyu, October, 2112

Xiang sat in the seat next to John. He'd been largely useless as a co-pilot, but it didn't matter. The *Atreyu*, the Acheron-class transport that they were taking from Mars out to Janus, basically flew itself. It had the most sophisticated AI that John had ever encountered, save for Max's "Jane." And John knew that "Jane" hadn't been quite so sophisticated before Max got her hands on it.

Xiang commented, "I have to say, I've never really enjoyed space travel."

"Really?" John asked. "Why did you choose Xenoscience?"

"I was a *theoretical* Xenoscientist, until the Kurool showed up and made the theoretical not so theoretical anymore."

John chuckled.

"What's so funny?"

"Well, it seems to be a case of 'be careful what you wish for.'"

Xiang laughed out loud. "Yes, yes, you are quite right about that, aren't you?"

John hadn't really warmed to Xiang yet. He was overly formal, but not in the familiar military way—in some different way that John couldn't really quite get his head around. And it didn't help things that Max, who was basically John's best friend, didn't get along well with Xiang. While Max was busy supporting John in his relationship with Patrick, John had to listen to Max complain about how hard it was to work with Xiang. John could see why.

But they had at least been pleasant and civil, and Xiang had been willing to follow John's lead. They were about ten days out from Janus, where they would meet Max and her friend Lindsay, and plan their contact procedure. He wasn't quite sure what was going to happen or how they were going to pull this off, but everyone realized the necessity of making contact with

the Zeloso, and letting them know that they'd been found out. They needed to find out what the Zeloso wanted, and try to make sure they didn't do any more damage to the system.

The decision to hold off on telling SolGov what was happening was Patrick's. Of course it was impossible to argue very well over an asynchronous connection, and since Patrick was officially John's boss, John couldn't really argue anyway, but he thought it was an unwise move. He understood it—Patrick felt completely burned by what SolGov was doing, and didn't trust them. But John thought that it might make things more difficult later.

The AI, who had a thin, metallic voice, said, "Incoming message from Max Julian."

"Play, please."

Max's face appeared on the small comm viewscreen.

"Hey, John. Jane just filled me in on something. We'd lost track of the Kurool, who left Jupiter soon after the destruction of Ganymede One. She'd been monitoring all of the surveillance systems from the Kuiper Belt to Mars, and found them, finally. They are heading on a bee-line to... you guessed it, Epimetheus. We'd suspected this, but needed to be sure. They won't be there for another thirty days or so. I sent a message letting them know the outlines of our plan, but I haven't heard back yet. Just thought you'd want to know who all the guests at our party are going to be. Looking forward to seeing your face in realtime, my friend."

Xiang made a sound, and John turned to look at him. Xiang was making a sour face, but remained silent. John didn't bother to ask. Instead he commented with mock cheerfulness, "Well, that's going to make our lives quite a bit more interesting, ain't it?"

Xiang's face had become impassive. He said nothing.

Chapter 6

Approaching Janus, December, 2112

Lindsay's AI had scoped out the best possible approach to Janus, allowing them to avoid being seen from Epimetheus. Janus was still tens of thousands of kilometers away from Epimetheus, but was approaching quickly. They would be closest in about five days. Max's team would arrive in several hours.

Lindsay could see Janus growing ahead of her, and found a shallow cavern on the side of Janus facing away from Epimetheus to drop into. There was just enough gravity to keep her shuttle settled in the cavern for the wait.

She had heard just before she left for Janus that her offer on the wonderful cave/dome complex on Mars had been accepted. She'd already transferred the funds to Mars for the purchase, and filled out all of the varied paperwork, including detailed immigration papers. Mars was being very picky about immigrants, but having Max as a reference made all the difference in the world; Lindsay's application had been approved almost immediately, which, from what she knew, was unheard of.

She decided that she might as well take a nap, since it would be several hours before Max arrived. She dreamed of her father, and as she awoke, she felt tears in her eyes. It seemed that she'd never really had time to mourn him; right after his death she'd had to enter the battle of her life, trying to honor his wishes and have his second wife inherit nothing. If it had been up to Lindsay, she'd have just given the woman some money and let it go, but her father had been quite clear that Arcadia was to get none of it, so Lindsay fought in his name.

She was, for a moment, sad for Arcadia. The woman had only lived with Lindsay and her father for about a year; her father had gotten involved with Arcadia just a few months after her mother was killed in an accident. Lindsay and Arcadia had never gotten along; Arcadia was always jealous of the time her father spent with Lindsay, time that was precious to her. Arcadia knew she wasn't her husband's first priority, and did rather horrific things to get back at him for it. Finally her father had had enough.

Lindsay's father had been an explorer before he settled back down on Earth relatively late in his life to marry her mother and raise a family. He'd been out as far as Uranus, and had pioneered some specific methods for identifying promising asteroids that KE, Strelax and other companies still used today. Lindsay had never expected to go out into space; her father hadn't wanted her to follow in his footsteps. He'd wanted a more safe, stable life for her.

But here she was, in the outer solar system, about to make contact again with a troublesome alien species. How did she get into this again? Ah, right, they were the ones who'd initiated this. And somehow she'd managed to be special. She did appreciate that—she would have been sad and angry to have been manipulated to leave Pandora, only to return to see it destroyed.

She checked on the status of Max's ship, the *Callista*. She could already hear the ident beacon. They were about fifteen minutes from Janus, approaching carefully to avoid being seen by anything on Epimetheus.

She opened a comm channel. "*Callista*, this is Lindsay. I'm hiding in a little cavern on Janus. Shall I come to meet you—have room for a shuttle?"

Lindsay heard a voice she didn't recognize. "Affirmative, Lindsay, we've got an open shuttle spot. Come on board."

She woke up her systems and quietly launched from the cavern. As she approached the *Callista*, Max came on the comm.

“Lindsay, hey, it’s Max. The shuttle bay door is now open. The bay is about two-thirds of the way down the hub. The signal beacons are active.”

Lindsay instructed her AI to find the beacons, and navigate into the bay. She didn’t quite trust her own piloting yet for that delicate maneuver. She settled into the bay, and saw the doors close overhead. Her AI signaled that she could disembark from the shuttle.

As she left, she saw Max floating at a door close to the shuttle.

“Lindsay, it’s great to see you!”

“Glad to see you too, Max.” They did a zero-g hug.

“Let’s get you out to the habitat ring. You can meet Niles and Sharron, the other crew members. The *Atreyu* will be here in a few days, so we have some leisure time before we start all this in earnest.”

Lindsay grabbed her bag, and followed Max.

Atreyu, December, 2112

Max looked around the table at John, Xiang, Sharron, Rosalind, Lindsay and Niles. They were the group that was going to figure out how to contact the Zeloso. It seemed daunting to her. She didn’t get along with Xiang, and had never really gotten to know Rosalind. She seemed like a nice person, but John had mentioned that she and Xiang seemed to be striking up a bit of a romance. Max figured this meant that Rosalind would be on Xiang’s side when there was a conflict.

The good thing, Max thought, was that she trusted Sharron, John and Nilesch with her life, and had always thought Lindsay a reasonable person with whom she could get along well. If things got dicey, she knew that she had folks who had her back.

She and John shared leadership of this mission, which worked well for Max. It was time to get started.

She said, “OK, folks, let’s start. The current plan is to contact the Zeloso via their high-frequency transmission wavelength, and suggest that they meet with us. Xiang, Lindsay and I will take the *Callista* to Epimetheus, and meet with them. Since Lindsay can’t be compelled by them, she will be the commander of that mission.”

Xiang cleared his throat.

“Xiang?”

“I think I would be of better use analyzing the data feed from the meeting than actually being there.”

Max tilted her head toward him. “Are you sure? Xiang, you are supposed to be the culture expert.”

“Yes, and I’d rather study their culture at a distance.”

Max inwardly smiled. She’d always thought he was a coward. Now she really knew.

“Alright. Well, we need three folks on that mission. John needs to stay with the *Atreyu*. Any takers? Rosalind?”

Sharron said immediately, “I’ll go.”

“You sure?”

“Yes. I’m up for it, and intrigued by the aliens. Nilesch has taught me enough that I can take care of the *Callista*.”

“Alright. So it’s Sharron, Lindsay and I. We’ll be sending back constant feeds.”

John said, “To be safe, we’ll be moving the Atreyu back out to Rhea.”

Max said, “Makes sense to me. We’ll be fine, I’m sure. We’ve been watching Epimetheus for a while now, and we’ve seen about four ships come and go since we arrived. We’re assuming that most of the ships are in deep caverns inside Epimetheus, since there are no surface buildings of any sort except for an old habitat that was built in the fifties, long abandoned.”

John said, “Have you been able to get an idea of how many ships might be there?”

“No, there’s no way to know. There could be four ships, or there could be a hundred. Jane estimated twenty-five, but that’s a rough guess. If fifty ships had just been sitting inside Epimetheus all these years, we’d never know it.”

The next day, Max was sitting with Sharron and Lindsay in the control room of the *Callista*, heading for Epimetheus. They’d been sending a message on the high frequency bandwidth that the *Zeloso* had used before, but had yet to hear back from them. They were going to orbit around Epimetheus until the *Zeloso* answered, or until they were forced to leave. Max hoped the latter wasn’t going to happen.

Jane said, “Max, incoming message from the *Zeloso*.”

“Open the channel, Jane.”

A strangely accented voice said, “Hello, hello, go away.”

Lindsay said, “That’s the same voice I heard before—that’s Koth.”

Max said, “Hello, Koth. We would like to talk with you.”

“No talk. Go away.”

“Koth, everyone knows you are here. We human beings are at home in this system, and

you are visiting. We need to talk with you.”

There was silence on the end of the line. Finally, after a few minutes, they heard, “Come down to the surface. We talk.”

Max let out a sigh of relief.

“Agreed. We will launch momentarily.”

Max still didn’t know what was in store for them. They decided to take Lindsay’s shuttle—it was better equipped than the one they had, and more comfortable for three. As they launched toward the surface, they saw a ship emerge from the mouth of a cavern.

Max said to Lindsay, “They are close enough that it is time for this. Lindsay Ali, I give you full authority as the leader of this mission.”

Max could tell Lindsay was nervous. Max said, “Don’t worry—it will be fine. It’s not a big deal. You know the plan.”

She nodded.

Max said, “Jane, send John a message. ‘We’ve made contact with the Zeloso, and are meeting them on the surface. Lindsay is in charge.’”

“Affirmative, Max.”

“And you’re sending him everything?”

“Yes, Max.”

They approached the surface, and assumed that whatever ship had emerged from the cavern was going to meet with them on the surface. But the ship kept going outward.

Max said, “Jane, where is the Zeloso ship headed?”

“Toward the *Callista*.”

“Toward the *Callista*? Show it on screen.”

The viewscreen showed the *Callista*, which was in a slow orbit around Epimetheus. The Zeloso ship entered into view, and Max gasped as she saw the beam weapon slice into *Callista*, sending pieces of it flying in all directions.

She heard Lindsay exclaim, "Fuck!"

She sighed. She should have imagined this outcome. Why didn't that occur to her?

Max said, "Damn, what did they do that for?"

Lindsay said, "These are bad creatures, Max."

"I'm getting that impression."

Jane said, "Max, incoming message from John."

"Put him through."

"Max, you alright? What happened?"

"We're fine, John. Don't come close to Epimetheus. They destroyed the *Callista* without a howdy-do."

"You need to get out of there!"

"No, we need to see this through, John. I messed up in not realizing that they would destroy the *Callista*, but they knew that we were in a shuttle headed toward Epimetheus. If they wanted to kill us, they would have already."

"Well, that's true. Nilesh is livid."

"Yeah, I'm not surprised. Tell him that I'm sorry I didn't predict this. I'm assuming they think that they can compel us to do something, and that's why they spared us. We'll see how it goes."

John said, "Be careful, my friend."

"I will, that. Talk to you later."

Jane said, “Max, I suggest you land at the abandoned habitat. You might be able to get it going again, and that would give you some shelter, and a relatively safe place to meet the Zeloso.”

“Agreed. Let’s head for it.”

Mars Colony One, December 2112

Gareth looked at Sharron’s face. It was shining.

“So, Gareth, I’m about to head into a new adventure. I volunteered to go with Max and Lindsay to contact the Zeloso. It seems like such a wonderful opportunity. I don’t think there will be much danger, but we can’t be sure. Pray for me, and the success of this mission.

“I hope you are doing well. Have you gotten that final statement from the Kurool to append to our article? I look forward to reading what they have to say. I have been increasingly confident of our conclusions, Gareth, and I would find it unlikely that many reasonable people would disagree. And we already know what the unreasonable people will say.

“Be well. I pray for you every day. I miss you dearly, and look forward to seeing you soon. Love you.”

Yes, Gareth knew what the unreasonable people would say when they read the article. The Kurool had just delivered to him their very short statement.

It read: “Based on the data that we gave you about the teachings of Turool, as well as what we have seen of the teachings of Jesus, it is clear that they are somehow truly connected. We cannot, at this time, theorize how, but the explanation given in this article would certainly make this data consistent with the theology and cosmology of the religion you call

‘Christianity.’“

It wasn't what he'd hoped for, but it was enough. He wasn't sure what he'd hoped for. Perhaps the old evangelical in him had hoped that this article would convert the Kurool to Christianity. But the truth was, the article was more likely to convert Christians to worship Turool. He supposed people might even think he'd converted himself, though it didn't really feel that way to him. It felt more like he'd found the true Christianity, after all. It surprised him deeply that it was alien.

Epimetheus, December, 2112

Max found the habitat, and docked their shuttle. It turned out to be in impeccable shape—it had clearly been mothballed with the idea of someone coming back to it.

Sharron and Lindsay stayed there, working to get the atmosphere started, and inventory what was there. Meanwhile, Max kept up with the status of the Kurool, who were about five days out from Epimetheus, as well as tracking the coming and going of ships into the cavern. Jane was doing some calculations based on the size of Epimetheus, estimating how big the internal caverns might be, based on caverns known in other Saturn moons.

Max was glad that she got to shirk engineering duty and stay in the shuttle, without having to work in a suit. Sharron and Lindsay were quite good at it anyway, and Max would have just gotten in the way.

“Jane, any results on your search for history of this place?”

“Yes, Max. In 2055, the founder of Strelax and Kuiper Exploratory, Brodrick Tata, came out here with theories of finding rare earth elements and precious metals. He didn't find

anything, but he put a claim on all of the inner moons of Saturn, which no one has challenged. When he died in 2080, ownership of the moons fell to KE.”

Max—along with everyone else interested in the solar system—knew the history of KE well. Brodric Tata was a scion of the very powerful Tata family, owners of one of the largest Corps on Earth. He broke with them over space exploration—they wanted to stick to working on Earth, and he wanted to roam the solar system and find precious metals. He first founded Strelax, then sold it, came to the outer system, and founded KE before he was killed in a ship accident in the belt in 2080.

Of course, he’d been right about the precious metals, most especially in the asteroid belt. Although their delay in getting into space had cost Tata a precious decade or two, they were now were trying hard to play catch up to Virgin Galactic, who had been the first corp in space. There were at least a dozen other corps vying for power in the solar system.

“Thanks, Jane.” Max took in the information that they were trespassing on KE space—but then, so were the Zeloso.

“Jane, send a quick message to John with the details of what you just gave me. He needs to know that KE owns this space, and they should be the first to hear what’s going on here.”

“Affirmative, Max.”

Max knew that Mars had a very good relationship with KE, as did she. She doubted that they would take issue with what was happening here. KE was one of the rare corps that played nice, realized their dependence on others, and returned favors. Max wished that Strelax had kept the culture Tata seemed to have nurtured at KE.

Max heard Sharron on the comm. “Max, come on in. We’re out of our suits. The heat is on, the air is sweet, and there are some decent quarters. I even just had a nice shower.”

“Thanks! Be there in a flash.”

Max got up out of her seat, lightly pushed to the back of the shuttle to grab her bag of essentials, then bounded out of the shuttle into the habitat. Epimetheus’ gravity was tiny—but it was enough to know up from down, keep things pretty much where you left them, and kind of walk. She saw Lindsay squatting in front of an open panel, working on something inside.

Max said, “Hey, thanks for getting this going. Very nice space, here. Won’t be the most horrible place to spend Christmas.”

“Yeah, it’s not bad. It’s bigger and nicer than my habitat on Pandora. I’ll see if I can find a tree.”

Max smiled. “Well, in case you are interested, the habitat was built by Broderic Tata.”

“Ah, that doesn’t surprise me. He built the one on Pandora as well.”

“I didn’t know that KE owned all this space.”

“Yup. But they’ve finally realized that there’s no money here. That’s why they fired me. I was the last person out here they had.”

“Do you think they’ll care about what we’re doing here in their space?”

“I don’t think so. I heard a rumor they were going to try and sell the space to a tourism company.”

“Oh, well, that won’t work at all, will it, with the Zeloso here?”

“Not so much, Max. I guess we’d better tell them, eh?”

“I’m leaving that decision up to John, but yes, they’ll be the first to know what’s happening out here.”

Sharron came up to Max, and asked, “Any word yet from the Zeloso?”

“Not a peep. I don’t quite know what they are waiting for.”

“Perhaps planning what they want to try to compel us to do?”

“Yup.”

Sharron looked at Lindsay. “I’m so glad you’re here, Lindsay.”

Lindsay smiled.

Max said, “I’m hungry. Any eats? Or do we have to make do with MREs from the shuttle?”

Sharron said, “I haven’t checked the galley yet. Let’s go look.”

Max realized that the food would be almost fifty years old. She didn’t know whether or not one could eat fifty-year old food.

Sharron opened one of the cabinets. “Oh, my. Fifty year-old freeze-dried food. I think we need to go back to the shuttle for the MREs.”

“Lemme look.”

Max took out a package, which said “Roasted Chicken with Rosemary, mashed potatoes, and peas.” Nice Christmas dinner, and it sounded delish, but the expiration on the package said May, 2065. So much for that.

“OK, I’ll get them. You keep working.”

“Alright, thanks.”

They sat around the table in the galley eating MREs from the shuttle. They had about a ten day supply; Max wondered if it would be enough. She said, “I don’t like the fact that the Zeloso haven’t said a peep since they destroyed the *Callista*. I guess we should wait here until we’re out of food, then head back to Rhea.”

Lindsay said, “I have a feeling they’ll contact us soon.”

“I certainly hope so.”

Life in the habitat for the next few days settled into a routine. All of the systems in the habitat were working well. John had decided to let KE in on what was happening at Epimetheus, and they'd appreciated the heads-up, as they'd been about to close a deal with VirginGalactic's tourism subsidiary for the inner moons of Saturn. They chose to withdraw from the deal for the time being, and John said that VG was upset. KE wasn't explaining yet, which made VG even madder, apparently. Ah, Max thought, life in the solar system.

Chapter 7

Epimetheus, January, 2113

Lindsay was doing a check on one of the atmosphere monitors—it had become a bit flaky the day before. She had been pleasantly surprised at how well the habitat had stood up all this time being empty. Her habitat had been empty for many years, but not nearly as long as this one.

She heard Max shout, “Sharron, Lindsay, come to the control area!”

Lindsay dropped what she was doing, and headed toward where Max was.

“Jane said that the Kurool are now in visual range of Epimetheus, and there is a small Zeloso ship headed here. Should land in a few minutes.”

Lindsay said, “So *that* was what they were waiting for.”

“Funny, I thought it might be their way of celebrating the New Year. Anyway, Lindsay, you’re on.”

Lindsay nodded. She didn’t feel ready for this, but she knew she might be the only one who could resist the Zeloso. She had her medical injector handy, in case she had to subdue Max and Sharron. They both knew this was a possibility. She also had a small weapon that she could use against the Zeloso if necessary, but she hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

Their ship docked on the other side from the shuttle, and sent out that familiar tube to connect with the habitat. The doors opened, and then the familiar little cat/kangaroo with no nose stood looking at her.

Destroy. Destroy.

“Destroy what?”

Destroy big ship coming.

“You’re kidding, right?”

It is dangerous to us. You must destroy. Then, in that familiar compelling-but-not thought: *We must do our best to destroy the Kurool. They are a danger to everyone.*

Lindsay looked at Max, whose eyes were glassy.

Max said, “Jane, calculate what we would need to destroy the Kurool ship. Does the *Atreyu* have the capacity?”

Lindsay was surprised. This was no simple kind of compelling.

Sharron looked at Max, then at Lindsay, then at the Zeloso. “What is happening?”

“Jane, this is Lindsay. Do not obey anything Max commands as of now.”

“Affirmative.”

Max looked at Lindsay, confused. “Why did you do that?”

Sharron said, “Max, you aren’t yourself.”

Lindsay said, “Max, listen to me.”

“I will not listen to you. We have a mission here, and we must carry it through. The Kurool are dangerous, and we need to eliminate them.”

Lindsay sighed and turned to the Zeloso.

“You don’t have any power over me, and I am in command here—my colleagues here can do nothing. We need to talk.”

No talk. No talk. Destroy.

“What are you so afraid of?”

Enemy. Enemy. No talk. Destroy.

Koth ran back out of the habitat into its ship, and took off quickly. Lindsay shook her

head.

Max put her head in her hands and said, “Oh my god. Oh my god. Shoot me now. I can’t get this idea that I should destroy the Kurool ship out of my head!”

Lindsay said, “Max, it’s OK. We knew this would likely happen.”

Sharron said, “I’m special too, I guess. I didn’t hear or think a thing from them.”

Lindsay said, “That is quite useful. I’m glad of that. What do we do now? They seem hell-bent on trying to destroy the Kurool.”

Lindsay heard Jane say, “Lindsay, a much larger ship has exited the caverns. It is a ship that has the same design and size as the ship with the beam weapon that destroyed Ganymede One.”

“Is it heading here?”

“Negative. It is going toward the Kurool ship.”

Max said, “The Kurool have no weapons, and... they should be destroyed... what am I saying?” She looked rather distressed.

Sharron said, “I sure hope that the Kurool ship is immune to whatever the Zeloso throw at it. Maybe then they’ll talk.”

Lindsay said, “Max, listen to me. If you feel that you cannot be trusted, let me know. We have contingency plans for that.”

Lindsay could see that Max was struggling. Struggling was good, as far as Lindsay was concerned.

“Lindsay, ask Jane to monitor me, and to tell you whether she feels I’m a danger. I’ll trust her judgment.”

“Jane, did you hear that?”

“Affirmative, Lindsay. I will monitor Max.”

“Jane, status of the Zeloso ship?”

“Closing on the Kurool.”

“Display.”

On the viewscreen was the image of the Kurool ship. Jane zoomed out so that the picture included the approaching Zeloso ship. They all watched, transfixed, as the ship got closer. It stopped. Lindsay could see what looked like bands of light moving down the ship. She was worried.

Lindsay said, “Jane, analysis?”

“It appears that the Zeloso ship is about to fire its weapon.”

“Oh no!”

As they watched, the bright, thick beam of the Zeloso weapon flew out of the front of their ship. It seemed to simply be absorbed by the Kurool ship—there was no evident damage.

“Jane? How is the Kurool ship?”

“It appears undamaged.”

Nothing happened for several minutes, then Jane said, “The two ships are communicating on a high-frequency bandwidth.”

Sharron said, “Well, that’s a relief. I guess now that the Zeloso know they can’t harm the Kurool, they’ll talk.”

They waited, while the two ships were close to each other. Then, finally, the larger Zeloso ship with the beam weapon left, and the smaller ship came back to the habitat. Again, the cat/kangaroo was at the door.

We could not destroy them. And they offer us help. We do not trust them.

Then, in that compelling-but-not thought: *I must make them go away. I will convince the Kurool to leave Saturn.*

Lindsay turned to look at Max who was staring at the Zeloso.

Max said, "Lindsay, can we make the Kurool go away?"

Lindsay said, "We will do no such thing." She turned to the Zeloso. "Stop trying to compel us. Stop it now! It won't work, and it's just making things more complicated—and believe me, they will be more difficult for you if you continue this way."

Max said loudly, "Oh, man, you little creepy bastard. Stay the fuck out of my head."

Lindsay nodded. Well, that seemed to have worked.

"Thank you."

Maybe we trust you?

Lindsay was taken aback. "What is your name?"

I am Koth.

She looked more carefully at the creature, which looked different than the one she'd seen before. Same name?

"I am Lindsay Ali. This is Max, and over there is Sharron. By the way, she can't hear you at all."

I know. I must go now. I will see Lindsay-Ali again.

It turned around and left. The ship took off, and entered the caverns.

Lindsay shook her head. What was that all about?

Jane said, "Lindsay, the Kurool are on the comm."

"Connect please."

The familiar almost-mechanical voice of the Kurool started. "Hello, this is Huroat. We

haven't met yet. I was chosen for this mission because I have characteristics that make it unlikely that I can be compelled by the..." and a word that Lindsay couldn't possibly pronounce, but sounded vaguely like "Zeloso."

"Hello Huroat. We call them 'Zeloso'—it seems the best transliteration of the word you have. We're glad their weapon didn't harm you."

"Our ships are very tough—we knew they could not harm us. I will use 'Zeloso' from now on. We have been in communication with the Zeloso, and they will cease contact with you. We have offered them assistance, and assurance that we won't harm them again, but they don't really trust us. I can understand that."

Max asked, "Why have they been busy inserting themselves in our affairs, Huroat?"

"That's what they do. That's what they know. We hope to prevent that from happening in the future."

Lindsay wondered how successful they would be. She said, "What should we do, Huroat?"

"It would be best to make sure no one enters this space. This ship will stay here, and help them as much as we can. It is all that we can do, since this predicament is our fault."

Lindsay wasn't quite so sure of that—these creatures seemed to be able to make enough trouble all by themselves. If they'd never rescued Zoetrope... well, anyway, it seemed that this was over. Perhaps it was time to go home.

"Thank you, Huroat. Is there anything we can do to assist?"

"No, not at this time. Goodbye."

Lindsay was relieved. "Max, you're back in charge. Let's get the hell out of here."

Atreyu, February 2113

Max said, “I’m so embarrassed by the whole thing. I mean, me, want to destroy the Kurool? I couldn’t help myself.”

Max, Lindsay and Sharron were sitting around the conference table on the *Atreyu*, relaying to John, Xiang, Niles and Rosalind what had happened on the Epimetheus habitat.

John said, “Max, no need to be embarrassed! We knew this was likely. They clearly have a very strong mechanism of telepathy. I wish that the Xenoscience team was further along in understanding it.”

Xiang said, “That’s years and years away, John. There are some theoretical physics that apparently we have to get to understand before we’ll even get close. And even then we’ll only have theories—nothing certain.”

Rosalind said, “I’d love to work on the evolutionary mechanisms of such a talent.”

John said, “So anyway, we have our work cut out for us, guys. First, we have to tell SolGov that Epimetheus, and about five million cubic kilometers is off-limits to anyone except the Kurool and the Zeloso. Then, we have to make this all public.”

Max said, “Tina will handle that part, John. We just need to feed her the info.”

John nodded. “I need to contact Kuiper Exploratory and explain the full situation before this hits the press, Max.”

“Understood.”

“They are likely going to want to let VirginGalactic on it before that as well.”

“Just give me the go-ahead when it’s time. I’ll work with Lindsay on crafting the material.”

Xiang said, “I’d like to contribute to that.”

Max nodded, although she was internally bristling. The guy chickened out, and now he is going to want his name on the report? Sheesh.

John said, “We’re forty-five days from Mars. I’m sure we can work this all out by then.”

They left the conference room, and Max went back to her quarters. She’d gotten a message from Tina several days before which she still hadn’t watched, and, frankly, was scared to watch. She suspected that Tina was about to break up with her.

Max didn’t blame her one bit. If Max had been Tina, she’d never have gotten re-involved with her in the first place. Max thought that missing Christmas last year was probably the final straw.

Max had promised to make it home for Christmas, and she knew how important it was for Tina—not because Tina was religious, but because she had some amazing memories of family Christmases on Mars, and wanted a little piece of that. Max well remembered a couple of those—she could understand.

She sat down on her bunk. “Jane, play message from Tina.”

She looked into the screen with Tina’s face. It looked sad. Yup, here it comes.

“Hi Max. Thanks for your message letting me know that you were safe and sound. It was a really hard Christmas without you. I have come to realize that I can’t do this anymore. I keep almost losing you, and it has finally penetrated my thick skull that you *like* doing this sort of thing. I know, you have told me more times than I can count, but somehow, when you came back from that... that *disaster* in the Kuiper Belt, I thought that had all been worked out of you. I now realize it hasn’t.

“I will always love you, Max, and I do hope we can be friends. I want to be able to

support and cheer you on from a safe distance.

“I’m taking a long-delayed trip to the Moon to visit family, so I’ll be gone when you get back. I’ll look forward to seeing you again once I get return.”

Max knew Tina. That was code for “Please feel free to remove your stuff from my place before I get back.” She would oblige. She was going to have to find some quarters of her own.

Max was sad. It would take her some time to get used to not being Tina’s partner any more. Tina had always been the closest person to Max’s heart, but she was right, nothing could match space, and work, and the adventure that was the combination of the two.

She didn’t know what was going to be next for her. It would take a bit of figuring out.

Atreyu, February, 2113

John looked at Patrick’s haggard face. This was all taking a huge toll on Patrick. He’d never bargained for this kind of trouble.

“So, John, SolGov is sending three, count them, three new *Corinth*-class ships to Epimetheus. They are livid that we didn’t tell them what was going on, and livid that these little creatures managed to wreak havoc in the system.

“And possibly worse, VirginGalactic is suing both Kuiper Exploratory and Mars because this nixes the deal that KE had made with VG to sell the inner moons of Saturn to VG once KE determined that they were of no value to them. Apparently, VG had already spent billions of Yuan on research and planning, and they’re going to extract that from someone’s hide. And they’ve unilaterally canceled all contracts with Mars entities, which is making a lot of people here really mad.

“What makes it even more complex is that VG has a case in front of the SolGov supreme court, which could decide that SolGov has the right to jurisdiction in the system—the whole system.”

John thought, *Unless Mars caves in, war is coming.*

“And, to make matters worse, public opinion of the Kurool is dropping like a stone, because of the perceived Kurool responsibility for this mess, and the deaths of twenty-five thousand on Ganymede. SolGov is making major hay out of it, and Prak is almost certain to win re-election, possibly by a landslide. Mars independence is at risk, John.”

John sighed. This was going from bad to worse. He needed to tell the Kurool what was going on, and figure out how in God’s name they were going to get out of this mess. It was a complete disaster for Mars.

He recorded a message to Patrick on his personal account—he wanted to let him know that he loved him, no matter what happened, and that they would both get through this. Things would be chaotic when he returned, and he realized that if Mars lost independence, John was possibly going to be captured and thrown in the brig. He needed to make arrangements so that didn’t happen. Perhaps one of those remote Mars outposts? That would be his safety valve. He made a note to mention it to Lindsay.

The trip back to Mars was filled with messages from Patrick and General Lei Tsang about Mars’ military readiness for war with SolGov. It was all very sobering. Even given the horrible economy that Earth had been suffering since Mars independence, and particularly since the more recent blockade of Mars, there was no way that Mars could match the military power of SolGov. They would lose a full-out war with SolGov, and lose it badly. Patrick was trying his best to mend fences and build bridges, and make as many concessions as he dared make without

jeopardizing independence. He'd ceded jurisdiction to everything except Mars, Phobos and Deimos to SolGov, and so far, that had been enough to keep the dogs at bay. But John had no idea what would happen if or when Prak won re-election. All bets were off.

Mars Colony One, May 2113

Lindsay was on her way to the new Mars Colonial Authority. No one seemed to know exactly what the Authority did, though there were some rumors about creating small colonies. She'd gotten a cryptic message when she returned to Mars, suggesting that she talk with one of the agents of the Authority regarding the compound she had just purchased. They said there were a lot of things they could offer to help her. Lindsay thought she could use some help.

She had spent most of her inheritance on the compound—it was large, and could easily house twenty people. She didn't quite know why she'd jumped at it, but it felt right to her, like a good next step and a good way to spend her father's money. But she didn't have a lot left to spend on improvements, and she hadn't quite figured out how she'd make a living out in the hinterland of Mars.

She walked into the office with the small label on the side of the door, and saw a receptionist and a few chairs.

“Hi, I'm Lindsay Ali.”

The man sitting behind the desk had sandy hair and a nice smile.

“Hello, Lindsay. Have a seat for a moment. Jason will be with you in a little bit.”

She found a seat, and started to take out her tablet to check for messages, when she heard, “Hello, Lindsay. Please come into my office.”

She looked up to see a pudgy man with a balding head and a shirt that fit him a little too

tightly standing in the doorway to an inner office. She got up and followed him inside.

“Please, have a seat. I’m Jason Welles, and I’m the coordinator of the Mars Colonial Authority. I imagine you’re wondering why I sent you that message?”

“Yes, indeed I am.”

“Well, MarsGov has realized that there is no way that we have the capital to build another large colony, like Colony 1 or even 6, so we’re going a different route. We’re looking for people who own property on Mars that has potential—potential to grow into full-fledged colonies.”

“I see.”

“We have a very specific offer, one that is quite lucrative, I think you’ll agree.”

“Go ahead and tell me.”

“We give you one million Yuan to do upgrades and changes that allow for a colony of thirty, within one year. Once you’ve reached what we’re calling Colony Stage One status, we will start assessing income tax on all members of the colony, except you, of course. You will get 75% of that income tax, at least two-thirds of which you are required to invest back in the colony. When the colony has grown to Colony Stage Two, or one hundred colonists, we take 50% of the taxes, and you keep 50%, again at least two-thirds of which must be re-invested in growth of the colony. At Stage Three, or 500 colonists, you keep 25%. At Stage Four, or 1000 colonists, you keep 10%. At Stage Five, it is 5%, and finally Full Colony status, with 10,000 colonists and up, you keep 2%, with no expectation of further investment on your part. That will continue until you die, but that percentage is not inheritable by any offspring. You will never be assessed income tax on colony-related income.”

Lindsay did some quick math in her head. She stood to make tens, perhaps hundreds of

millions of Yuan! She would be one of the wealthiest people on Mars if the colony made it to Full Status. She guessed that was the incentive. But...

“What’s the catch? There must be a catch.”

“Well, you must sign over ownership of your compound to MarsGov. MarsGov does reserve the right to revoke Colony status during stage One or Two, but ownership of the compound would revert to you in that case. After Stage Two, no matter what happens, MarsGov retains ownership. There are mileposts you must make in terms of growth and GDP of the colony, but those aren’t too onerous. The governance of the colony is up to you until Stage Four, when you will need to adopt standard MarsGov colony governance. Not making the targets reduces the percentage of taxes you can keep, and MarsGov reserves the right to invest more in the colony than you have chosen to.”

Well, that seemed obvious—no government was going to make a deal like that without demanding ownership, and without providing targets to reach. Lindsay wondered whether she really wanted to do this. She had liked living alone for all of those years on Pandora, and she’d expected to live alone on Mars as well. But she knew that she’d run out of money before long, and this looked like a way to make serious money—enough to buy her a small dome nearby to live in alone, if she wanted to. It seemed a very sweet deal.

“I need to think over this for a while. When do you need to know?”

“No hurry. Decide whenever you want. The offer will remain open as long as you own the property, and don’t make changes to it that preclude the sort of colony building we have in mind.”

She added internally, *as long as Mars stays independent*. “Alright, thanks!”

She left the office, and asked her AI to send Max a message to meet her.

Mars Colony One, August 2113

Gareth was poring over the three proposals he had gotten from contractors for building the new compound close to the Kurool Colony. MarsGov had given Gareth and a small group a large lot of property a few kilometers from the Kurool, outside of the toxic regolith area. In return, Gareth and Sharron would spend a big chunk of his inheritance building a compound which would grow into a colony according to the new ideas that MarsGov had.

So far, their group included Sharron, Xiang and Rosalind, and, surprisingly, Ted. Sharron had returned from her adventure a completely different person. Gareth loved the person that she'd become, even though he felt he hardly recognized her. He'd always known she had this confidence and ability within her, but she'd chosen to limit herself for a long time. Clearly, that was over.

She was currently wading into the storm they'd created when the article about Turool and Jesus was finally published. He hadn't the stomach for it. The Pope had dedicated an entire encyclical to the "horrific and damaging theology" that Sharron and Gareth were proposing. Scientists were up in arms because the Kurool refused to teach them their science, and suggested that they were simply trying to convert everyone to worship Turool. That last part, Gareth knew, was probably true.

The good news was that somehow this new idea that Turool and Jesus were connected had helped bolster what had been sagging approval for the Kurool. Mars needed that, in the face of an increasingly hostile SolGov.

Sharron busy giving interviews and talks. Between their article, her adventures with the Zeloso, and the fact that she had saved Max's life, she was the celebrity of the moment. He was happy for her—she deserved the limelight.

It was his turn to do domestic things, and begin to build their new colony—the colony that would educate human children with Kurool children, and, importantly, the colony that would follow Turool. He had already gotten thousands of inquiries from people all over the system.

Ali Compound, September, 2113

Lindsay brushed the dust off of her coveralls as she walked into the dome, where Max was on some scaffolding working to make sure all of the dome panels were properly coated.

“Max, looking good!”

“Yeah, I figured I’d clean them off while I was at it, so we could see the sun sometimes.”

“You sure you’re ready for this, Max?”

Max climbed down the scaffolding to join Lindsay.

“I need a new adventure, Lindsay, it’s in my blood. Tina finally realized I was hopeless, and she found herself someone who would always be around. I rather like Angeline, and I don’t blame Tina. We’ll be friends for life.”

“Starting a new colony isn’t going to be easy, my friend.”

“I know, but it’s just the kind of problem for me to be sinking my teeth into right now. I like the new Mars approach of organically growing colonies from small compounds. We should be ready for seven or eight emigrants in a few months, and if we keep going, we could be a full-fledged colony in less than ten years.”

Lindsay laughed. “Max, you won’t be here ten years from now. I don’t quite know where you’ll be, but it ain’t here.”

Max had to admit that Lindsay was right. As she looked over her life, she never had been

in one place, save perhaps a ship, for more than a few years. It just wasn't in her to stay in one place for very long. She didn't know what adventure was next for her, but this adventure was fine for now.

“Hey Linds, it's time for lunch. Let's break out the new cuisine shipment we got yesterday. Oh, and the wine!”

“Did I hear correctly that you found a cache of Zoetrope's Ganymede wine, and bought all of it?”

“Yeah. It was dirt cheap. The person selling it had no idea of its significance. I figure in a year or two it'll sell for a hundred times what I bought it for.”

“But we'll drink some first.”

“That we will.”

About the Author

Michelle has been a science fiction fan since she could read. She has written and published poetry and technical writing. She has published four novels in *The Casitian Universe Series*, and this is the second novel of the series, *The Casseopeia Chronicles*. Michelle lives and works in Northern California.

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