JORDAN

HUMANITY FINDS A NEW HOME



ROBERT P. WILLS

BOOK 3 OF THE PRODIGALS

Jordan

Book 3 of The Prodigals

by

Robert P. Wills

Cover illustration by

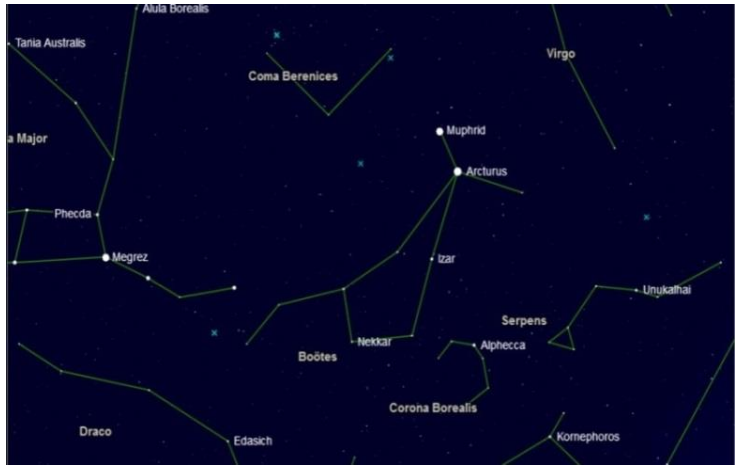
Milena on Fiverr.com as "MilenaVitorovic"

Cover design by

Rebecca on Fiverr.com as "RebecaCovers"

Any similarities between the characters in this book and persons living or dead are purely coincidental.

Copyright 2020



He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.

Psalm 91, 4 (NIV)

Chapter 1

Hooper leaned to his right, scanning the controls between him and where the copilot should have been. He was sure that somewhere in the rows of toggles was the one switch that would activate the docking assist. He had heard several pilots reference it but had never paid attention to its location since he never expected to be in the situation he was currently in. There were three dozen toggle switches and half again as many buttons on the panel. For the sake of space, they had abbreviations above them. Unfortunately, none of them had anything that looked like the abbreviation for 'docking assist'.

He looked ahead through the windshield- this particular spacecraft had an eight-inch thick, forward-facing reinforced transparent polymer that allowed him to see what was actually in front of him. Below his feet, another several panels allowed him to see straight down below the craft. Matching panels around the electronics gave breathtaking views of space.

At the moment, the breathtaking view of space was his least concern.

The massive LINAC was now so close he couldn't see the ends of it without turning his head back and forth. And it was getting bigger every second.

Hooper flipped a switch activating his communication system and hovered his finger above the red 'transmit' button- not knowing the name of the ship ahead of him. "LINAC, this is approaching landing craft," he tried. "Landing craft three," he said, remembering the number stenciled to the main hatch before it opened. He hoped that the ship had been docked at its original berth otherwise the electronic transponder sending his ship's information would be different than what he had just said. He knew it was a mistake rookies made.

When no one responded, he tried again: "LINAC, this is the approaching landing craft. Over?"

"Hey there, Hooper." A voice said. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes!" Hooper relaxed in the chair. "Yes, I can hear you." He looked at the information projected on the windshield. The callout for the large ship showed it was just five miles away. "Requesting permission to dock."

Without even a pause, the voice replied. "Permission denied, you idiot."

"What? But I need..."

"This is Space Ten, Hooper," Sergeant Mellow interrupted. "The ship you stole is still on our frequency. And even without asking the Chief, I'm going to make a command decision and say you can't come back."

"Listen..." Hooper didn't recognize the other voice. "Uhm…"

"You don't even know how to fly that thing and you'll just end up crashing into us," Mellow continued. "So do us all a favor and switch your HaveQuick to channel twelve."

"Twelve?"

"Yeah; the DMS should be on twelve. That's that grey box at the top of the panel that's between the seats. It sits a little higher because it is actually a separate box that can be taken out and replaced. It has 'HQ' stenciled on it."

Hooper frowned. "Do you have their Word of the Day?" He asked, hoping to regain some standing by knowing the term for the code used to synchronize the frequency hopping protocols to different ships. Without the code telling the transmitter which frequency to start at, and which frequency to jump to next, there was no way for a foreign ship to follow a conversation for more than a millisecond before it changed to what seemed to be an endless series of random frequency.

"The word of the day is that Jesus loves you even when you're stupid." Mellow said with a chuckle. "Especially when you're stupid."

"That's not what I meant."

"Hold one."

Hooper watched as the DMS got larger in his small view screen. He was now under four miles and was worried that whoever was at the

communications station on Space Ten would just leave him to founder. "Typical," he said.

"Hooper, you still with me?" Mellow said.

"Yes." Hooper said, relieved.

"Switch to twelve; the DMS is indeed on that freq and we're on the same W-O-D; it's system wide. And when you get close, use your auto docking to keep you from smashing into that thing."

"Which... which button is that?" Hooper said, again not expecting to receive an answer. His hand hovered over the knob that changed radio frequencies, hoping for help from his like-minded compatriots on the other ship instead.

"It's another joint control so it's there in between the seats, but on the panel above your head. It's about half way down." Mellow explained, thinking back to his flight training on the way to Arcturus. "It has A-D-X above the toggle for Auto Docking. Flip it down to turn it on when you're under a mile. But you still need to talk to them about docking so they push their telemetry to your computer. I don't think you should just try flying in blind."

Hooper frowned again. "Thanks, Space Ten." He said begrudgingly.

"Roger that, landing craft. Good luck, good riddens and good bye. Out"

Hooper turned the dial to the number 12. "DMS?" he said, unsure what the acronym stood for. "DMS, this is approaching landing craft three. Requesting permission to..."

"Hold off on your approach, landing craft," a man said tersely. "We've been tracking you."

Hooper looked at his screen. The callout for the ship in front of him showed it was at three and a quarter miles and decreasing at an alarming rate. "DMS, if you could..."

"I said hold one." The voice said snapped.

Hooper watched helplessly as the distance ticked down in hundreds of feet.

Chapter 2

"What have we got, Alystock?" Captain Tom Miner said as he moved from the flight deck back to the communication station. He had been moving between the stations making sure everyone was on task for leaving the system when the young man there called him over.

"Ship approaching, Sir." Private Alystock said. He gestured at the panel. "They're coming in pretty fast and sloppy if you ask me."

"Sloppy?"

The private nodded. "He... they... whoever it is, are on an intercept course from Space Ten. They were weaving and juking when they first started. I thought it might have been remotely piloted to ram us but the more I watched it, I figured there was someone at the helm that didn't know what they were doing. Either way I've got a couple of missiles locked onto them." He gestured toward the tactical station. "I'm covering tactical too so I piped it over here."

"Who is it?"

"It's designated as Landing Craft Three, the Pteradon. It's a light-duty landing craft; just over fifty feet. Interplanetary drives. It'd take a couple of weeks if you tried to run it from Earth to say, Mars. Picked up the bogey as soon as it squirted out. Locked on right after that."

Tom shook his head. "No, no; who are you talking to?"

Alystock looked up at the man and smirked. "Our small talk didn't get that far, sir."

Tom reached over and flipped the transmit button. "Pteradon, identify yourself."

The pair waited for a response.

After ten seconds of silence, Alystock chuckled. "Guy's a black shoe," He said, referring to the derogatory term Navy pilots (who wore brown shoes) used for non flying personnel (who wore black shoes).

"Doesn't even know the name of the ship he's driving. Hell; it's painted on the side even." Now he pressed the transmit button. "Landing Craft Three, please identify."

"I'm landing craft three!" Hooper said. "Can I land?"

Tom looked at Alystock who just shrugged. "He's been like that."

"You need to send me the telemetry to land," Hooper said again.

"Just answer the question," Tom said. "Who are you?"

"Landing... I'm Hooper. Jim Hooper! I was on that stupid rescue mission with Lieutenant Wick and we got stuck on the ground back on Titan and..."

"I swear if you don't just answer the question without running off at the mouth, I'll have you blown into bits!"

"Oh." Hooper said. "I'm at three miles now."

Tom looked at Alystock who nodded in confirmation. "Who else is with you?"

"No one! I got left behind so I stole a ship to catch up. There was no way I was going..."

"Fine, fine." Tom said, cutting Hooper off. "Give us a minute to decide where we want that ship docked and we'll push a landing program to you."

"I'm coming up on two and a half miles. I don't think I have that much time." Hooper said.

"Hit your retros then. And be quiet about it."

When there was no response, Tom looked at the private. "What do we have for open docking bays?"

"I checked on that when I started tracking him. We have three; Alpha Fifteen and Sixteen, and Charlie Seven. We're..."

"How do I do that?" Hooper said. "I'm really getting close."

Tom grabbed the console with both hands tightly, then after a moment, pressed the transmit button again. "In front of the thruster... that lever you pushed forward is a button marked R-T-O for retro rockets."

"Push it? What do I do about the engines?"

Tom clenched his fists, veins showing in his neck. "Move the throttle back to ten percent. Once you push the button, the retros will fire to slow you to ten percent of your current thrust." He considered that. "If the distance between us starts to get bigger, then we're outrunning you; just push the retro button again to turn it off and increase thrust by a couple of percent. Go back and forth to keep your distance as we accelerate. It's all about relative speed between the ships. Got it?"

"Got it." Hooper said.

Tom looked at the Private again. Even though he outranked him, they seemed to be about the same age.

Alystock grinned wide. "You sure you want him aboard? Got enough goobers around here already."

"Don't you start with me." Tom said. "We can use another landing craft. That's luxury living quarters for two or three people when we get planet side." He thought back to what the young man had said. "So fifteen, sixteen or seven?"

"Right." Alystock said. "Fifteen and sixteen are landing craft bays. Seven is a big all purpose one." He gestured at the speaker. "Want me to send him to fifteen? He'll plug in nicely there."

"Yeah, that works. Push him the approach vectors for that. Can you talk him through what he needs to do?"

Alystock nodded. "Yeah; I'll get that plumber hooked up."

Tom stared at the private who had been using aviator lingo liberally. "You fly?"

Alystock shrugged. "Did it professionally for a little. Now just recreationally."

"You a wash out?" Tom smirked. "Or a Whiskey Delta?" He said referring to a pilot that had cracked in a pressure situation and had been relieved of flying duties because of it.

Alystock stared hard at the man. "Beat up my Air Boss." He said, referring to the head of the air department on a carrier- the officer in charge of all air or spacecraft.

"What?"

"Sent him back to the taxpayers," Alystock said, using another naval aviation phrase which was used to describe an aircraft that was damaged beyond repair and decommissioned. "Sir," he added.

The two stared at each other.

"Hello? It looks like I'm pulling away from you now," Hooper interrupted.

"Get that ship docked, Alystock." Tom said "We're short on pilots so if you're willing to keep your fists to yourself, I can see about getting you back in the driver's seat. Professionally." Without waiting for a response, he turned and walked back to the Flight Deck.

"Aye, aye, Captain," Alystock called after him. He looked down at the console. "Landing Craft Three, sending telemetry for docking in one minute. Get in, sit down, hold on, and shut up..."

Chapter 3

Hooper stepped through the hatch, onto the DMS. He leaned against the bulkhead and closed his eyes to compose himself.

"You okay?" a technician asked with a smile. "Rough flight?"

Hooper waved her off. "Yeah, just glad to be back on land." He looked over and smiled at the woman. "Metaphorically speaking, that is."

The technician laughed. "I suppose that's one way of looking at this ship."

"I just have one question."

"What's that?"

"What does D-M-S stand for?" Hooper turned and leaned against the wall in what he hoped was a casual yet confident manner.

"Derek Michael Sanderson, of course. He's that famous admiral." The technician said with another laugh. "Where did you think you were; the Danny M. Stiles?" She said, referring to a popular pop musician. "Where we'd be dancing to the entrance of your heart." It was the name of his most popular song.

"Hah, funny." Hooper answered. He was familiar with the artist and that particular song. He hated both. "I had no idea." He pointed at the hatch. "I just wanted to be off that thing." He pointed back at the landing craft. "And off Space Ten."

"They're nuts." The technician said matter-of-factly.

"Yeah." Hooper smiled at her. "So, I'm Jim. Jim Hooper."

"Tabitha." The technician smiled. "Welcome aboard, Jim."

"Did everyone make it?"

Tabitha shrugged. “I suppose. There’s about twenty of us on board. From that last meeting, I think that’s everyone.”

“Twenty.” Hooper whistled. “That’s not a lot, genetically speaking.”

“What?”

“That’s not really enough people to create a genetically diverse, sustainable population.” Hooper shrugged. “Of course, we can splice our genes around to maybe make it work.”

“Are you a doctor?”

“No; I’m an engineer. You?”

“I was a passenger,” Tabitha said. “I was...” She teared up. “My husband... He...” She took a deep breath. “Alec read that stupid book and believed everything in it.” Anger flashed in her wet eyes. “And he tried to convince me, but I didn’t want to listen. So, I left.”

“Good for you.” Hooper nodded. “Who needs them?”

Tabitha opened her mouth to speak, then just turned and walked off, leaving Hooper alone in the hangar.

For a long moment, Hooper stood there alone waiting for someone to come by. When no one did, he walked to a communication panel. He pushed a green button with ‘talk’ engraved into it. “Hello?”

“Comms,” a voice responded. “What do you need?”

“I’m the ship that just docked,” Hooper said. “Jim Hooper. I was hoping to talk to whoever was in charge.”

There was a long pause. “We’re going to have an all-hands meeting in the mess hall in about two hours... Fifteen hundred hours ship’s time. Until then, find yourself a cabin, unpack and get settled.”

Hooper looked back toward the landing craft. In his panic to leave Space Ten, he had not brought anything with him. “I don’t have anything.” He said into the speaker. “I left in a rush.”

“Well then unpacking should be a breeze shouldn’t it?” The voice responded. “Comms out.”

Hooper stared at the green button for a long moment, deciding on whether to press it again. He looked down at his watch and set a two-hour timer since he still didn't know what the exact time it was on the ship. Finally, he turned and walked toward the central spine of the ship- because of their unique propulsion system, LINACs were all set up in the same manner; a large main bridge at one end, support departments, then living quarters with a centrally located mess hall, and two large asteroids as shields on either end.

When he got to the shaft, he reached out and grasped the cable running up toward the living quarters nearer the bridge and other facilities. With only twenty people on a ship designed to carry four hundred- a hundred fifty crew and two hundred-fifty passengers, he was sure he could have his choice of living quarters. And hopefully find some unattended clothes in his size.

Chapter 4

Violet walked across the mess hall toward the cable. She was frustrated because on Space Ten, she had been the leader of the One Generation group, but now that she was on the DMS, she had been pushed to the side by Tom Miner, who had declared himself the de-facto leader of the ship. Mainly because he was the highest-ranking military member as a senior Captain, and he was also a pilot. *He'll probably promote himself to Major* she thought angrily. And to make matters worse for her, he did not seem interested in her as a partner. Violet had decided to get close with another pilot; Ernie- to have at least some inroads to leader discussions on the ship. She thought back to her times with Jeffery. While she was assigned to get close to him to keep One Generation informed of the plans of Space Ten, she had enjoyed her times with him. And genuinely missed him.

When she got to the cable, she looked up and down the massive shaft out of habit. She didn't expect to see anyone because of the very small amount of people aboard the massive ship. To her surprise, about a dozen decks down there was someone riding the cable up towards her.

Wanting to have someone to talk to, she decided to wait to see who it was. So, she sat on the edge of the shaft, legs dangling down and waited patiently.

After only a little while, Jim's head appeared over the mess hall deck. He was facing the other way and didn't notice Violet sitting on the edge.

"Hey," Violet said.

Jim turned his head to look at her, recognizing her immediately. "Violet." As his feet reached the deck, he stepped off onto it. "Man, it's good to see a friendly face."

"Yeah, it sure is! I'm glad you made it, Jim," she said.

"I almost didn't."

"Oh? Where on Earth were you?"

Jim shook his head. "I wasn't; I was out on Titan on a wild-goose-chase of a rescue mission with that stupid Lieutenant Wick." He pointed down. "I flew over on a ship right after we got back to Space Ten. I tried calling you, Fields, Serra, and Jean. No one answered. Then I saw that ship heading for the DMS and I figured everyone was leaving Space Ten instead of just staying on Earth. Then I..." He hesitated, not sure if he wanted to mention killing a crewmember by shoving them into the shaft. Before, killing non-One Generation people was considered a badge of honor. Even so, it bothered him for some reason. "Then I took that landing craft and flew over here."

"I didn't know you could fly a ship." She smiled at him. She was sure from her previous interactions with him that Hooper would jump at the chance for a physical relationship with her. If he was also a pilot, it would be the quickest and easiest way to gain access to leaders' meetings. "Nice."

"Oh, I can't. I definitely can't." Jim shuddered. "Thank God for auto docking, right?"

Violet's smile faded.

"It's just an expression," Jim said as his face reddened. "That's it."

"You need a new expression," Violet said.

Jim looked up. "Yeah, yeah. What I need first is a cabin." He frowned. "And some clothes."

"Traveling light?"

"I barely got off that stupid ship as it was. I didn't have time to pack." He pointed at her. "Seems I didn't get the message about the plan to steal a ship instead of staying on Earth from our glorious leader."

"Well, first off, I'm not in charge anymore, and second, it was a last-minute opportunity that presented itself. You're probably not the only one without a lot of personal items."

"You're not in charge?"

Violet shook her head. “Captain Tom Miner is our new glorious leader. It seems this is now a military operation.”

“It does make it easier, having an established chain of command.” Jim said. “Especially with the small number of people aboard. Everyone’s going to have to do double duty to keep us moving toward... where are we going?”

“No idea.” Violet answered.

“Well, wherever we’re going, it will go smoother with a good chain of command.”

Violet sighed- she was aware that the majority of people on the ship were military and because of that, one of the worries she had was how she was going to control them. Or at the very least be involved in decision making. “I suppose.”

Jim smiled. “So... There’s an all-hands in a couple of hours and I need to find a cabin before that.” A thought occurred to him. “Hey, what’s ship’s time?”

Violet looked at her watch. “Thirteen-oh-seven.”

“Thanks.” Jim adjusted the time on his watch to match the ship’s. “So... where’s your cabin?” He asked casually.

“What?” Violet stared at him. “What are you getting at, Hooper?”

“Oh!” Jim startled. “No! I was just trying to figure out where others were picking their cabins so I can be close to everyone else. It’s a really big ship.” He hesitated. “Have you found any stuff from the original crew while you were getting settled?”

“What do you mean stuff?”

He shrugged. “All I have is what I’m wearing.”

“Ahh,” Violet smirked. “I see.” She pointed up. “We all seem to be about ten to fifteen decks up, maybe a couple of people per deck. There’s no sense crowding each other with all the space we have.”

“Yeah, I suppose that’s true.” Jim said. “And did you find stuff... clothes from other people?”

"Now that you mention it, I did. The first couple of cabins I found had some uniforms hung up in them. I didn't go through the drawers though."

"Male or female?"

Violet laughed. "Beggars can't be choosers; I think the saying is."

Jim frowned.

"One was female, the other male. All you'd need to do is just cut the rank and names off them. Whichever one fit you. If they're not long enough, you can cut them into shorts."

"That's true. What cabin was that in?"

Violet looked up. "I don't know; twelve, thirteen decks up, I think. There were other people looking around so you might need to ask again when you get up there."

"Thanks," Jim said. "I'm going to try and find a place before the all hands."

"Good luck." Violet said.

"Thanks. See you at the meeting." Jim turned and grasped the cable, letting it pull him out of view.

Violet watched the man move up and away from her for a while, then looked down the miles-long shaft. She snorted and shook her head. "Thank God. Yeah, right." An unusual pang of guilt ran through her as she decided to stay right where she was until the all hands meeting. She really had no other place to go and no duties to perform.

Chapter 5

Jim Hooper rode up on the cable, making an effort to not look down- embarrassed for using what until recently had merely been a common expression of relief instead of an actual thanks to a supposed Deity.

"Thank God," he said again, sourly. "Real smooth, Jim."

A shirt fluttered past him.

Jim reached out, trying to grab it but he was too late. "What in the world?" He looked up- the shaft was empty. "Hey!" He shouted.

After a few moments, a boot sailed into view a dozen decks or so above him. It arced into the shaft and dropped by Jim in slow motion thanks to the reduced gravity. Even so, he was unable to reach it. He looked up again. "HEY!" He shouted at the top of his lungs. "YOU UP THERE- THROWING CLOTHES!"

A young man peered over the edge. "Who me?"

"Yes, you! Who else is throwing clothes?!" Jim shouted back. "Stop doing that!"

The youth looked down at him for a long moment. "Why?"

"Because I need clothes! So, stop it!" Jim started to climb the rope, hand over hand to get to the deck where the youth was- nearly ten decks up.

The youth looked over the edge again. "Okay!"

Jim continued to climb up the cable as it also ran up, moving him closer to where the youth was; deck thirty-five. As he climbed, another boot sailed past him. "What the hell?" he shouted up. "I asked you to stop that!"

"I already threw the other one off; what good is one boot?" The youth called down.

Jim shook his head but didn't answer, concentrating on climbing instead.

After another couple of minutes, he stepped onto deck thirty-five.

"Hey." Said the youth amicably. "I'm Slim."

"Slim?" Jim wiped his sweaty brow with the bottom of his shirt. "Really?"

The youth shrugged. "Everyone calls me that. My real name is Robert. Robert Garvin."

"Why don't they call you Rob, or Bob, or even Bobby?"

The youth -who was indeed lanky- shrugged. "I got no idea."

"I'm Jim. Jim Hooper."

"Nice to meet you." Slim smiled.

"Why in the world are you throwing clothes into the shaft?"

"I don't need them," Slim answered. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "I'm emptying out my cabin."

"So, you're just going to create a pile of junk down by the reactor?"

"Sure?"

"That the techs are going to have to walk over or around while they are tending the reactor core?"

Slim considered that for a long moment. "Huh. I didn't think about that. I just want them out is all."

"How about you let me look at them first; I'm in the market for new clothes." Jim gestured at the cabin. "May I?"

Slim shrugged. "I suppose." He started for his cabin. "Go look through them."

The pair started toward the cabin.

"So, are you next door to your parents?" Jim asked as he stepped into the cabin. There was a pile of clothes on the bed. "Are you throwing out all of this?"

"Yeah. I put my stuff away already." He gestured at the pile. "Take what you want, and I'll toss the rest."

Jim sighed. "Why don't you put them all in an empty cabin so that if someone else needs clothes, they don't have to carry them up twenty-five miles?"

"Yeah, sure." Slim said noncommittally.

"Listen, this place is our home for the next few months and we don't need it to be a pig sty before we even start out."

"A what?"

"A pig sty."

"What's that?"

"It's where pigs live."

"Oh." Slim said. "Why's that bad?"

"Pig sties are filthy. We don't need that here."

"Okay..."

Jim started going through the clothes- they seemed to be all the same size, so he started moving colors and styles he liked to one side. He turned and smiled at the youth. "You know, when I was your age, I'm not sure I would have wanted my parents in a cabin right next door."

"What?"

Jim pointed at the wall toward the next cabin. "Having your parents next door to you."

"They're not."

Jim added more clothes to his growing pile. "Good for you then. What deck are they on?" He asked, deciding he wanted to be on the same deck as adults if at all possible.

"Oh, they're not on any deck."

"What?"

"They're coming on the next ship." Slim explained. "When they heard that the Earth was a goner, they wanted me off the Moon as soon as possible. Then when my Mom heard about Space Ten's mission, she got me on the ship. She's a geneticist. So that will be handy on the new planet. Dad's an ion engine mechanic. Mom had stuff she had to finish up on the Moon, so she got me on Space Ten and then she said they'd be on the next ship out of the system."

"Oh. Sorry."

"For what?"

"Your parents." Jim said.

"Why are you sorry about them?"

"Well... I... You know."

"Know what?" Slim asked.

Jim decided he didn't want to be the one to explain it to the youth. "That they're heading toward the wrong planet." He lied instead.

"Oh, right." Slim smiled. "Captain Miner said he was sending out a signal so all the other ships will stop going to Arcturus and head for Proxima Centauri. There're probably dozens of them by now, I would think. So, I won't see my parents until we get there."

"We're going to Proxima Centauri?"

"Pretty sure that's what they said. Gonna be really glad when my parents get there."

Jim stared at the young man, deciding what he should tell him. "Did... Did you go down to Earth?"

"Why should I have? Everyone I know lives on the Moon. I've never even been to Earth." Slim pointed at the pile of clothes. "You done?"

"Sure." Jim smiled. "I'm done." He looked at the large pile, realizing it was too much to carry. "Huh." He said. An idea occurred to him. "Hey, give me just a second more, okay?"

"I suppose." Slim said. He moved to an easy chair and flopped into it. "If you're quick about it. Got lots of things to do, ya know?"

"Yeah, I know." Jim said, not knowing at all. He bolted out of the room and into the next cabin. He pulled the comforter off the bed and went back to Slim's room.

"Smart." Slim said, gesturing at the large cover.

Jim unfurled the comforter and flipped it open, allowing it to slowly settle on the lower half of Slim's bed. Once it was down, he tossed the clothes he had chosen into the center of it. "Excellent." He said as he gathered up two diagonal corners, tying them into a knot. He repeated the action with the remaining two corners. "Done," he said as he turned, hefting the clothes onto his shoulder. "Thanks."

"Sure." Slim said. He pushed himself out of the chair. "So, you're saying I should stick these other clothes next door?"

"Yes, then the engineers going into the reactor room won't come looking for you." Jim smiled. "And you can let everyone else know at the meeting that you have extra clothes in the cabin beside you in case someone needs them. I'm sure they'll appreciate it."

"I suppose." Slim started for the door.

Jim scooted ahead of him. "Thanks again," he said as he stepped into the corridor. Without looking back, he headed for the chute to go up another couple of decks to find a cabin with adult neighbors.

Chapter 6

Captain Tom Miner sat in the dining hall alone- he was over thirty minutes early for the meeting. He was sitting at a table near a far wall, so he had a clear view of both entrances to the area. He wasn't looking however; his eyes were closed as he gathered his thoughts for what would be the first meeting of the mission. The amount of things that needed to be accomplished for a ship the size of the DMS to operate even at minimal efficiency was staggering. Especially for the number of crewmembers he had.

Voices brought him out of his introspection as two people came into the room. He was struck by the age difference between the two: one in his early twenties, the other in her mid-sixties. He had seen several crewmembers but not all of them. He knew the youngest was about sixteen or seventeen and the oldest was in his hundred-twenties. He hoped that the majority of them were closer to the age that would be interested in having children. Otherwise the colony would be gone in one generation. Or worse; an angry, lonely two.

"Hey Captain," The older one- Terry Fishborne said, as she walked to the food dispenser. She had joined the service later in life, after a One-Gen operation had not only destroyed the munitions building she managed, it had also killed her husband and two children who had been visiting that day. She had learned after the event that the One Gen terrorists had chosen an 'open house' day as the day to attack to ensure they not only killed the people making munitions, but also their families as well. If Terry had not stepped outside to retrieve her two-year old's sippy cup from their vehicle, she too would have been inside as the entire building exploded. As it was, it had thrown her into her vehicle with the rear hatch closing behind her as it flipped over in the first of several barrel rolls. It ended up in a ditch about twenty feet away which shielded it from the subsequent blasts as the munitions exploded as well. It has taken the rescue efforts five hours to find her. After a month in the hospital, she had walked straight to a recruiting station and joined the Navy. Thanks to her degrees in chemical engineering and metallurgy, she was granted a commission as a first lieutenant. Thanks to her age,

she was the oldest lieutenant in the service- even before humanity had been decimated.

"Fifteen minutes early for the fifteen minutes early, huh, Tom?" The young one said.

"Yeah, something like that," Tom answered as he leaned back in his chair.

"He's gathering his thoughts, Herman," Terry said. He smiled at Tom. "The first meeting is always the toughest." Terry always acted as a mentor to officers that while they outranked her, were decades younger. "We can wait outside if you want, Cap'."

Tom smiled back. "It's fine, Gills," He said, using the other's nickname. "If I haven't thought of it by now, it'll keep for the next meeting."

"These are going to be a regular event?" Herman said. "Man, I figured those were a thing of the past since we left Space Ten and the almighty Chief."

"Well," Tom said, "This is a military operation, but even if it wasn't, the dissemination of information is key to a smooth journey. So, yeah; there will be meetings."

"Huh, okay." Private Bitburger said. He looked at the woman. "You going to be giving meetings too?"

Terry shrugged as she took a cup of coffee from the dispenser. "Only if everyone needs to know about ammunition supplies. I imagine this meeting is going to cover ship's operations." She took a sip. "Which means I'm not going to get to say anything." She raised her cup as a toast to the young man. "This time."

"What a crime," Herman said with a laugh. He pointed at Tom. "Think you can work the esteemed Lieutenant Fishborne in somewhere, Tom? Double tap it so there's one less meeting?"

Tom stood. He stared at the young man. "Private Bitburger, since there is time, maybe you can go find your military bearing before this meeting starts."

"Wha...?" The Private gave Tom a double take. "I... what?" He finished.

Tom continued to stare at him. "Maybe you can go find your military bearing before this meeting starts." He said flatly.

"I find..." Bitburger stammered. "Sir?"

"I'll translate." Terry said, "Get lost, Herman. Seems the Captain wants to talk to me in private not to me *with* a Private."

Herman's face reddened. "Geeze. Okay then." With that he turned and walked off.

Terry grinned wide. "Kids. What can you do?"

Tom sat. "Man." He put his face in his hands, elbows on his knees.

Terry moved beside him and sat as well. "You okay?"

Tom lifted his head. "No, Terry." He held his hands out, gesturing across the empty room. "I don't have any control over these people. At all. Or respect from any of them." He sighed. "At all."

"Well you need to get it. And quick, *Captain*."

Tom looked at the woman. "How? Up until now, I was the guy in the meetings who was everyone's pal. *Just call me Tom*, I told everyone. *We're all the same*, I'd say."

"That was then, and this is now," Terry said. "The situation has changed. And you need to take control of it." She slapped the man on the shoulder as she stood. "So, get yourself together, unleash the cocky pilot you are deep inside and let everyone see that you are understandably, obviously, and without any doubt the only person on the ship who can make this mission a success."

Tom looked at Terry. "You know a lot of pilots?"

Terry looked up at the ceiling. "Ehhh...I may have chatted with one or two while sitting behind them dropping ordinance at the proving ground, and you're all the same." She smirked "I'm convinced there's a superiority pill they give you in flight school right before you graduate. Isn't there?"

"That's classified." Tom stood as well. "So, I'm understandably and obviously the only hope for this mission?"

"Damn right you are." Terry poked him in the chest with a finger. "And it's high time you told everyone." She looked toward the far

entrance as several crewmen entered. "Now go greet your crew as they arrive."

"Thanks, Gills."

"No problem, *Captain*." Terry answered. "I'm going to sit and drink my coffee and watch the show." Now she toasted Tom with her cup. "Break a leg."

With a nod, Tom moved toward the people who had arrived.

Terry was pleased that the young Captain picked up a swagger as he walked toward them.

Chapter 7

Tom looked around the room. He knew the number of people on the ship but seeing them in the massive dining area made the number look miniscule. "Okay folks, we've got a lot going on and we're spread pretty thin," he said.

"You got that right, Tom." Ernie laughed. "Damned thin."

Inwardly Tom cringed- thinking he should have taken the time to speak to all his officers beforehand. "Well, we're going to make the best of it, Lieutenant LaBianca," he said, hoping the man -as well as the other officers would catch the hint. "And once we get into an operational rhythm, I think we'll be just fine."

"Sounds good, Sir," Ernie said with much more serious tone. "So, what's the plan, Captain?"

Relieved, Tom continued: "It seems to me that our main priorities are propulsion, navigation, and life services. So, what I think we need..."

"Oy, Cap'!" A woman - a red haired civilian- in the back stood. "Aboot th' subject o' life services an' before yeh get too far along in your meetin', I just wanna to say to whoever is tossing crap down the shaft, they need t' stop because if'n I catch them... it's baw's on the slates!"

"I see. That sounds like a reasonable request," Tom said having no idea that anyone was even doing that, or really what the threat was the woman had just made. He was sure from having dealt with the hot-headed Scot, that it involved a physical assault of some sort. "I can't believe I even have to say it but stop throwing things down the chute. Thanks Alyssa." He shook his head. "How about we hold comments until I get through my prepared speech?"

"Sorry, Cap'; seemed like a good a'time as any t' speak m'mind." Alyssa Whitburn sat roughly.

"No problem. So, as I was saying, we have three main ship's functions that need to be manned throughout the day."

Now a corporal raised his hand.

Tom tried to ignore him. "Now, luckily we've got at least one tech in each of those fields aboard, so I'm looking for volunteers to get at least four folks to join those sections and get a quick and dirty day of training, so we've got five people each on those."

The corporal waved his hand over his head.

"The other ship's functions such as communications, sciences, and medical, we can handle as needed, I think."

"Sir?" The corporal said. He stretched his hand up high.

"And with four or five people, we can run shifts for twenty-four hours ops without too much stress for..."

"Sir!" The corporal said again.

"What is it, Corporal Fields?" Tom snapped.

"What do you mean, run shifts?"

"What?" Tom was caught off guard by the question.

"What do you mean run shifts?"

"What do you mean, what do I mean?" Tom snapped. "You don't know what a shift is? What are you, stupid?"

"I know what a shift is, *Sir*," Corporal Fields said. "What I mean is why are we running shifts when the mission is to destroy the ship."

The words hit Tom like a ton of bricks. "What?"

Corporal Fields stood. "What I mean Tom, is what happened to what we were all talking about the entire time we were on Space Ten?" He brought his hands up and gestured around the room. "All must die so Earth can live! Remember?"

"Earth is dead, Jack," Tom said. "What's your plan now?" A terrible thought occurred to him. "Wait. You want to blow up this ship?"

"No." Fields smiled as he shook his head. "Of course not. That'd be stupid."

"Then sit down because..."

"What I want us to do is ram this ship into Space Ten to finish our mission," Fields continued, "which we would have been able to do if you and Violet," he wheeled around and pointed at Violet, "hadn't said to do nothing until we got back to Earth." He turned back around and pointed at the Captain. He raised his voice, "So it's your fault that we aren't all dead and the Earth was saved!"

"The Earth is dead, Jack." Tom said again. "It was dead before we even left Arcturus. Now sit down."

"Or what?" He crossed his arms defiantly. "What're you going to do, Tom?"

"How about I sit you down, Corporal," Ernie said as he stood. "And by the time I'm done, you'll be bloody and a private. Now sit down and shut up."

Fields looked between the two men, then sat with a final: "Huh!"

"As you were saying, Captain," Ernie said as he gestured at Tom. "Please continue."

Tom nodded. "Right. Right. As I was saying..." For a moment didn't remember what he had been saying. "Uhhh."

"Shifts," Terry said helpfully. "Running shifts."

"Right, shifts. We're going to have to run shifts to keep this ship operating within minimal parameters. And..." He looked around the room at the eighteen people sitting before him- one was on the bridge and one was in the reactor core. "And... With only twenty-one of us total..." He sat back down. "All right then. Let's have this out." He pointed at Fields. "Who thinks like he does; that we need to all kill ourselves?"

No one said anything. Most of the people wouldn't even make eye contact with him.

"Come on people. Spit it out."

Private Sierra raised his hand.

Tom chuckled. "I think we're well past raising hands, Private Sierra."

"I'm with Jack," Sierra said.

"Yeah! Thanks Ian," the Corporal said. He looked around the room, "Anyone else?"

Now no one would make eye contact with him.

"Come on!" Sierra said angrily.

"You all know you want to!" Fields added.

When no one said anything, Tom continued: "Corporal Fields, Private Sierra, I appreciate your honesty. I really do. But that was then, and this is now." He looked at Terry. "The situation has changed."

"Nothing's changed!" Fields said. "All must die so Earth can live."

"There are no humans left on Earth. They're all dead." Tom said. "Earth is dead. Or it's dead to us. It can heal and rebuild as it wants. There're no humans left there to get in the way. The ants will probably take over the place. They outnumber everything else on the planet." Tom leaned forward in his seat. "Seriously. When we were on Earth and things looked bleak, it seemed like a good idea to just end it all. But now..."

"Now? What's changed?" Fields said.

"Now we have a chance to start over. On a new planet where we..."

"Can make the same mistakes we made before!" Fields interrupted.

"Fields, if you interrupt the Captain again, I'm going to shut your mouth personally," Ernie said. He had the young Corporal by almost thirty pounds and six inches. "Now shut up." He smiled at Tom. "You were saying?"

Tom took a deep breath, then another. "As I was saying, while I was on Earth, while *we* were there, what One Generation was saying made sense. We were killing our planet right under us. There didn't seem to be any reason to go on. Ending it seemed the most reasonable thing to do." When he got nods from several people, he continued. "With the discovery of each habitable planet where they...we... destroyed yet another species, killing off mankind seemed like the best way to

serve the galaxy. The scourge that was Humanity needed to be stopped." He sighed. "But then..."

"Oh, here we go," Fields said. "Now he's going to start talking about God. God! God! God!" He looked at Ernie, and thanks to the stern look he got in return, he looked down at the deck. "Sorry."

"But then," Tom continued, "In a twist of galactic proportions, Humanity was destroyed without us having to do anything. And now, we." He gestured at the people in the room, "We have a chance to make a new, better life for ourselves. At Proxima Centauri. One of the planets that we found in the system that was inhabited, but not by any intelligent life. It's several millennia behind Earth on the evolutionary track. And it's an easy six-month trip. Closer to five months, really."

"But I heard that planet has limited resources. Not near enough for everyone." This time it was Private Alystock who interrupted. "What are we going to do about the limited resources there, Sir?"

"You're half right." Tom said. "It is true that the planet does have limited resources. But that was for a hundred thousand people as a full-blown colony. We aren't anywhere near that number." He smirked. "And it will take us a really long time to get anywhere near that number. It will take a dozen generations probably. And by then we will have pushed out to other planets, or mined Sol for resources. Or some other planet. It won't be an issue at all at that point."

"Oh. Well, that makes sense." Private Alystock nodded. "Then that does sound like a good plan, Sir." He turned and looked at Fields. "What do you think, Jack? A new planet for us to build the right way?"

Fields wouldn't look at him.

"How about you, Ira? Come on, you want to, right? It will be great. A new planet and a new adventure. Just imagine what we'll be doing day to day."

Private Sierra looked at him, "Yeah, I mean, if we do things right this time." He looked at Tom. "Right, Captain Miner? That's what you mean, right? We'll do things the right way there?"

Tom nodded. "Yes. I truly mean that. We can build our society to live with nature instead of trying to force the environment to do what we want. Within reason, that is."

Ira looked at Fields. “Hey, what do you say to that, Jack? That sounds pretty good, right?”

Fields got to his feet. “No, damn it all, it doesn’t!”

“So, what do you suggest we do?” This time it was Private Alystock. “Just march ourselves out an airlock for the betterment of the universe?” He crossed his legs. “Yeah, no thanks to that. I’m for going to Proxima and starting over.”

Nods from the others in the room showed that that was the consensus.

“And I want to see my parents again,” Slim spoke up. “When they meet up with us later.”

“Your parents are dead,” Fields said. “Don’t be stupid.”

“What?” Slim looked at Tom. “They’re not dead, right Captain Miner. Right? Tell him they’re not dead.”

“We won’t know anything until we get to Proxima Centauri and give any ships that got our message time to get there, kid.” Tom said even though he was sure no other ships would ever show up. “That means we need to get there and set up shop so we’re ready for them.”

“I agree completely.” Terry said. “Are we all in agreement that the good Captain’s plan is acceptable?” She looked at Fields. “Corporal Fields, are you copacetic to this plan?”

“No, I’m not copacetic, Ma’am.”

Hooper had been sitting at the back, keeping to himself. He stood. “I nominate me the head of security. Any seconds?”

Everyone turned to look at him.

“Who the hell are you?” Tom said.

“Hooper. Jim Hooper.” He smiled wide. “The new head of security, I think.”

“I don’t know you, so I’m sure as hell not putting you in charge of anything, pal.”

“I know him,” Violet offered. “He’s good.”

"Yeah; the recommendation of one person." Tom said as he shook his head. "Sorry pal; you need more than that." He startled. "What makes you think you can head up security?"

"I am ...was an operational loads engineer on Space Ten." He looked at Fields. "So, I know how to work airlocks."

"I don't think that's necessary," Tom said, taken aback by the man's callousness. "I mean, there aren't that many of us left as it is." He looked at the young man. "Corporal Fields. *Jack*. We need you."

"Great, now I'm just supposed to go along with this plan. What do you think about that?" Fields said.

"What?" Tom looked around, not sure who he was speaking to.

"He does that," Violet said. "I'm thinking the airlock might be the best thing to do with Fields and all the other people living in his head."

"No one is going to get put in an airlock," Tom said. He gave Hooper a stern look. "Right?"

Hooper nodded at him. "Yes, Sir." He sat back down, hoping he had planted the seed that he needed to be in a place of authority. "Whatever you say, Captain."

"So, what do you say, Corporal Fields?" Tom said. "We need everyone aboard to make this mission a success. Every single crewmember is a critical part of the operation." He held out a hand toward the young man. "What do you say?"

Corporal Fields shrugged. Everyone was looking at him. He looked around the room, eyes stopping on an empty corner. "He says it like it was an option, don't he? Like I'm just supposed..."

"Fields!" Violet snapped. "Stop acting crazy long enough to answer the man! The mission of One Generation now is to establish an ecologically responsible colony on a new planet. One Generation to build the future."

"Yeah?" Fields looked at her. "It is?"

"Yes." Violet sighed. "Yes, it is. I'll be sure to send you a written copy of the Operations Order." She rolled her eyes then gestured at Captain Miner. "Captain?"

"Corporal Fields, are you willing to work with us on our... new mission to get to Proxima Centauri and establish an environmentally responsible colony?"

"Sure, I suppose so. If that's the mission." Fields said. "I mean, who am I to argue with orders, right?"

Tom didn't answer because he wasn't sure who the young man was asking.

Fields sat without another word.

Tom leaned back in his chair. "Well... Okay then? As I was saying, we need several people for navigation, propulsion, and life services. We've got a pretty good trajectory so we're looking at under six months."

"And once we're there how are we going to be able to live?" Violet asked. "Just how scarce are these resources?"

A woman on the far left raised her hand.

"Well, they're scarce, but not really. Not for our numbers." Tom said. "The original mission would have included over a hundred fifty thousand colonists on the planet. We're there with less than two dozen. We've plenty of edible flora and fauna." He looked at Doctor Cortez. "Doctor Cortez, do you have a quick update on the resources we'll be dealing with?"

Doctor Cortez stood. "I have been studying the reconnaissance drone's reports for the planet. Proxima Centauri Beta Three is well suited for our needs." He smirked. "We can come up with a snappier name for it once we're settled. P-C-B-3 doesn't really roll off the tongue."

Tom noticed the woman's upraised hand and nodded at her. She nodded back and lowered her hand.

"Great. Here we go again." Bitburger smiled at Doctor Cortez. "Next we'll be doing morning formations."

Doctor Cortez cleared his throat. "Proxima Centauri Beta Three's resources are spread across the globe with a concentration in the tropical zones along the equatorial landmasses, decreasing to the polar caps. This is typical of most habitable planets. There are large pockets of petroleum and natural gas on two of the continents in the temperate

zone as well as a massive reserve under the southern ice cap. The system contains many iron-ore asteroids that also contain large deposits of gold, silver, and other elements that are rare on Earth. There are large areas of volcanic rock that can be quarried for energy efficient housing. True it wouldn't have been enough for an entire city, but a settlement to suit our needs? Easily. Plus, there are silicates available to manufacturer windows as well as doors and electronics later on. Heavy and inert metals are also available on the planet." He spread his arms out wide. "Of course, the landing crafts of this ship can also be used as temporary housing until we build more permanent structures." He looked around the room. "Sergeant Uhlein? What say you?"

Sergeant Uhlein stood. "As far as building those structures, the DMS is outfitted with thirty two EM-SQUATS so with a couple of days of swapping out available appendages and a week for fabricating new ones, we can have plenty of workers to cut that volcanic stone and assemble it while we do other things. Concrete is absurdly easy to make. I can whip up a mixer in an afternoon. The biggest problem is that we will need architectural drawings for the robots to work from." Now he looked around the room. "We got some of those? Or someone who can draw them?"

No one said anything for a long moment, then Slim slowly raised his hand.

Sergeant Uhlein smiled at the youth. "Ahh, what have we here? Architect major?"

"I was studying architecture and civil engineering. I was in my third year at Florida Polytech, Sir."

"Bradley works... Robert, right?"

"Folks call me Slim, Bradley."

"Third year?" Bradley smiled. "You look kinda young to be a junior."

"I'm really good at numbers. Force loads, compression strength and stuff. I can see it in my head."

"Well Slim, you're now designing our new settlement."

"What?"

"Three years at Fla-Poly is probably better than anyone else aboard so you're it."

Hooper stood as well. "I can help with the engineering if you'd like. I can convert sketches into architectural renderings" He said; glad to be able to show his worth. "I can do that along with security." He added with a smirk.

"Let's solve one problem at a time." Tom said. He smiled at the two men. "Well, we've got plenty of time before we get to where we're going so that's plenty of time to have plans drawn up and gone over." He looked at Uhlein. "Anything else?"

The woman raised her hand again.

"Well... I hate to give bad news..." Uhlein lied, "But we've got another problem."

"What's that?" Tom asked as he gestured for Slim and Hooper to sit. "No sense keeping it to yourself." He looked at the young woman. "I haven't forgotten."

She obliged by lowering her hand again.

"The EM-SQUATS will easily be able to construct at least the rough construction; walls, roofs, run main sewer lines, that sort of thing."

"Nice." Tom said. "So?"

"Well, we're going to be short on other things. Schematics for windows, hinges, toilets, everyday stuff. Or things like microwave ovens, coffee pots, lighting. Even things like internal combustion engines, that sort of thing." He sat. "I mean... we can get some basic living going but besides the landing crafts, we're not going to have any real good means of transportation for little trips around the neighborhood, know what I mean? And I've looked Sir; there aren't any plans for them in our computers. I know how to make a still so we can make fuel, but we won't have anything to burn it in."

"Huh." Tom had not considered that. "Well..." He considered this for a long moment. "We... we can domesticate one of the larger quadrupeds to ride, right Doctor Cortez?"

"That's a long process. Especially if we need to breed them to better fit human physiology." He chuckled. "And we can't breed them

into microwaves or light bulbs." He leaned back in his chair. "Wonder how Chief will solve that problem." He muttered.

"Oh, I'm sure they won't have that problem," Uhlein said matter-of-factly.

"What?" Tom asked. "How do you know?"

"Well, Space Ten was better outfitted than the DMS. Remember it was supposed to set up the initial colony until the rest of us showed up, so it's loaded with all sorts of experts. Plus, right before I left, I saw in the message traffic that they were scouring the system for helpful tech. Chief Hauser practically gutted the Research and Development floor at the Ministry of Defense personally before he left. I'm sure they got at least a couple nuke power boxes, plus plenty of plans. There's no way they didn't just lift the entire engineering databanks of the Department of Housing and Development, Civil Engineers, Universities, and whatever else they came across. Data storage capacity is like barbed wire; miles long and dirt cheap."

"Are you sure?" Tom asked, shocked at what he was hearing.

"They were swapping shields so most of the crew was sitting around with nothing to do for a few days. And there's like a hundred of them." Uhlein shrugged. "I sure would have run every ship I had all over the system grabbing stuff. Can't imagine they didn't."

"Maybe they'll share with us if we ask them." Slim offered. "We could just send..."

Uhlein laughed. "Yeah, right; we're the dregs of society. Unbelievers going to Hell. Why should they help us?"

Several other crewmembers laughed as well.

"Oh. I thought they were pretty friendly." Slim said. "Don't see how it would hurt to ask them to send us copies of all them plans. Since they're so friendly."

"Sure; friendly with each other." Uhlein said. "All the wars on Earth were because people of different beliefs clashed with each other and used their belief as reason to eliminate the other group of supposed unbelievers. If you just look at..."

"Let's just deal with what we can control," Tom interrupted. "We can have historical discussions while we're on the way." He looked back at the woman. "Renée, right?"

The woman nodded. "I'm sorry, I have a question but... it doesn't really fit into what we are discussing right now so never mind."

"No, please." Tom smiled at her. "What was your question?"

"It's stupid."

Tom sighed. "I don't see how it could be worse than some of the other things tossed around here."

"Why is it going to take us five months to get to Proxima Centauri? It's really close. We made it to Arcturus in almost that time and it's a whole lot farther."

Tom smiled. "First time in space?"

Renée nodded.

"We are too close. With Arcturus, we were thirty light years away so we could accelerate for a long period of time and get close to forty times the speed of light. Proxima Centauri is only five light years away so we can't accelerate anywhere near that or we'd never be able to stop in time."

"Okay, I was just curious. Sorry."

Tom smiled at her. "That was a completely understandable question." He said, then hoping to speak with the attractive woman more, he added. "We can discuss space travel and acceleration after the meeting if you'd like."

"Sure." She answered. "Thanks."

"So..." Tom clapped his hands together. "Where were we? We can't make lightbulbs, I think."

"Right." Doctor Cortez said. "But we can reverse engineer the technology we have on the ship. That gives us a whole lot of stuff right there." He smiled. "Hey, if I could get two or three folks, I could set up a retro department."

"Retro department?"

"Sure, Department of retro-engineering." Cortez slapped his knee. "If someone made it before, we might make it again, will be our motto."

Most of crewmembers laughed. One clapped.

Tom shook his head. "I'm glad you're having a good time with our dire situation, Doctor."

Doctor Cortez waved a hand dismissively. "What dire situation?" He then spread his arms out wide. "We've got the best minds around and plenty of time to work out the details before we get planet side. Give me three crew and I'll have everything ready to go when we get there. We'll have our own little paradise in no time."

Tom smiled at the man. "Okay, okay. But I don't think I can get you more than two bodies. We still need to fly this thing." He looked around the room. "Who has any background in practical engineering, electronics, or manufacture?"

Three crewmembers raised their hands.

"Look at that; very nice, folks," Tom said. He nodded at Doctor Cortez. "Things are looking up."

"Paradise here we come." Doctor Cortez said.

"So, we are going to split the tasks up evenly to handle propulsion, navigation, and life services." Tom leaned back in his chair. "And of course, the Retro Engineering Department..."

Chapter 8

"Status?"

"Everything's in the green."

"Just where I like it," Nick said. He put his hands behind his head. "Murphrid here we come." He closed his eyes. "Five months of nothing going on."

"Why are you even up here, Chief?" Jeffrey asked. "I mean... there have to be more interesting things going on below you could be involved in, right?"

Nick let out a long breath. "Rebecca is... planning the wedding. Hectic and stressed out is what I would be if I were involved with such dealings below decks."

"What's to plan?" Jeffrey shrugged. "A simple ceremony and hors d'oeuvres in the mess hall. That's all you need."

"What?" Nick looked over at Jeffrey. "What did you just say?"

"That's all you need, Chief. Nothing fancy at all."

Nick swiveled around putting his feet on the console between the two pilot seats as he faced the young man. "So, you're suicidal. That's going to be an issue."

"What are you talking about?"

"If you go down below and tell Lieutenant Lori Coyote Wick that all she's going to get is a short ceremony and hors d'oeuvres, she will kill you. Death would be quick and certain."

"Be serious, Chief."

"Have you ever actually been to a wedding?"

Jeffrey frowned. "Uhm... no?"

"Never? Really?" Nick was taken aback. "No kidding?"

"Nope. What's the big deal?"

"Doc!" Nick suddenly shouted, making Jeffrey startle.

"Nick?" Doctor Sanderson called back.

Nick beckoned the man. "Come'ere Doc; we need your professional opinion!"

Doctor Sanderson started toward the pair.

"Here we go." Jeffrey signed. "Next Gunny'll show up."

"What seems to be the problem?" Brian said as he approached.

Nick pointed at Jeffrey. "He's suicidal."

"Oh." Brian looked at the Lieutenant. "Well, we need to have a..."

"I am not suicidal." Jeffrey rolled his eyes. "Chief here is being overly dramatic. As usual."

"Oh yeah?" Nick pointed at his old friend. "Go and tell him. *I dare you*."

"Tell me what?"

Jeffrey looked up at Brian. "All I said was that Lori will be fine with a short ceremony and some hors d'oeuvres in the mess hall."

Brian staggered back, hand on his heart. "Gads!"

"Right?" Nick said. "There won't even be enough of him left to have a funeral."

"You're both overreacting."

"So, let me get this straight," Brian said. "You're going to go to that highly unstable pilot you've been playing the relationship dance with for over a year, that you've finally proposed to, and tell her, her wedding is no big deal." He looked at Nick. "How many crewmembers has she punched for just smarting off at her?"

"Oh, that's a tough one." Nick counted off on his fingers. "Six that I know of. There's probably double that number that never filed a report against her. Triple maybe if they were bigger than her. She's even balled up a fist at me once, now that I think about it."

Brian laughed out loud. "Wow."

Nick continued: "She's been busted to Lieutenant Junior Grade twice for striking superior officers. Hell, she should be a senior-grade lieutenant commander by now."

"A lot of that is probably explainable," Jeffrey offered. "Justifiable even."

Brian pointed at Nick. "That woman that Chief just described. That's the woman you're going to say, 'Listen baby, we'll just exchange vows in the hallway and have some cheese on crackers afterwards.' and expect to live to tell the tale?"

"We have cheese?" Jeffrey said.

"Since we started milking that calf down amidships, we do." Brian squatted down. "Don't change the subject. You need to make sure this wedding is special."

"Well..." Jeffrey pointed at Nick. "He's hiding out up here to not be involved with the planning of his wedding! What about that?"

"My wedding, since you obviously don't know," Nick said. "Is going to be an intimate affair with the entire crew invited, ice carvings of swans, food, dancing, and plenty of alcohol. It's going to run at least twelve hours so all the crew will be able to work their shift and still come to it and join in the revelry." He cocked his head to the side. "Actually, now that I think about it, it's a standard Warrant Officer party."

"I love those Warrant Officer parties." Brian said.

Jeffrey opened his mouth then closed it. "Hmmm..."

"Now, I suppose since Lori is acting as Rebecca's Maid of Honor, you could ride the coattails of my extravaganza and we could have a dual wedding." Nick offered.

"It beats getting beat up," Brian pointed out. "I'd love to see Wick make Lieutenant Commander before I croak."

"She'd make a great Commander since we're not going to be having a huge military."

Brian winked at Nick. "Sure, sure. Of course, she would make a great Wing Commander if we end up building a carrier."

"You think we need a carrier?"

"Absolutely." Brian said. "I mean, if you're going to be appointed Admiral of the Fleets, you need a flagship." He gestured around. "Can't be a LINAC. You need something flashy."

"What about a Corvette?"

"Ehh. Too small." Brian said. "Maybe if we doubled its size. And painted it red."

"Red, huh?" Nick rubbed his chin. "Hey, wait; I thought I was retiring when we got planet side. All I want to do is fish and drink beer."

"We can paint flames on the front of it." Brian said seductively.

"Oooh; flames." Nick pursed his lips. "But beer and fishing are hard to pass up."

"Someone'll need to set up a brewery first." Brian winked. "Say Nick, did you know the ancient Babylonians were the first civilization to brew beer?"

Nick leaned toward the man. "I did not."

"Well you see what happened was..."

"If you two are finished." Jeffrey pushed himself out of his seat. "I think I'll go below and see what's going on."

"Go be sociable," Nick said. He looked at the view screen. "When's the next relief due?"

"Lincoln's right seat." Jeffrey looked at his watch. "In about forty minutes."

"Lincoln's right seat?" Nick said. "I haven't signed off on any new pilots."

"Lieutenant Biggs will be left seat keeping an eye out on things." Jeffrey smiled. "Got to get more pilots trained up, you know. Especially if you're going to have Wick manage an entire wing. Well, not you personally of course Chief; you'll be fishing and drinking."

"That is really high on my list of things to do." Nick admitted. "Especially if you keep the Jeffrey Simpsons School o' Flight up and running." He swung his legs forward as he nestled into the seat. "I'll hold the tiller till they show up."

"Roger that, Chief." Jeffrey saluted. "See you later, Doc." He gave the old man a nod.

Brian swung around and sat in the co-pilot seat as Jeffrey vacated it. "Wow."

"Right, huh?" Nick shook his head. "Well, at least we got him on track. Are you going to be game to handle a double wedding?"

"You think Jeffrey will mind me doing his ceremony as well? From our discussions, he is probably the most religiously educated person on the ship. He has personal experience even."

"It's not like we have any clergy around." Nick smiled. "Hey, you want a new job?"

Brian shook his head. "No, I don't think I'm... No. I don't think so."

Nick spread his arms out wide. "Well, one of the things I've learned reading the Bible is that there are religious leaders to tend to the peoples' spiritual needs and ceremonies."

"That is true." Brian said. "But I don't think..."

Nick looked at his friend. "Are we supposed to have ceremonies? Burnt offerings even? I honestly don't know. They did on Arcturus so should we as well?"

"Those are good questions, all of them."

"How do I get answers to them? I mean, I've been praying a lot and..." Nick hesitated, unsure how much he should say about the dreams he had.

"And?"

"And... I don't know. It pretty one sided. Nothing like what Paramus said his conversations were with God." He put his head back against the rest. "I wish I could have that."

Brian considered that for a long moment. "Well... There does seem to be a distinct difference between the Old and New Testaments when it comes to conversations with God. There are exceptions, of course."

"I wish I had a way of talking to Paramus."

"Really? Just Paramus?" Brian chuckled.

"Well, Tolen too, I suppose."

"And not God Himself?"

"No. Talk to the Almighty? Me?" Nick shook his head. "There's no way I am worthy of doing that."

"Nick. We are all unworthy, falling short." He worked himself out of the seat. "In fact, there is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."

"Romans. You're in Romans, aren't you. Been there a lot myself."

"Romans three, twenty-two to twenty-four." Brian winked.

"Sounds like you are really on track to becoming our first High Priest, Brian."

Brian shook his head emphatically. "Oh no. Talk about feeling unworthy and falling short. That's me."

"I'll talk to Jeffrey. See if he's willing to at least take the job temporarily until we get something... someone more permanent in place."

"You know, Tommy's son Kevin has been talking to me a lot. I think he seems interested in working in that field. He's being doing a lot of research, it seems."

"Kevin, huh?" Nick said. He considered the young man. He was astute and serious about his work in agriculture. "I'll talk to him about it."

"Once the ceremony is done."

"Once the ceremony is done," Nick agreed. "And that's you still, right?"

"Sure. I can do a wedding ceremony. That I can do."

"Thanks, Doc."

"And while you're talking to Kevin about leading this flock, I'll start praying about it too," Brian said. "Maybe between the two of us, we can get an answer. Right?"

"Whenever two gather together, He is there." Nick said.

"Exactly." Brian smiled.

Nick sighed deeply then looked up at the view screen. "See you later, okay?"

"Okay." Brian answered as he turned to leave.

Chapter 9

Tom sat on the bridge of the DMS, staring at the view screen. Even at the speed they were already moving, the stars stood still in the blackness of space.

Captain LaBianca walked up behind him. "Hey, Tom. Ready for a break?" He stepped around the copilot seat and flopped into it.

"Sure, Ernie. Man, I could use a break." Tom gestured at the screen. "Not much going on up here. Five more months of this is going to get boring."

"Two weeks down, right?"

"I suppose so."

Ernie slapped his friend on the shoulder. "You should go down to the Retro Labs to blow off steam. It's all really hands-on down there. They were taking a Reaper apart yesterday to draw up schematics for it."

"A Reaper? How is that practical at all?"

"What?" Ernie cocked his head to the side. "If we're going to get around unimproved terrain, a high-performance tactical bike will be the way to go. Light, maneuverable, easy to store indoors, fuel efficient..."

"Prone to toss inexperienced riders onto their heads."

Erne snapped his fingers. "Helmets! Those should be easy to fabricate. Good thinking. Or we can use the ballistic helmets in the armory. Got a bunch of them down there."

Tom sighed. "So besides tactical motorcycles, what else are those mad scientists coming up with?"

"They got opening windows worked out. Was pretty simple, really." Ernie said. "And door hinges. We figured we'd do a simple latch for closing doors for now. Plus, light switches. They're all ready for mass-production."

"What about lights, power sources, plumbing?"

"It's on the list. They'll get to them."

"Motorcycles are higher up than lights?"

Ernie gestured at the ceiling. "We've got thousands of lights we can scrounge if we need them. Hundreds of miles of wire too. We need to be able to move around; you know."

"We're going to be living like primitives." Tom shook his head. "Some other race is going to come along and wipe us out to colonize the planet. Talk about ironic."

"Wipe us out?" Ernie snorted. "Not likely. We might have to sit in the dark and not have indoor plumbing, but we're armed to the teeth and we've got EM-SQUATS that'll do the trick too. And I'm your very own personal close-air support."

Tom laughed. "That's good to hear, I suppose. But we need to make sure we're prioritizing right."

"Doctor Cortez has things under control down there. Go take a look. You'll see."

"What we really need is actual plans for things."

"Doc's got a plan."

"No, Ernie, I don't mean a plan to do things, I mean actual plans... schematics that we can use for fabricating."

"Those would be nice. But we don't have them, remember?"

"It's just absurd." Tom gestured around the flight deck. "All this technology and not a single damned plan for *anything*."

"I've never even seen the insides of a food processor." Ernie said. "Who just keeps schematics lying around?"

"No one, apparently." Tom said. He pushed himself out of the chair.

"Take the rest of the day off. I've got this up here." Ernie said. "Okay?"

"Okay. Thanks." Tom walked to the shaft and climbed down to the large room where the cable ran. He leaned back against the wall.

"Living like primitives." He watched the cable as it passed by for several minutes. "What would you do, Chief?" He said, thinking back to the times when he had sat and listened to the many experiences Chief Hauser had been through.

With a sigh, he pushed himself off the wall and walked to the edge of the miles long shaft, looking down into the darkness. "What would you grab from your bag of tricks, Chief?"

A thought occurred to him.

With a snort he leaned out and grabbed the cable, letting his legs swing out over the edge.

"Get serious." He said to no one as he started to descend. Tom loosened his grip, letting himself slide down the cable so his feet hit one of the footrests. "What would Chief do? Come on, anything but that. Anything."

Tom rode down the cable in silence.

After several minutes he took several deep breaths. "All right, God. What have you got for us? Are you just going to let us all die? Is that the plan? What can we do?"

He waited for several moments, both hoping for an answer and hoping to not get one.

Another five minutes went by with him reading the deck numbers as they passed since there was nothing else to do as he descended.

A strange thought popped into his head.

Manifest

"Manifest." He said aloud. Tom looked around the dark shaft. "The ship's manifest." He frowned. "Oh, come on. It better not be." He looked up. "It better not be You putting words in my head, God!" He caught himself when he realized that if any other crewmembers heard him, it would have sounded like he was talking to God.

Tom rode in silence to the mess hall level. When he got there, he swung over onto the deck then walked to a large panel. They had not set up any personal communication links, so he had no way to speak to anyone until he got to an actual communication terminal. He pressed

several buttons, hoping the doctor was in his laboratory. "Doctor Cortez?"

When no one answered, he pressed another set of buttons and tried again: "Doctor Cortez?"

Again, no one answered. Frustrated, he pressed the combination that would transmit ship wide. "Doctor Cortez, this is Captain Miner, at the Mess Hall. Please contact me here."

He pressed the ship-wide buttons again to deactivate them then waited.

Within seconds, a green button began flashing.

Tom pressed it. "Doc?"

"What's up, Tom?"

"Well, first off, we need to get someone on Comms so that I don't... or anyone else... doesn't have to do a ship-wide call to find someone. That's just absurd."

The doctor laughed. "I agree. But that can't be the reason you were trying to reach me, right?"

"No, it wasn't. I was..." Tom scowled. "Thinking... about how we're in a corner without any actual plans for things we're going to need."

"That's what we're tackling down here at the Retro Engineering Division."

"I thought you were the Retro Engineering Department."

"I decided we were too small to be a department. A department can have several divisions, you know."

"Oh." Tom said. He smiled. "Okay then."

"So, what were you... thinking?" Doctor Cortez made a point to pause as long as Tom had.

"Manifest."

"You mean like manifest destiny? The planet is ours for the taking?"

"No. I mean manifest like a list of people that are on a ship."

"There are twenty-one of us, Tom. Pretty easy even without a list."

"No, not that crew, this ship's crew. The present and past crews of the DMS. Those crews. Those manifests."

"Who cares who they were?"

"Well...I was thinking how we really needed schematics and that popped into my head."

"Manifest popped into your head."

"Yes, it did," Tom said. "Do you know what I have in my personal storage?"

There was a long pause. "A manifest?"

"No!" Tom snapped. He took a deep breath. "No. I have flight simulators. Air warfare simulators, going back to double-wing early twentieth century planes. There's even one that lets you design your own plane from scratch and test fight it against other planes. And it has to be aerodynamically feasible; the program won't let you build nonsense."

"You want us to build an airplane?"

"No! What I'm saying is that what I have in my personal storage is programs about designing aircraft because that's what I'm interested in. This ship is supposed to have a crew of about a hundred-fifty, right?"

"That sounds about right for this size LINAC."

"And crewmembers over the past fifteen, twenty years that this ship has been in service have come and gone. And out of all those people, there have to be some that are into internal combustion engines, plumbers, architecture, all sorts of things. And their personal hobbies are stored on ship's storage, which I was recently told is miles long and dirt cheap. Which means that unless they deliberately deleted their information when they left the ship..."

"From my own experience, all I ever delete is personal or incriminating information." Offered Doctor Cortez. "Who cares about the rest?"

"Exactly. But that means there should be hundreds of zettabytes of information sitting there on the back-streets of our data storage capability, only deleted if the space was needed."

"Which is unlikely. Ahh, Captain Miner, you are correct." Doctor Cortez said. "That is brilliant."

"Yeah?"

"Oh yeah. I will get one of our intrepid retro-engineers to pull up the ship's personnel data section, break into their personal storage partitions, and start doing searches for keywords from our wish list of tech."

"That sounds like a plan, John. Glad I could help."

"You have. Whatever you're doing to come up with those brilliant ideas, keep doing it."

"It was a one-off."

"Sure, it was." Doctor Cortez said.

Without answering, Tom pressed the button ending the call. Hard.

Chapter 10

"Oh! I look terrible." Wick ran her hands down her military dress uniform; while it was indeed form-fitting, it was at the same time not very feminine. "I should have gotten a dress made." She slapped her hands on her hips. "I can't go out there in this. I look like a guy."

Mary Ann McCain moved beside the young woman. "You look beautiful. Absolutely beautiful."

"Why don't I own dresses?"

"Because you're a pilot first."

"Well I'm not supposed to be a pilot today!" Wick slapped her thighs again. "Any day but today."

Gunny Sergeant McCain came in through a side door. "What'd I miss?"

"What took you so long?" Mary Ann scolded.

"I can't get married in this." Wick said. She turned to face Gunny. "Gunny, I just can't. Just look at me!"

"You look great, Wick. And I'm sure that nervous young man out there will agree."

"Did you get it?" Mary Ann asked.

Gunny scooted beside his wife, "What? You think I went all the way up and back without it?" He took a satchel off his shoulder.

"You put it in *there*?" Mary Ann snatched the green satchel. "Really?"

"It beats dropping it twenty miles down the shaft as I rushed back, dearest." He smiled at her.

Mary Ann snorted. She took a large parchment envelope out of the satchel. "Nice, here we go."

"What's that?" Wick asked. She ran her hands down her uniform again. "I look like a man in this."

"That's going a little far, I think." Gunny smiled wide. "I guarantee you that none of my male pilots fill out their uniform like that. Yowsa is the appropriate word, I think."

"Thomas Oswald McCain!" Mary Ann tossed the satchel at him. "You had better go check on Rebecca."

"Yes, love of my life," Gunny said as he turned and went into a smaller second room created by more partitions.

Mary Ann turned back to the young woman, "It's for you." She smiled. "Something borrowed." She opened the top of the envelope and pulled out a large bundle of lace. "This should do the trick." She put the envelope on a table and flicked the lace outward. It flipped out, stretching out from almost two feet wide at her hands to a rounded point twelve feet away.

"Oh! It's beautiful!" Wick stepped around the train to Mary Ann. "Where did you get it?"

"It was mine. I wanted to save it for my daughter." She smiled. "But we had two sons, so..." She shrugged. "It's going to be the something borrowed." Mary Ann stepped around Wick and placed the veil on top of her head. "Stand still while I get a couple of pins."

Wick put her hand atop her head to hold the veil in place. With the other she brought the train around to examine it closely. "Is this handmade?"

"Uh huh. My mother made it for me." Mary Ann walked back towards Wick. "She crocheted a bedspread as a wedding present for us as well. King size even."

Gunny pushed open the side door but didn't come in. "It safe to come in?"

"As long as you keep your comments to yourself." Mary Ann warned.

"Yes dear." Gunny stepped in, holding the door open. "Ma'am." He gestured for Rebecca.

Rebecca stepped in. "Thanks, Tommy." She looked at the lace veil. "That's it, huh? Beautiful." She poked Gunny. "But you were right."

"What was he right about" Mary Ann asked.

"It's not as beautiful as his wife."

"What?" Mary Ann said. She was looking the other way, pinning the veil on.

"Well, our battle-hardened Gunnery Sergeant here told me the veil he retrieved for you was beautiful, but it was nothing compared to you on your wedding day."

"Who, me? I said that?" Gunny feigned offence. "That's hard to believe."

"You may have the others convinced, but I know the real deal." Mary Ann said. "There, done." She finished pinning the veil on. "Make sure you hold onto it, so you don't step on it." She turned to face her husband. "Softy."

"Hey, hey." Gunny moved quickly to crowd Mary Ann. "I've got a reputation you know." He took her in his arms and started dancing. "Tommy tough as nails McCain, I'm called." He dipped her. "Remember?"

Rebecca laughed.

"I'll keep it in mind. Now if you'll kindly un-dip me, I can let Doctor Sanderson know we're ready to start."

Gunny brought Mary Ann back up, kissing her before letting go. "Fine, fine. There'll be more dipping when the music starts."

"Deal." Mary Ann turned to look at Rebecca. "Lady; that is one gorgeous dress."

Rebecca twirled in her dress. It was a tan sundress that had blue asters embroidered on as if they were growing up from the hem; she was perpetually standing in a bed of flowers. "Like it? I picked it up on Mars before we left." She put her hands in the dress' pockets. "It seems everything was free at the Levinson Mall. Nick's never seen it."

"That's beautiful. The Levinson Mall?" Wick asked. "I've never been to Mars. Much less dress shopping."

"It's named for the first astronaut on Mars because it was the first mall on Mars. It's in Hesperia right on the water."

"Oh." Wick frowned. "I guess I'll never get to Mars, will I."

"Now that's not necessarily true," Gunny said. "Once we're settled, I can easily see a mission or two going to pull tech off of Earth and the colonies. There's still a lot of stuff we could use that's back there. You know, I think..."

"We are not planning future missions right now." Mary Ann snapped. "We are dealing with a double wedding." She walked to the front of the partition- the closest toward the main part of the dining area. "Come here Tommy and wait for your cue." She pushed the partition out slightly and when Doctor Sanderson looked, she stuck out her hand and gave a thumb's up. "It's almost time."

Rebecca and Wick centered on where the two partitions split.

"He will absolutely love your dress." Wick said. She let the train of the veil fall over her shoulder then self-consciously put her hand on her uniform.

"While everyone else was raiding the hangars, I loaded four cargo containers with clothes. I cleaned out three stores, all different sizes." Rebecca said. "Maybe later this week, you can come look through them before I set them up for everyone else."

Wick reached out and took Rebecca's hand. "Oh, that would be great!"

"Now?" Gunny said. He prepared to push on his part of the partition.

Mary Ann peeked out into the room. "Not yet. The guys aren't out there yet."

"What's keeping them?" Rebecca said.

"Cold feet?" Gunny said, "Planning a mission maybe?"

"What?" Wick's hand went to her hips. "What are they doing?"

"Tommy..." Mary Ann warned.

Chapter 11

Nick took a deep breath. Then another. Once again, he blew it out through pursed lips.

"You okay?"

"Me? Sure." Nick looked at Jeffrey. "Are you?"

"No. I don't think so. You don't look so good either."

"I think I look better than you. So, there's that."

Jeffrey shook his head. "I'm not so sure. Remember; I have the benefit of youth." He tugged on the collar of his dress uniform. "It's giving me an edge. I think. Maybe possibly."

"You're definitely on the edge." Nick said. "Hey maybe a drink would..."

Nikki poked his head into the kitchen as he pushed the swinging door open slightly. "What is going on? Everyone's waiting!"

Nick pointed at Jeffrey. "He was going to faint."

"What? No, I wasn't!"

Nick winked at his son. "One of my pep talks and he's back on track now."

"You can't faint once you get out there. Are you sure you're okay?" Nikki asked.

"I'm fine." Jeffrey said. "Don't listen to him."

Samantha pushed the other door open and put her head into the kitchen.

"That's the 'in' door," Nick said. "You're going to run into someone carrying hot soup doing that."

"Dad!" Samantha hissed. "Everyone is waiting!" She looked at her brother. "You were supposed to get them."

"It's Jeffrey's fault." Nick offered.

"What?" Jeffrey pointed at Nick. "He's the one holding this show up."

Samantha shook a fist. "You two better get moving or you're dead." She looked at Nikki. "Get back to your seat."

"Right." Nikki ducked back into the dining area.

Samantha shook her fist at the two men once more time then disappeared as well.

Jeffrey looked at Nick. "Man." He said simply.

"My sentiments exactly." He reached over and patted Jeffrey on the shoulder. "Okay. Let's do this."

The two men pushed open the doors and stepped into the large dining area. It looked like the entire crew was seated facing a two-foot-tall platform that had been set up against one wall. Large photos of flowers adorned the back of the platform with potted plants from Arcturus framing a podium placed in the middle of it.

Jeffrey slowed his pace. "Wow."

Nick took two steps more and then slowed as well. "What?"

"Thanks for letting me tag along, Nick; I don't think near this many folk would have shown up for just Lori and I."

"What?" Nick laughed. "You're kidding, right? All these people are here to see the title bout; Simpsons versus Wick." He reached over and put his arm around the young man and pulled him along. "I had to fight to keep crew at essential stations once word got out you two were getting hitched. Luckily we're just flying straight so we only needed a half dozen folks watching for warning lights."

"All but six?"

"And they're all watching it on their monitors."

"That's just..." Jeffrey stammered. "I'm just..."

"Keep it together, Jeffrey; this is the easy part." Nick said. "The ladies aren't even here yet."

When the pair reached the platform, Nick let go of Jeffrey and turned around. Jeffrey stepped onto the platform and also turned around.

Nick cleared his throat. "I want to say we both thank you all for coming. It means the world to us. It really does." With that, he turned and stepped up onto the platform as well.

Doctor Sanderson winked at the pair. "You two couldn't look more nervous."

"Nervous?" Jeffrey said. "I'm not nervous." He shook his head. "Doc; I'm downright terrified."

Nick nodded. "That makes two of us."

Doctor Sanderson looked past the pair and gave a quick nod. The Bridal Chorus from Richard Wagner's Lohengrin started playing through the ship's speakers.

Nick and Jeffrey turned to look at the far end of the dining area where the large partition had been set up blocking off a portion of it for the ladies to not only prepare for the wedding in, but also to enter from.

Mary Ann and Tommy McCain pushed open two partitions as if they were large doors. They moved to the side revealing Rebecca Hawking and Lori Wick.

In unison, the women started toward the platform, walking slowly in time with the music.

"Oh man." Jeffrey said. "She is beautiful. Oh man. I'm in trouble."

"Oh, it's too late for that kind of talk, pal." Nick said. He looked at Rebecca. "Never seen that dress before. Man. All of a sudden, I think I'm in trouble too. What a pair we are; couple of battle-hardened daredevil pilots and now..."

"Shush you two!" Doctor Sanderson whispered.

The three men waited quietly as the women approached the platform and then moved beside their respective man.

When the two couples turned to face Doctor Sanderson, Nick gave the Doctor a nod. "You're on, Doc."

Doctor Sanderson cleared his throat and spoke:

"Ladies and gentlemen, family and friends, we are gathered here today to witness and celebrate the joining of Nicklaus Hauser and Rebecca Hawking as well as Jeffrey Simpsons and Lorraine Wick in marriage. With love and commitment, they have decided to live their lives together as husband and wife." He looked at the couples. "Are you all, this day and before all present, ready to accept each other in marriage?" He paused while they answered, 'I am', like they had in their rehearsal earlier that day. He looked down at his note cards while they all gave their answer even though he had the entire ceremony memorized.

Doctor Sanderson nodded at Nick. "Do you, Chief Nicklaus Mortimer Hauser choose Rebecca Hawking to be your partner in life, to support and respect her in her successes and as well her failures, to care for her in sickness and in health, to nurture her, and to grow with her throughout the seasons of your life together?"

Nick thought back to his first marriage and his failures throughout it- his infidelities, angry outbursts, and emotional distance. A pang of guilt ran through him. Then he thought about recent events with the ship, his time on Arcturus, and his personal life. "With God's help, I do." He said getting off script slightly.

Doctor Sanderson ignored the ad-lib and turned to face Rebecca. "Do you, Doctor Rebecca Maria Hawking choose Nicklaus Hauser to be your partner in life, to support and respect him in his successes and his failures, to care for him in sickness and in health, to nurture him, and to grow with him throughout the seasons of your life together?"

Rebecca smiled at Nick. "Oh, I do. I truly do."

"Oh man." Nick said.

This time Sanderson gave them both a stern look for deviating from their rehearsed lines. He raised an eyebrow at Jeffrey as a warning. "Do you Jeffrey Clark Simpsons, take Lieutenant Lorraine Wick as your wife, to have and to hold until death do you part?" The pair had opted for much shorter vows.

"I do." Jeffrey smiled wide as he stole a glance at Lori. "It's really..."

Before he could say anything else, the Doctor spoke to Lori: "Lorraine Elsbeth Wick, do you take Lieutenant Jeffrey Simpsons to have and to hold until death do you part?"

"I do, Doctor." Lori said as she looked at Jeffrey. She opened her mouth to speak.

"Do you have the rings?" He interrupted before she could now say anything else. When the four of them held up their respective rings, he continued: "You have for each other special rings as symbols that love is the most precious element in your life together. The ring has no beginning and no ending, which symbolizes that the love between you will never cease. You place these rings upon each other's fingers as a visible sign of your vows this day, which will be your public declaration that you are husband and wife."

Doctor Sanderson waited as the couples put their rings on their spouses. "Excellent. Now we come to the first kiss as husbands and wives, and then introduction of the newly joined couple to the attendees." He said to them. He looked at the audience and held his arms out wide. "Ladies and Gentlemen..." He looked back at the couples without lowering his arms. "Now would be the time to kiss." He waited while Nick and Rebecca as well as Jeffrey and Lori kissed. "Excellent," he said again. "As the Bible says in the book of Ephesians, chapter five, verses twenty-five to thirty-three, 'Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her, that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the Word, so that He might present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church'."

The couples turned and faced the crew.

"And finally, as the Apostle Mark said, 'What God has put together, let no man put asunder'." Doctor Sanderson gestured at the two couples. "Now, by the power vested in me by... well... me, I present to you all for the first time, Mister and Missus Hauser, and Mister and Missus Simpsons."

The crew all stood and applauded.

Doctor Sanderson stepped forward and put his arms around both Lori and Rebecca, pulling them close together to the two men. "Whew. That was clunky. We really need a standardized liturgy for marriages."

"I agree, Doc," Nick said. "But how about we work on that later? The festivities are beginning."

"Well said, Nick." Sanderson let go and stepped to the side. "The bar is now open!" He said loudly as he pointed at the impromptu bar set up along one wall. "And I'm buying!"

The applause started up again.

"Would you like to dance, dear wife of mine?" Jeffrey asked with a short bow.

"Yes and no." Lori said with a smile.

"This isn't an auspicious start." Jeffrey smirked. "Which is it?"

"Yes, I would be delighted, husband. But once I am out of this uniform and into something more comfortable for dancing." She took her lace train in her hand. "I'm a trip hazard at the moment."

Jeffrey looked down at his dress uniform. "Huh. I suppose I need to change too." He looked at Nick. "Chief?"

"I'm not dancing." Nick said. As Rebecca poked him in the side, he quickly added: "Any sort of young person dance that would require a change of clothes."

"That's better." Rebecca said. "Shall we?" She held out her hand.

"Sure thing. See you kids in a little." With that he pulled Rebecca towards the dance floor.

Jeffrey looked up at the ceiling. "Crud; I should have brought a change of clothes." He looked at Lori. "You did, didn't you. Back in the secret lair over there." Jeffrey pointed where the partitions were.

She smirked. "Secret lair?"

"Oh man, you brought a change of clothes. Okay. I'll be back in twenty minutes."

"Dear husband of mine." She narrowed her eyes at Jeffrey. "I did indeed bring myself a change of clothes." Lori put her hands on her hips. "And being an attentive and quick-thinking wife, I brought a pair of jeans and a shirt for my husband as well."

"No shoes?"

"I'm not planning on stepping on your feet." Lori said flatly. "I hope you will return the favor."

Jeffrey stepped beside her and offered her the crook of his elbow. "Then let's get changed; folks will be expecting us to dance."

Chapter 12

Jeffrey slipped out of bed and quietly walked to the table. Lori was still asleep. As he had always done in the early morning, he began to pray for those around him- now adding his wife to the list.

After several minutes, he raised his head to see Lori staring at him.

"You okay?" Lori asked as she pushed herself to a sitting position.

Jeffrey smiled at her. "Are you kidding? How could I not be? I'm the copilot on the ship carrying the future of mankind, heading to a brand-new planet to start a new life with God on our side." Jeffrey smiled. "And I have what is probably the most beautiful wife in all humanity."

"Probably?" Lori cocked her head to the side.

"Almost certainly?"

"Almost?" Now her head cocked the other way. "Almost?"

Jeffrey leaned back in his chair. "Unequivocally." The front legs of the chair picked up on the deck as he balanced. "And without any shadow of a doubt."

"Well, if you're going to waffle like that." She rolled out of bed. "Unsure of the current state of your spouse." She looked toward the ceiling and shook her head. "Wow."

In a flash, Jeffrey bolted from his chair and tackled Lori back onto the bed.

"Help, help! I'm being assaulted for being a mediocre wife!" Lori said as she struggled under Jeffrey.

Jeffrey kissed her cheek as she turned her head. "The most un-mediocre wife you mean."

"Attacked by a waffling husband is what's happening!" Lori grabbed him by the shoulders and tried to throw him off her.

"Help, I'm being attacked by the most beautiful wife in all humanity!" Jeffrey said as he let her toss him to the side. He propped his head up on his hand. "Is that better?"

She looked at him. "I'm pretty sure un-mediocre isn't a word." She smiled. "But I'll accept it."

"Good." He stared at her.

"What?" Lori tried in vain to smooth down her unruly mass of curly red hair- it was not allowing it. "'Don't stare at a gal when she's not looking her best."

Jeffrey continued to stare.

"Come on now."

"You are absolutely stunning, Lori. Stunning. Even first thing in the morning. I have thanked God a hundred times for having you in my life."

"Took you long enough." She narrowed her eyes. "I practically had to die to get your attention."

Jeffrey laughed. "Pestering me is what you were doing."

"Whatever. It worked didn't it? A cunning plan is what it was."

"It was something all right. So," he began as he got serious, "about our honeymoon."

Lori spun around, tucking her legs under her so she was sitting up. "Are we going on a boat ride? You know, I've never been on a boat before. Ships and fast attack patrol boats, but I don't think they would count. Especially since it was usually nighttime when I was on one."

Jeffrey opened his mouth several times to speak as Lori continued.

"Nothing under forty-five feet anyway. To just paddle around casually with no place to go really sounds wonderful."

"What boat?" Jeffrey finally interjected.

"What?" Lori looked down on him. "*What boat*? How can you possibly not know about the boats?"

Jeffery laughed. "It was the only way I could get a word in edge-wise." When Lori frowned, he continued: "Yes; I have signed up for a

couple of times for the boat. One during the day and another in the evening."

"What's the difference?"

"Mood lighting." Jeffrey waggled his eyebrows. "It's romantic paddling around during the day, but it's even better when they dim the lights and project stars up on the ceiling."

"Okay." She eyed him. "Is that it?"

"Oh. Well..." Jeffrey hesitated- it actually was all he had planned. Except for some dinners. "Yes?" He finally said, worried.

"You sure?"

"Yes. I'm sure. Well, I also set up a couple of dinners in the Astrophysics Lab with the views of the stars. In the evenings when it quiets down there, they set up a few tables for couples."

"Oh, that sounds nice too" Lori said. "And?"

"Should I have planned more?" Jeffrey asked. "I mean... Nick and Rebecca are going away for a week or two, from what he told me." He shrugged. "But I didn't know if you wanted to do something like that. I figured you'd go stir crazy after a couple of days."

Lori nodded. "I probably would." She smiled. "I do want to try those boats out. Maybe see if we want to get one when we get settled on the new planet. I think I'll like that."

A thought occurred to Jeffrey. "Did *you* have anything you wanted to do?"

Lori hesitated. "Well... You'll probably think it's stupid."

Jeffrey rolled over, resting his chin in his palm. "No way. Anything we can do together is fine by me."

"Promise you won't laugh?"

"Oh boy. I'll try my best. How's that?"

"Okay." Lori scrunched up her face. "I thought we could go do some work on the Proclamation."

The suggestion caught Jeffrey off guard. "Doing what?"

"You heard me; I said I thought we could go do some work on the Proclamation." Lori said again.

Jeffrey laughed. "No, I get that part. I mean doing what; as in what work would we be doing? The maintenance team is working on it already."

"I know. It's just something I thought we could do together." Lori sighed. "The ship's kind of special to me. I mean, it got me home and brought us together finally. I just wanted to do something to help get her back in service, you know?"

Jeffrey nodded. "That makes sense. But I ask again. What sort of work? They sure aren't going to let me do any electronics work. Mainly because I wouldn't want me doing any electronics work beyond plugging something in. I could paint, I suppose. That's hard to mess up. I'm a pretty good woodworker. Maybe I could make an inlay for the instrument panel."

"How about welding?"

Jeffrey shrugged. "I've seen it done. From a distance."

"Oooh!" Lori clapped her hands. "Then I could teach you to weld and we could do that. There's plenty of bulkheads that need fixed. And the outer skin too."

"I don't know the first thing about welding." Jeffrey smiled. "Except to not look at the bright light."

"That's a start. We can work from that."

"How did you learn to weld?" Jeffrey asked, thinking back on his flight schools- none of them dealt with welding. "I never figured you for a welder."

"I took some side classes after SERE," she said, referring to the Survival, Escape, Resistance, and Evasion training all pilots were required to take. "I figured being able to fix my downed aircraft in an emergency fit into the survival and evasion categories pretty good. That's two out of four." She smirked. "That's funny, you know."

"What is?"

"You not thinking I would be someone who welded."

"I didn't mean..." Jeffrey began.

Lori shook her head. "I did the same thing back on that moon. We were beat up pretty bad and Bill McGrath... You know Bill?"

Jeffrey nodded. "We've talked."

"Bill said out of the blue that he could stack dimes."

"Stack dimes?"

"It's a welding term," Lori explained, "it's the way you run the bead, it builds up with ridges and when you are doing it right, it looks like a bunch of dimes stacked together."

"I see." Jeffrey said, even though he didn't quite understand. "Welder-speak."

"Exactly. It caught me off guard is all."

Jeffrey nodded. "Well, okay. So, we can work on the Proclamation until our first boat time, which is tomorrow at fifteen hundred hours. We've got two hours assigned to us."

"Perfect."

Jeffrey thought for a moment. "I suppose after breakfast I can call down to maintenance and see if they'll even be willing to let us help. You know, they might tell us no."

"Sure, that might be a good idea." Lori looked away.

"I'll see what Tom Piper has to say." Jeffrey said. "We get along pretty good, Tom and I."

"Uh huh."

Jeffrey looked at Lori. "Hey."

Lori looked back at him. "Yes, dear?"

"Hey. Have you already set it up?"

Lori rolled off the bed. "I don't know what you're talking about." She walked toward the bathroom. "We should get dressed though." She looked at her watch. "Breakfast is waiting."

"Lorraine Elsbeth Simpsons." Jeffrey said.

Lori turned to look at him, hands behind her back. "Yes dear?" She swayed her hips back and forth. "What is it?"

"You've already got it all coordinated, don't you?"

Lori brought her hands up and ran them through her tangled mess of red hair. "Who; innocent little me?"

Jeffrey waggled a finger at her. "Yes you." He pointed at her. "Man... how can a guy be upset with such a gorgeous woman who also happens to know how to weld?"

"I honestly don't see how." Lori smiled. "Okay, we need to hurry. We're supposed to be in the maintenance bay by ten hundred hours."

"Yes, dear." Jeffrey deadpanned. "I'll get ready next door and meet you back here in twenty minutes." He moved off the bed as well. "Since we're suddenly short of time." He crossed his arms. "It's going to be an adventure being married to you, isn't it?"

"Just wait until we have a bunch of little girls. You'll be totally outnumbered." She winked at him then turned and entered the bathroom.

Jeffrey laughed. "God, I am absolutely glad you put her in my life. But from now on, if I ever foolishly pray for patience, please just ignore me." He glanced at the ceiling. "Amen?" With a smile, he turned and went to the bath in the unoccupied room next door that he had set up as his own for just such situations.

Chapter 13

Nick opened his eyes. For the first time in many weeks, he could not remember what he had dreamt- good or bad. Quietly he rolled over to look at the still-sleeping Rebecca. Thanks to decades of needing to be the first one at formations and meetings, he was always awake before six A.M, usually closer to five, in fact. Even if he had only been asleep for a couple hours- which was the case this morning.

Nick could always go back to sleep if he had nothing happening in the morning, but he still would wake up. In fact, it was a point of contention for Rebecca that Nick could just close his eyes and be asleep in less than a couple of minutes. Even if he wasn't in a bed. 'It's my clear conscience' he would tell her with a smirk, even though that was far from the truth.

He rolled onto his back to look at the ceiling as he tried in vain to remember his dreams. When nothing came to mind, he decided to talk to God. From what he had read in the Bible, and discussed with Jeffrey as well as Doctor Sanderson, he wasn't sure if what he was doing was technically praying; it was more a conversation. Albeit one-sided.

I'm really worried, God. Nick thought *I don't know what I should be doing. Should I be acting like one of the high priests from Moses' time because I'm the leader? I feel more like Moses, really. Without the stutter, I suppose.* He rolled onto his side again to look at Rebecca. *Thanks for sending Rebecca to me. I promise to not screw up this time.* He let out a sigh. "I just wish I knew what I was going to do." He said aloud.

"How about stop waking up at five thirty in the morning?" Rebecca said.

"You're awake?"

"Just because you have run covert missions in the darkest of jungles, doesn't mean you can roll back and forth in a bed like a stealthy spy."

"Huh."

"So, go back to sleep," Rebecca said. "Did I mention it was five thirty. In the morning. A.M even."

"Yes, dear." Nick said with a smile. He closed his eyes.

Now Rebecca stared at him. "You don't know what you're going to do about what? Or who?"

Nick didn't open his eyes. "I don't know what I'm going to do about a lot of things. Setting up the new colony. Leading the crew religiously. Those guys on the DMS."

"That's it?"

Nick rolled away from her. "Yup. Just the minor stuff. Our honeymoon is all planned out. We leave at ten."

"Leave?"

"Yup."

"AM or PM?"

"AM." Nick answered. "So, we can sleep in a little longer."

"I see." Rebecca watched Nick for a long minute. His breathing slowed as she did- she was sure he had just fallen right back to sleep after he had answered her. With a frown she closed her eyes, trying to go back to sleep. Even though they had only returned to their cabin at four AM, it still took her half an hour to fall back asleep.

"Rebecca." Nick said softly.

Rebecca pulled the sheet over her head. "There is no way it's ten already."

"No, of course not, dear." Nick said with a chuckle.

"Good."

"It's eight-thirty. We have to *leave* by ten, remember?"

"I don't remember anything you said at five thirty this morning." She tightened her grip on the covers. "Go bother someone else for another hour or two."

"We have a honeymoon scheduled, remember?"

"Can it wait?"

"Once we get there, you can take a nap." Nick assured her. He grasped the covers near her head. "So up and at 'em."

"No one... no one likes a morning person. Are you aware of that?"

"That's what I've heard," Nick said. He gently tugged on the covers. "But I think it's just propaganda. I mean, what's not to love about the morning?"

"How early it comes, for starters." Rebecca didn't loosen her grip. "Buzz off."

"If that's how you want it," Nick said. He rolled over, on top of Rebecca. "That's how it will be." He kissed her nose through the covers then continued his roll across her, falling to the floor on the other side. He had been holding his side of the covers as he rolled so Rebecca wasn't able to hold onto them thanks to his weight pulling against them.

"Did I mention that no one likes a morning person?" Rebecca said. She moved her pillow over her face.

"You did, dearest." Nick hesitated for a moment. "Lights one hundred percent."

Dutifully the lights immediately came on full blast. It was bright enough in the room that the chairs and table cast dark shadows now.

Nick reached up and grabbed Rebecca's pillow.

"You're making a powerful enemy, Mister."

Nick let go of the pillow. "How about I get some coffee going? The new husband said diplomatically to his potentially homicidal new wife."

"Better." Rebecca rolled over onto her stomach. She still had the pillow over her head.

Nick worked his way out of the covers and then stood over the bed. "Fifteen minutes, then we need to get going." He flipped the cover out letting it fall down over Rebecca. When it was settled, he pulled it up over her head, leaving her feet exposed.

"You bite my toe and there will be trouble right here in this cabin."

"Yes, dear." Nick said as he detoured from her feet toward the food dispenser. He pressed a button muting it, then punched in a coffee for himself. He leaned against the bulkhead as it processed.

"How exactly are we leaving?" Rebecca asked. She was still under the covers and her pillow.

"We're going on our honeymoon." Nick answered. "Obviously."

"That's why we're leaving. I asked how."

"You know, for someone who's looking to snooze for fifteen minutes, you sure are pretty chatty." Nick took his coffee from the dispenser and padded to a chair. "Lights fifteen percent." He said- even when he was reading in his cabin, he never had the lights above sixty percent.

"I sure hope you don't think you're going to Fax us someplace. That thing scares the crap out of me."

"It's safe enough," Nick said. He took a sip of his coffee. "But we'll be walking to our destination. Mostly, that is."

"Walking." Rebecca rolled to her side and looked at him. "Walking?"

"I know you think that I was just hiding out and avoiding any and all wedding planning..."

"You were."

"I was," Nick said without missing a beat. "But that was because I was planning our honeymoon."

"But we're moving at..." She hesitated.

Nick thought back to his last operational update. "Thirty-one Cee." He informed her.

"We're moving at thirty-one Cee so it's not like we can go anyplace outside this tin can."

"Oh, prepared to be filled with amazement and wonder. After your ten-minute snooze, that is."

Rebecca let out a long sigh. "Did I mention that no one liked a morning person?"

"You did."

She sat up. "Did you mention that I could take a nap later on?"

"I did."

"Fine, fine. In that case, I'm up." She swung her legs over the side of the bed.

"Lights..."

Rebecca pointed a finger at Nick. "Powerful enemy, right here in the room with you."

"Twenty-five percent." Nick said with a smile. "So, I can better see my beautiful wife."

"Uh huh." Rebecca said. She eyed him as she walked toward the bathroom.

"And she can see the cup of coffee that will be waiting for her when she returns." Nick added.

"A big cup." Rebecca said. "I didn't know you even owned shorts." She pointed at his legs. "People are goin' to talk."

"All the cool guys wear them where we're going. You need a pair on as well, now that I think about it."

"You're kidding. First you get me up early, then you want me to wear shorts?"

Nick raised his cup in toast. "To great legs and short pants." He took a sip. "You got them both, baby. How's that?"

"Between the compliments and the coffee, your stock is rising." She stepped into the bathroom and the door slid closed behind her.

Nick took another sip of his coffee, knowing he had a full half hour before Rebecca would be ready for her own cup.

Chapter 14

"So where are we going?" Rebecca said after taking a sip of her coffee. "For this super-secret honeymoon that was supposedly planned out well in advance?"

Nick smiled at her. "You have no idea, do you."

"No. I mean... where in this miles-long tin can would there be anything worth visiting?"

"The reactor pile is really lovely. I hear some of the youngsters go down there to count escaping neutrons." Nick waggled his eyebrows.

Rebecca took another long sip of her coffee. Her eyebrows remained in place. "I think not."

"You really have no idea?" Nick asked, surprised.

"No. I mean, the Astrophysics Lab has great views of space, but besides that, I can't imagine any other place to go." Now her eyebrows went up. "We're not E-V-A'ing, are we? Not at over thirty Cee, right?"

"There are EVAs almost every day. Pretty routine stuff, really." Nick shrugged. "As long as you're behind the shield, there's nothing to worry about. After all, the speed of the ship is also the speed of its occupants, so it's all relative, really. Even when traveling at non-relative speeds."

"We are not E-V-A'ing." Rebecca said flatly.

"It's perfectly safe." Nick smiled. "But that wouldn't be a garden spot, now would it. Any other guesses?"

"Are we going down to the petting zoo?" She pointed downward. "Down in the belly of the ship?"

"Technically, the ship doesn't have a belly; just two swappable ends. But that's not it either." Nick smiled. "Done guessing?"

"Maybe."

"Since you don't know, telling you won't ruin the surprise, I suppose." He leaned forward. "We're going to The Gardens." He leaned back and picked up his coffee. "You couldn't tell when I said it, but 'The Gardens' is capitalized."

"Is it a new bar down in Party Town?"

"It is near Party Town, but no; it's not a bar." Nick tilted his head to the side. "There is a bar there, though." He looked at his watch. "And we have very specific bookings there so we need to be on our way, so we don't miss them." He looked around the room then lowered his head as he leaned forward again. "It's very exclusive," he whispered.

Rebecca laughed. "Exclusive? On this ship?"

"Oh yeah." Nick stood. "So, grab your bag and let's get going."

"Bag? You think I have packed just one bag?"

"Well..." Nick hesitated. "If you find out you're missing something, we can have it sent for." He looked around the room. "How many bags-sss do you have exactly?"

"Three." Rebecca smiled. "But they're light."

"Light individually or light collectively?"

"There's a difference?"

"Only to my back." Nick said.

"They have wheels; it's not like you have to carry them." Rebecca moved to the far side of the room- to where three pieces of luggage were sitting on a small dolly. "They're even on another set of wheels, see? Wheels all over."

"We're not honeymooning on this deck, so at some point they're going to need to be carried." Nick picked up his duffle bag and slung it over his shoulder. "To the chute, dearest." He gestured at the door.

Rebecca pulled her dolly towards the door. "I can't imagine a battle-hardened Warrant Officer would have any trouble with three little bags."

"Are you talking to your luggage?" Nick asked. "Because that's what it looks like from here."

Rebecca looked over her shoulder at her luggage. "Don't worry about a thing; that big strong Warrant wouldn't dare drop even one of you."

"Maybe I can sling-load them down. We're going sixty decks you know." Nick pressed the button opening the door. "Sixty decks. At about eighteen feet per deck, that's ... a lot."

Rebecca smiled at him. "I have no idea where we're going, remember?" She pulled her cart out into the walkway. "You didn't make a plan for moving luggage?"

"Morning Missus Hauser," Jason McCain- the oldest son of Gunnery Sergeant McCain said.

"Oh!" Rebecca startled. "Jason, what are you doing here?"

"I'm your porter." Jason said. "Nick said you might be packing heavy, so he called in some backup."

Rebecca turned to look at Nick. "He did, huh?"

"Yeah, my brother seems to be running a little late. He was making sure everything was set up right for..."

"Hey now," Nick interrupted. "There's a surprise brewing here." He unslung his duffle bag and put it on top of the dolly.

"She doesn't know?" Jason said.

Nick shook his head. "Nope. Not a clue."

"The whole..." Began Jason.

"Not a clue about what?" Dylan McCain said as he stepped into the area.

"The Gardens." Nick said. "Where's your dad?"

"Really? It's even capitalized." Jason frowned. "Hey, yeah; where is my brother?"

Dylan shrugged. "It seems Dad is busy doing research." He looked at Nick, "He's trying to get things in order for his first service, Mister Hauser." He smirked. "So, he sent the child labor."

"You can't beat child labor," Nick said. He grinned. "Well, technically you can, but..."

Rebecca shoved Nick. "You're terrible." She smiled at the fourteen-year-old. "Thanks for coming to help, Dylan. We appreciate it."

The boy shrugged again. "Didn't realize it was optional."

"Nice," Nick said.

"As I was saying, Rebecca, the whole operation was classified Top Secret Close Hold, by Nick here," Jason said. "I guess that was a successful operation."

"I've heard about some gardens. I figured they were hydroponic labs down with those two animals." Rebecca crossed her arms. She narrowed her eyes at Jason. "So, let's see... We have The Gardens, which is capitalized, and Jason McCain an agricultural specialist making sure everything is set up right, and his brother Kevin who happens to be..."

"Him? He's just an electrician, and a budding priest." Jason said. "He has no part in this." He smiled. "I'm the brains of the operation."

"And I'm the brawn," Dylan said with a smirk.

"Perfect." Nick pushed the cart towards the two. "So, if you fine gentlemen will take care of these for us, we're going to give you a thirty-minute head start."

"What are we going to do for thirty minutes? Stand out here?"

Nick put his hands to his stomach. "Gads, woman! We're going to have breakfast. Along with lunch, dinner and supper, it's the most important meal of the day."

"Don't forget the snacks." Dylan said. "That's all that keeps me from starving between meals."

"Snacks too." Nick nodded at the youth. "Equally important. Smart kid."

"Fine, fine. We'll go have breakfast." Rebecca pointed at Jason. "Is your wife involved in these... shenanigans?"

"Sandra is not." Jason said. "But she and Carol approve, if that helps," he added. "Nick's got a really great honeymoon planned out. It's going to knock your socks off when you...."

"And now we go to breakfast." Nick interrupted. "I know I've mentioned this was supposed to be a surprise." He put his arm around Rebecca and steered her toward the chute. "You gents got this?"

Jason nodded as he held up a small bag. "I brought some ratchet straps. It'll be easy work."

Dylan shooed them off. "Go have some breakfast. The bags'll be waiting in your room and we'll see you when you get back."

With that, Nick and Rebecca rode the cable up several decks for breakfast, while Jason and Dylan rode down almost sixty decks to the living quarters recently set up just above The Gardens.

Starting just below where the brig had been and a half dozen decks farther down, the interior walls had been removed, creating ship-wide spaces for growing plants traditionally as well as hydroponically. Then several of the decks' floors and ceilings had been removed, ultimately creating two 35-foot high, 300-foot wide chambers.

Even though there wasn't a large variety of plants, there were nonetheless a good number of them. Especially when an eagle-eyed Marine had noticed that the Em-Squats that had been to the surface had Arcturian grasses caught up in their massive feet and he brought the samples to the hydroponics lab. Those had also been cloned and now provided two different types of lush grass to walk and -more importantly- lay on.

In a tribute to the long, winding gardens of Arcturus, two massive steel staircases wound along the outer skin of the ship opposite each other so that crewmembers could walk from one level through the gardens then down another staircase for one long, non-backtracking walk.

The second level was going to be filled with more plants, however as Space Ten sat in the solar system near several very large supplies of water while its shields were being swapped, the plans were redrawn to include a retaining wall around the central shaft. While Space Ten was being refitted with shields, a visit to the asteroid Ceres had provided the one and a half million gallons of water required to fill the area from a zero-entry edge to fifteen feet deep at the center. Unsurprisingly, once a floating dock and small beach area were built connecting the two spiral staircases, it only took another week for two small aluminum rowboats

to appear. A week after that, a diving board was installed near the 'up' cable that let crewmembers easily reach it ten feet above the water.

As far as ship's secrets, this was a closely kept one. Nick had seen the rough-draft plans and had a good idea of the concept, but that was it. To ensure that the workers- a dozen in all- wouldn't have to deal with constant sightseers or distractions, he ordered complete secrecy of the project until it was complete. That had happened yesterday. Nick was sure that within days, once word had spread to practically all the crew about The Gardens, it would be the most visited spot on the ship for the rest of their journey. Especially with the two boats- dubbed 'H2O-11' and 'H2O-12' available for use. Nick had already created the position of Morale Officer to deal with the new resort. He appointed someone he trusted most on the ship- Tom Jenkins; one of the men who had tried to kill him. Tom had then made sure Nick was signed up for several hours of use of one of the boats over the next week.

Chapter 15

Nick steered closer to Rebecca who was getting a coffee. "Where do you want to sit?"

Rebecca shrugged. "Anywhere."

Nick looked around the large mess hall- there were indeed a lot of seats available since it was after the start of the morning shift. He saw Kevin McCain- the youngest son of Gunny gesture at him. He gave a nod in return. "Let's see what Kevin wants before we disappear for a week, okay?"

"Sure." She moved beside him, tray in hand. "Where is he sitting?"

Nick lead his wife toward the other man's table. "Morning Kev', how are things?" He said as they both sat.

"Morning you two." Kevin smiled. "I thought you would already be..." He hesitated then leaned toward them. "There," he said in a conspiratorial whisper.

"Does everyone know about The Gardens but me?"

"Well, it's close hold, you know."

Rebecca eyed Nick. "I've heard. Close hold to everyone but your new wife."

"Well..." Nick picked up some eggs with his fork. "So, what's up Kevin? I hear you're planning a ceremony?" He said changing the subject. "How's that going?"

"A service." Kevin corrected. "I've been going through the Bible and other documents I came across to try and set up a liturgical service."

"Oh?" Nick said around the eggs in his mouth.

"Yeah, it's been tough because..." He paused as he gathered his thoughts. "Because mainly the descriptions of ceremonies in the Bible are in the Old Testament, but we're definitely Messianic. So, a lot of the

ceremonies that were done before the New Covenant don't really apply to how we should be worshiping. Jesus would usually sit and break bread and talk to the people."

"I see." Rebecca said. "Wait; what other documents are there about religious ceremonies?"

Kevin sighed. "Well, unfortunately there are secret surveillance videos of religious ceremonies and transcripts that were used as evidence in the trials. I've been going through those to get a feel for what I should be doing."

"Wow. That has to be hard." Nick said.

Kevin nodded. "It really is. Every single person I'm watching either preaching the Word of God, or listening to it, was killed because of it." He took a sip of his coffee. "But it is helping me get an idea of what I should be doing, so that is a good thing."

"I suppose so," Rebecca said. Now she hesitated. "I know you're new to this being a priest thing, but can I ask you a religious question?"

"Sure, once word got out that I was taking the job, I've had a lot of people asking me questions. Unfortunately, a lot of times I just have to say I have no idea." He smiled. "So, let's hear it."

"I don't get how we are here."

"Oooh! I know that one." Nick grinned. "You see, there were these two people named Adam and Eve and they lived in a garden. One day..." He gestured at Kevin to continue.

"I don't understand your question," Kevin said instead. "Although Nick is right."

"I mean, I've read the Bible and it says that Jesus would return to Earth. It's all in Revelations. And that's not what happened."

Kevin leaned back. "That's a question I've gotten several times. And I have an answer for that one."

"I've wondered that myself," Nick said. "What's the answer then?"

"It's in Acts, Matthew, and Mark. They all give Jesus' answer to that question." Kevin began. "Let's see. It's Acts one, seven; Matthew twenty-four, thirty-six; and Mark chapter thirteen, verse thirty-two. They all say that Jesus said, 'Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words

will never pass away. But as for that day or hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on your guard and stay alert! For you do not know when the appointed time will come.'"

"But..." Rebecca said. "The destruction described in Revelations. Earthquakes, floods, wars. Those all happened. And the Earth was destroyed. Right?"

"Well, we're still here, so Mankind, made in the image of God is still here. Whether there are actually still people on Earth is another thing- we didn't scour the whole planet. I would say that there were some significant earthquakes, floods, and wars; just maybe not *the* final earthquakes, floods and wars."

"But..." Rebecca began.

Kevin held his hands out. "All I can tell you is what I have read and prayed for understanding about. Don't try to figure out scripture, looking for hidden meanings. God said in Revelations to not add to or take away from it."

"You have to have faith," Nick sighed. "Man."

"What?" Kevin said.

"Well, on Arcturus, when Paramus or Tolen had a question like this, they just went to the garden and asked God directly. They would walk along the paths together talking. Talking with God. It's hard to get my mind around being able to do that."

"That is an amazing gift they have," Kevin said. "But what we have to go on is faith. Trust the plan. His plan. And follow His word. That's the best I can tell you." He smiled. "That's actually going to be one of my first services since so many people have asked that exact question." He got serious, "Now, since we're on the subject, there is something else you... we should all keep in mind and discuss at some point in the very near future."

Nick put the last of his eggs in his mouth. "What's that?"

"Once you have accepted Jesus Christ as your personal savior, there is something else that you need to accept. Something I saw discussed in a several of those secret recordings of services."

"What's that?"

"You need to accept that Satan is your personal destructor."

"What?" Nick said.

"It's what Peter warned about. It's in the first book of Peter, chapter five. Peter said, 'Be somber-minded and alert. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour.' Remember that even Jesus had Satan come out in the desert to tempt Him. What audacity! And Jesus told him 'get behind Me.' So, we need to be prepared to meet him as well."

Nick chuckled. "Come on, Kevin. Meet Satan?"

Kevin pointed at him. "Nick, I'm serious. And that's just the kind of attitude that the Devil wants us to have; where we refuse to see the Devil's work in our daily lives and blame God for bad things when they happen. He puts frustration around us, places people with bad intentions near us." He raised his hands plaintively. "How can you in one breath say, 'God is real' and in the next say 'there is no such thing as the Devil'?"

Nick thought about that for a moment. "No, I guess you're right. We can't say that."

"And that brings up another point that I was going to discuss with you after your honeymoon but since we're on the subject..."

Nick stacked Rebecca's tray onto his. "Hit me with it, Kev'."

"Do you believe that God is watching over our mission, guiding and blessing us on our way?"

Nick thought back to his dream of walking in the autumn forest, knowing in his heart that Jesus was right beside him. "Absolutely." He answered. "Positively, He is."

"Then you should also be considering that the Devil is watching over that other ship's mission, guiding them to his ultimate goal."

"Getting them to another planet?"

Kevin shook his head. "Killing us."

"But..." Rebecca sat back. "But if they get to their own planet and we leave them alone, don't bother them, you don't think they'll just go about their merry non-religious way?"

"That's not what roaring lions do." Kevin said. "Satan isn't a 'live and let live' kind of guy. Death and destruction are his game. And that's been something that's really bothered me. I've really prayed about it." Now Kevin leaned back and put his hands on the table. "Do we seek them out, and preemptively eliminate them before they come to our world and possibly kill a lot, if not all of us?"

"If you'd have asked me a year ago that same question; 'do I go engage an enemy that I know wants to do me harm with overwhelming firepower', then my answer would have been- you bet I do. Here's a thousand megaton nuke to let you know I'm thinking about you. Enjoy your lack of a continent. We've got a Gig sitting in our inventory right now." Nick sighed. "But now, more recently, after spending a lot of time in Rome, I would say I would have to pray for them and try to work out a compromise."

"Rome?" Rebecca asked. "When have you been to Rome recently?"

Kevin laughed. "You mean the book, Romans?"

"That and the city itself." He held up a hand to Rebecca who started to speak. "I can't explain it, but God has put me in ancient times Rome a whole bunch of times in my dreams. Seems I'm thick skulled and once wasn't enough."

"I see. Well, we're going to have to sit down and figure out what we're going to do about them." Kevin pulled Nick's tray closer to him, "But that will have to wait until after your Honeymoon, I think."

Nick looked at his watch. "You're right." Nick stood, pulling Rebecca to her feet. "We do need to get going."

"Have fun." Kevin said. "I've booked a boat for later this week for me, Carol and the twins."

"Boat?" Rebecca asked. "What boat?"

"Ahhh! It's a surprise!" Nick held a finger up to his lips. "Shhhhh!"

"Sorry." Kevin said as he looked away. "What I meant I booked some time to gloat."

"Gloat later this week with your wife and kids." Rebecca said sounding unconvinced. "Sure, sure."

"Talk to you when we get back, okay? And I'll be praying about it while we're away." Nick said. "Maybe I'll get another lesson in Rome. Anything's possible."

"All things are possible with God." Kevin waved.

Nick took Rebecca by the hand and pulled her off. "We're on a tight schedule. We might have to grab a couple of arrestors and just jump down. It's only sixty decks or so. Yeah?"

"And on this day, Chief Warrant Officer Five Nick Hauser's wife pulled rank on him and said *absolutely not*."

"But it would add to the excitement." He looked back at her as he pulled her along. "How do you feel about roller coasters?"

"Anything that has a seat belt or lap bar is fine. Loops, drops, curves are not a problem as long as there is a seat belt or a lap bar holding me in."

"Good to know." Nick said as they got to the edge of the shaft. He peered over it. "Ladies first." He gestured at the cable. "I'll be right behind you."

"Because there's a boat."

"Fine; there is indeed a boat." Nick affirmed. "So, get going!"

With a quick smooch, Rebecca grabbed the downward running cable and swung out over the edge. As most people did, she loosened her grip to slide down to a foothold.

Nick waited until another foothold passed then he stepped out onto it. "Okay, now slide to the next foothold down!" He called down.

"No." Rebecca called back. "Patience is a virtue."

"Yes dear."

Chapter 16

Jim Hooper walked into the mess hall- they had been underway for just over five weeks and the ship had -as ships always did- fallen into an operational rhythm. Even with their limited crew.

He walked over to the food dispenser and selected a breakfast meal, even though it was in the evening, ship's time.

Jim turned and looked around the area, not expecting to see anyone at all. The ship was a veritable ghost ship with only twenty-one people aboard. He was surprised to see two crewmen sitting together, talking. Then he was thankful when they gestured for him to join them.

"Jim, right?" Bradley Uhlein asked.

"Yup; that's me," Jim said as he approached. "Jim Hooper."

Bradley smirked. "You head of security yet?"

Jim slipped into the chair. "There doesn't seem to be a need, it seems. The Captain said with just twenty-one like-minded crewmembers, we're all going to get along just fine." He smiled at the woman. "Hello again. Listen, I'm sorry about mouthing off the way I did."

"It's fine," Tabitha said even though she had still not forgiven him for his remark about her now ex-husband. Or herself for leaving.

"Uncalled for is what it was. I just wanted to let you know." He smiled at her again.

"Thanks; I appreciate it." She lied.

Bradley had been looking back and forth as the two spoke, jealousy rising inside him. And regret for waving the interloper over. He had been making some inroads with the attractive -unattached- woman up until that point.

"So, what's the discussion for the table?" Jim said. He picked up a spoonful of what was supposed to be mashed potatoes. "Any scuttlebutt

I need to know about?" He smiled again at Tabitha as he put the food in his mouth. "Hmmmm?"

Bradley seethed. "All I know is we're on course to Proxima Centauri to set up a new colony. Proxima Centauri Beta three, actually."

"Sounds charming," Jim said, still looking at Tabitha. "The hard part is the lack of biodiversity, I think. To getting a successful colony up and running."

"I was under the impression that P-C-B was pretty habitable. No higher intelligence life forms above a dog, but everything else." Tabitha said.

Bradley shook his head. "That's not what Jim was talking about." He sighed as he considered the many ways he could kill the man later on in the evening. He was sure that since there were so few people on the ship, it could be weeks before anyone actually noticed he was missing. "Real classy."

"Oh." Tabitha said. "Yeah, you mentioned that earlier. Not enough DNA. We could clone a bunch of us. That's pretty straightforward."

"But that doesn't increase genetic diversity, it just duplicates it." Jim answered. "Then it's a problem on a bigger scale." He leaned forward. "There is another solution though."

Tabitha frowned. "Are you talking about the old-fashioned way of creating genetic diversity?"

"Jim, listen." Bradley started.

Jim laughed. "No, not that. That's as old fashioned as there is. I'm thinking of something a little more modern. High-tech even."

Bradley sat back in his seat, deciding if he needed to work on an alibi or not for when he killed the man. "I don't think I want to hear."

Jim turned in his chair, putting his shoulder toward Bradley as he faced Tabitha directly. "Now hear me out; because it's not that radical of an idea."

"Okay." Tabitha said, curious about what he was suggesting.

Bradley put his plate and utensils back on his tray, thoughts of strangling Jim bare-handed played out in his mind.

"Slaves."

"What?" Bradley said, caught off guard by the man.

"Slaves. We get slaves."

"What?" Now it was Tabitha. "What are you talking about?"

"It's an old tradition when a nation would conquer another one, they would take women..." he glanced at Tabitha, "and men back as slaves. And the slaves would have their kids."

"What are you talking about?" Bradley said. "Slaves from where? There's no one left on Earth, remember? We're the only Humans left."

"You think we could take over Space Ten and do that?"

Jim shook his head at her. "No way. They outnumber us five to one and even though a few of them are kids, they have us seriously outgunned."

Bradley put Tabitha's plate and utensils on his tray. "He's nuts, let's go."

Jim turned in his chair to face him. "Listen Brad, it's not that crazy..."

"It's *Bradley*; it doesn't get shortened." Bradley snapped. Now his plan involved a heavy pipe to kill Jim. "Ever." He started to stand.

Jim put his hand on Bradley's arm. "Bradley, sorry. No, what I'm suggesting is that we go back to Arcturus and clear out a village or two."

Bradley let go of his tray. "What?"

"Did you see what they looked like?" Jim asked.

"The aliens?" Bradley said. "The aliens down on that alien planet?"

"Gross." Tabitha said. "They're aliens, Jim."

"They're humanoid so the odds are we're pretty similar genetically." Jim raised a finger. "Actually, a little difference would help our issue even more."

Bradley stood up. "You know, I did see them on the video feeds from my EM-SQUATS." He held his hand up to his chest. "They're about five feet tall. Five and a half feet, tops."

"What?" Tabitha asked.

"They're little bitty things. You should've seen them."

"Five hundred years ago, the average height for a human was six feet. Did you know that?" Jim asked.

"Everyone knows that. People are taller now. Better genetics. In another five hundred years we'll all probably be ten feet tall."

"So, with a little genetic manipulation, we can take those short aliens and make them taller and make our gene pool deeper."

"But they are aliens." Tabitha said.

"They're humanoid aliens. And we're in a bind." Jim smirked. "And we'd end up with a pretty nice planet to boot."

"That's just gross."

"Stop saying that," Jim snapped. "Don't be stupid; I'm not saying we have sex with them. I'm saying we put them in a lab, harvest their eggs and sperm, manipulate their genes, and add their genome to ours."

"So, we wouldn't be human anymore." Bradley said. "We'd be... I don't know what."

"A successful race is what we'd be. What we are now is two generations from extinction."

Bradley picked up his tray. "It's an abomination is what it is. Human is human is human. We don't need any alien DNA mixed in." He looked at Tabitha. "You coming?"

Tabitha looked from Jim to Bradley. She knew that while Jim had been callous, he didn't scare her like Bradley did- something about him made her nervous. "I... I think I'll just turn in." She got up and quickly walked away from both men.

Bradley watched Tabitha walk off, now thinking violent thoughts about her as well as Jim. "Great. Just great."

"Buck up, Brad," Jim said as he slapped Bradley's shoulder. "There are other fish in the sea. Oh wait. No there aren't." With that he walked off in the direction Tabitha had gone as well. He hoped that with Tabitha on his side, they could go to the Captain and pitch his plan.

Bradley looked down at his tray, Neither the fork nor the knife seemed like a suitable weapon to deliver the amount of violence he was thinking about inflicting on Jim. As he decided on the implement to use, he gathered up all three trays and begrudgingly walked toward the kitchen- everyone was responsible for cleaning dishes. It was the only request of Private Bitburger; the sole cook on the ship.

Once he had cleaned all three sets of dishes, Bradley went to the armory and took a pistol as well as a hundred rounds of ammunition. When he got to his quarters, he started to think of ways to get Jim Hooper's body off the ship unnoticed. He did this while he started updating his program to ensure that the Em-Squats on the DMS would only listen to him if the need arose. He had already taken care of the ones on Space Ten.

Chapter 17

As Nick and Rebecca got to the doorway, Nick turned and picked her up. "Hah! Over the threshold."

"You're absurd."

Nick looked at the doorway. The button that activated the hatch was just over waist high. "Hmmm." He said. "That's annoying." He backed up a little, planning on kicking the button.

"You drop me and you're going to be in trouble, mister."

"Where's a 'plan-b' when I need one?"

Rebecca leaned toward the bulkhead. "Just take a step forward, silly. I'll get your button pushed."

"You push my buttons all right," Nick said as he stepped closer to the button.

Rebecca pushed it, causing the door to unlatch. It swung open just a few inches, still blocking their path.

"Come on."

Rebecca laughed. "Want me to get on your back?"

"This is absurd." He reached for the edge of the door with his foot.

"Remember that threat about dropping me? It's still in force."

Nick looked at her. "Madame, if you'll allow me to deal with the situation at hand, I would appreciate it."

Rebecca giggled. "At least you thought this through."

"It played out a lot different in my head." Nick admitted. "A lot." After a moment's consideration, he turned sideways and used his elbow to open the door. "Problem solved."

"Very nice."

Nick took one long step into the room. "And we are officially on our honeymoon."

Rebecca looked around the room. It had a king-sized bed created by pushing two twin beds together, a door that led to what was most likely a bathroom, a small table, and two chairs. There was nothing more except for a neat stack of their luggage. "Luxurious."

"It's really just a place to change if you get wet or dirty."

"How romantic."

Nick tossed Rebecca onto the bed. "Everyone's a critic."

Rebecca laughed as she rolled to her side. "It's great, really."

"Lady, you ain't seen nothing yet." Nick pointed at the door. "I'm going to knock your socks off." He smirked. "Actually, socks and shoes are optional, so..." He sat on one of the chairs. "No need for these." He said as he unlaced his shoes. "You too. Just in case."

"Just in case of what?" Rebecca also started to take off her shoes.

"In case the boat tips over, of course."

Rebecca waved a shoe at him. "The boat will not -*not*- tip over."

"I'll do my best." Nick assured her. He stuffed his socks into his shoes. "Ready?"

Rebecca did the same. "Lead the way."

Nick offered his hand to Rebecca. "Allow me to 'wow' you like you've never been 'wowed' before."

Rebecca took his hand. "Lead the way then. But I'll need my hand back to ride the cable."

Nick shook his head as he stepped into the corridor. "Nope. There's no cabling required at this point." He looked back over his shoulder. "Unless you want to cannonball."

"If you say so," she said unsure of what he meant.

Nick led Rebecca around a corner to where there should have been the entrances to two more rooms. Instead the area was open with a steel

staircase leading down out of sight. She couldn't see it but on the opposite side of the ship, there was a second staircase.

"What?"

Nick brought Rebecca up beside him. "What indeed." He started down the stairs holding onto her. "I'll watch the steps because I know you won't. I didn't my first time either."

"Uh huh," Rebecca said as they started down the stairs. Once her head cleared the floor, she looked across the wide-open space at the hanging plants, some of which had flowers. Even though there were only several dozens of them in the large space, the area seemed lush when compared to life on earth. She looked down. "Is that grass down there?"

"You my dear, are going to nap on it later on. After the boat ride, of course."

Rebecca was only half-listening as she looked around the area. The grass was broken up by paths that zig zagged across it. It wasn't that the paths were necessary- there just wasn't enough grass to cover the entire deck completely. "It's just...just beautiful."

As with the ceiling, dozens of plants were growing around the area. To fill in the spaces, benches were placed regularly around the path, as well as two small fountains.

"They pipe down an image from the Astrophysics Lab at night, so you get a star scape." Nick said.

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, Rebecca looked across the small landing to another set of stairs. "Down again?"

"Nope. We go across and down so you can walk through the grass, of course." Nick pointed toward the open area.

Rebecca looked down at the grass. "I can't remember the last time I walked on grass." She looked at Nick, "I was always too busy to leave the city."

"Allow me to escort you then. We have a reservation on the next deck." He put his arm on her shoulder and led her into the grass.

Rebecca wiped a tear from her eye. "This is how it's going to be on the planet, isn't it?"

"It sure is." Nick assured her. "Except there'll be real stars and clouds overhead. And rain you don't have to hide from."

The pair walked slowly through the grass in silence to the far wall to where an identical set of stairs were.

"Down again." Nick continued to the stairs and started down.

When Rebecca's line of sight cleared the floor this time, she was greeted by another large open area, except it was filled with water. "How in the world did they manage this?"

"Well, the ship's bulkheads are all airtight and can withstand the total vacuum of space. A little water is no problem once they built the retaining wall around the shaft."

"What do they do when we need to decelerate?"

"They pump the water out into tanks below, of course," Nick said. "We can't let millions of gallons of water just shoot up the shaft. I'd get angry letters."

Rebecca laughed. "I suppose you would." Her eyes got wide. "Boats. You weren't kidding, were you."

Nick shook his head. "Nope. After the beach and the dock went in, they both showed up. I want to know who made them so I can give them a commendation. And put in an order for my own boat when we get planet side."

As the pair made it to the bottom of the staircase, Rebecca took a tentative step into the sand. "Is this real sand?"

"Technically, I suppose. It's fine-ground silicates and some nickel, iridium, platinum, and gold."

"Platinum and gold?"

"When you grind up an asteroid, you get what you get." He smiled. "It does give it a nice sparkle, doesn't it?" He gestured at the closest boat. It had 'H2O-11 stenciled on the back.

"Eleven?"

"The other's Twelve." Nick explained.

Rebecca wiped her wet eyes. "It's beautiful. Absolutely beautiful." She turned and kissed Nick. "Thank you."

"All part of the service," Nick said. He gestured at the boat. "Get in and I'll shove us off."

Rebecca climbed into the boat and sat in the back. "Ready."

"No, you're up front; I'm in the back so I can row." He smiled. "That way you can enjoy the views."

Rebecca clambered to the front of the boat and sat facing back. "Okay, now I'm ready."

Nick pushed against the stern of the boat. "Here we go."

As the boat started to float and rock, Rebecca grabbed both sides and tensed up.

"Just relax and don't make any sudden moves." Nick hopped into the back of the boat when the water was knee deep. "The next question is clockwise or counterclockwise."

"Does it matter?" Rebecca looked around.

"Nope. Not a bit."

Rebecca gestured at Nick. "Your choice then." She leaned back. "This is great."

Nick swung the oars around- they were fastened into the oar locks and he started to paddle away from the shore.

Rebecca let one hand dip into the water as she leaned back against the cushioned front of the boat. "Wonderful." She looked around. "How long is a... trip? Lap? Revolution?"

"I'm glad you asked because I did the math on that." Nick said. "The pool is three hundred feet across; outer bulkhead to outer bulkhead. That makes the circumference nine hundred fifty feet. So closer in a little bit, it's eight hundred seventy. And paddling at a leisurely mile per hour pace means we'll make a revolution in about ten minutes, or six laps an hour. Of course, it'll be more if someone gets into the other boat and a naval battle ensues."

Rebecca leaned forward looked at him. "No."

"Not that that will happen," Nick said without missing a beat. "And now for the views." He looked at a small panel set in the side of the seat. "Jungle or forest?"

"I have no idea."

"Forest it is." Nick pressed a button and projectors set up at the ceiling turned on, projecting images of a forest scene along the walls.

"Wow." Rebecca leaned back again. "Just... wow."

"We can also turn off all the lights and do a starry night with a full moon. But that's the next tip."

"Incredible. It really is."

"Wait till we nap on the grass." Nick said with a smile.

The two rowed around the 'river' mostly in silence, enjoying the scenery as well as each other's company. Even when another couple eventually rowed by them, they only gave a silent wave as they passed by.

The hour seemed to fly by. As did the week.

Chapter 18

Jim Hooper peeked into the mess hall. He had been trying to avoid Bradley for the past week while still trying to accidentally bump into Tabitha. He had actually managed to run into Bradley once but hadn't seen Tabitha since he, Tabitha and Uhlein sat together. He made sure he didn't turn his back on the man.

Jim was pleased to see Captain Miner sitting at a table eating what should have been a late lunch, taking ship's time into consideration. He gathered his thoughts and decided this was the best opportunity he would have to try and pitch his plan for Arcturus.

With a smile, he stepped out around the corner. "Hey, Captain Miner," he said as he walked in. "Fancy meeting you here."

"It's either here, driving this thing, or sleeping." Tom nodded at the man. He remembered him from the meeting where he suggested jettisoning Corporal Fields. The two hadn't spoken since then.

"Mind if I join you?" Jim said as he walked to the food dispenser. "Getting a late lunch, myself," he lied.

"Sure." Tom said, happy to have some company. "The more the merrier."

Jim smiled inwardly, at the opportunity. "Funny you should mention that, Captain."

"Just call me Tom," Tom said. He had been insisting the soldiers address him by rank, but it seemed pompous with the civilians. "It's not like I out rank you."

Jim turned and walked to the table. "Well, you are in command of the mission." He smiled as he slid into the seat. "But whatever you say, Tom. I'm Jim. Jim Hooper, remember?"

"I remember." Tom said. "Keeping busy?" He pointed a fork at him. "Not with the airlocks."

Jim forced a laugh. "Sure, sure. I've been going in and out of the retro labs working on designs for houses and such." He looked around. "I'm not keen on living in a tin can for the rest of my life, even if it is sitting on a new planet."

"I agree." Tom pushed his food around on his plate. "I'll tell you; I'd trade living in a grounded ship for a year for some real food."

Jim nodded. Inwardly he steadied himself as he started to speak. "So, speaking of 'more the merrier', I had a thought."

"You want to invite some more people to lunch?"

"I want to invite more genes into our pool."

Tom looked back up at the man. "What?"

"Listen Tom, I know you've thought the same thing as me."

"Oh? What's that?" Tom put down his fork. He had been approached by most all the crew with one sort of outlandish idea of another- head back to Earth, seek out and ram Space Ten, or even wait to destroy it once they reached their colony, stranding them on the planet.

"We're that last generation that One Gen was always talking about."

Tom let out a long breath. He had heard suggestions about this as well: establishing a non-monogamous policy, gene-splicing, and even cloning. "That's what I've heard."

"Folks have been talking to you about this?"

"Every male but you up until now. And a couple of the females." He let out another sigh. "What's your sex diagram look like for the eleven females and ten males on the ship?"

"My what?"

"Two young men gave me a color-coded diagram showing how the females on the ships can be used as breeders by all the men on the ship by having a kid a year over the next twenty years. Classy, huh?"

"You're kidding."

"Not a bit. So, do you have a flow chart, Venn Diagram, or what?" Tom shook his head. "I can't wait to see it."

"That's not my plan at all." Jim said.

"You're not interested in the women of the ship?"

Tom shrugged. "Well sure. I mean... Tabitha is pretty cute, but that's a different story."

"She's got snakes in her head." Tom said. "Better you leave that one alone."

"Oh?" Jim said, secretly thinking that the Captain was just trying to steer him clear of the attractive woman. "Are you sure?"

Tom nodded. "Real sure. If you spend more than ten minutes with her, all you're going to hear is 'I'm a terrible person, how could I leave my husband' and 'maybe they were right'. On and on she'll go about her pathetic and sad life choices and about how she can't live with herself." He shook his head. "The last thing I need in my life is more depression."

"You're depressed?"

Tom spread his arms out wide. "Are you kidding? I'm the commander of a failed mission. We're the last of humanity doomed to die out. As you said; in one generation."

"Buck up, Tom." Jim smiled. "I have a cunning plan."

"No diagrams?"

"Well, we might need something in writing at some point, but not at the moment."

Tom pushed his plate to the side and leaned back. "Okay, what is it."

"The problem as I see it, is that we're too small a group to effectively be able to procreate naturally and keep a diversified genetic profile."

"Are you a geneticist?"

"No," Jim said. "But I've been doing a little research. It's the old fifty, five hundred rule."

"The what?"

"It was a rule... well, it's not really a rule per se, it was more an observation that some scientists made which said that to combat inbreeding, a population of at least fifty is needed. And to reduce genetic drift, five hundred are needed. It's called Population Viability Analysis. It was first introduced by biology conservationists in the mid twentieth century to try to figure out the tipping point for a species that was endangered. You get under the threshold and the species is doomed to die out."

"Like we are apparently, since we're at a solid twenty-one people."

"Unfortunately, yes. But there is an easy solution that doesn't involve rampant promiscuity to increase genetic footprint or having ten Tom Miners running around all at once."

Tom ran his hands through his hair. "You're one of those. Great."

"Those what?"

"The attack Space Ten, kill all the men and carry the women off like we're Neanderthals, people."

"What? No. I say we get our genes from an unarmed population that doesn't have close air support and five times the able bodies fighters we have." Jim leaned forward, "No, Tom. We go to Arcturus and harvest five hundred samples of male and female genetic material. Then we take sperm and egg samples from the crew, splice the genes and create a hundred or so genetically diverse babies over the course of twenty years. We raise those kids collectively along with the kids normal relationships provide."

Tom made a face. "You want to use the genes of those aliens along with ours?"

"They're humanoid and obviously intelligent. I'd be surprised if we weren't within ninety-five percent compatibility." Jim raised a finger as it looked like the young captain was going to interrupt. "You know that humans not only share ninety-eight percent of our genes with the Chimpanzee, we spliced Bonobo genes in with ours so that everyone now is immune to HIV, NRS, and UBT." He put his hands on the table. "And before you start complaining about adding non-human DNA to our genes, keep in mind we've been doing that for a couple hundred years already."

"Who are the Bonobos?"

"They were a monkey that was related to the Chimpanzee." Jim leveled his eyes at Tom. "Monkeys. We humans spliced monkey genes in with ours." He snapped his fingers. "Oh, and sharks. The gene that made them highly resistant to cancers. We've got those in us as well. Sharks and monkeys. I have to say, if we can add a furry, non-speaking monkey and shark genes to our own successfully, we sure as hell can add some intelligent, humanoid genes and be just fine."

Tom considered the man's proposal. It was, militarily speaking, much better to attack an unarmed population than Chief Hauser's forces. "But we will still need to keep our women constantly pregnant for two decades. I can tell you, the overwhelming consensus is 'hell no'. One even put her hand on her pistol when she said it." He smirked. "Which is probably why she was wearing a pistol in the first place."

"Exogenesis. We've been doing that for a hundred-fifty years."

"Baby farms? You want to set up baby farms?"

"I don't care what we call them. We can just call them tanks. Or how about 'the future of mankind'?" Jim said. "Listen, it's really the easiest, safest way to go. Going up against an unarmed population is the best way to go." He gestured around the empty room. "We can't afford to take any losses, Tom. None at all."

"Do we even have the technology to set up a baby farm?"

Jim nodded. "I looked in the ship's medical files. The program to convert a small T-Cell tank used for broken limbs into a uterus is already sitting there. It's a contingency in case there was ever an injury or death of a pregnant crewman or passenger. They would harvest some T-Cells from the baby then generate a uterus and about a liter of amniotic fluid in twenty-four hours then stick the kid in until it was old enough to be born. Metaphorically speaking, that is."

Tom nodded. "Wow; you have done your research."

"Other people did the research, I just compiled it." Jim said, hoping that the plan was accepted so that they could expand the operation once they arrived and wipe out the entire population of Arcturus. He wasn't sure why, but he had an overwhelming desire to do just that. "It's tried-and-true tech. And really, it's really the safest way."

"But they're a lot smaller than we are. Almost three feet smaller."

"So, we keep our height genes and grab everything else from them. They even have the same skin tone as Doctor Cortez." Jim smirked, "Or you, if you want me to say it."

"My mom was from Bangladesh. Dad was a pilot assigned there."

"Ahh, the age-old love story." Jim laughed. "Soldier moves to foreign land, marries local girl, pisses of local parents."

"That about sums it up." Tom stood. "Except my grandfather on my Mom's side was a fighter pilot as well. So, they got along great. They even flew missions together."

"There you have it." Jim stood as well. "I'll get the dishes since you're the one with a full-time job." He stacked the plates and put them on one tray.

"I guess so. Thanks." Tom said as he tried to process everything he had just heard. He decided he wanted to talk to Doctor Cortez about this as soon as possible.

"Sure thing." Jim put his tray on the other man's. "Have a great day at the office, honey." He added in a falsetto.

Tom laughed as he walked off. "Don't wait up. I'm going to hang out with the boys after work."

"Typical." Jim said as he picked up the trays.

Tom laughed again as he waved over his shoulder. As he walked to the cable to ride up to the bridge, he considered what the other man had said. It was a much safer alternative than full-scale fighting with Hauser's group. Especially since they outnumbered his by so many. He grasped the cable to ride toward the bridge- with a detour at Doctor Cortez's laboratory to get his opinion on the plan.

Jim walked toward the back of the mess hall to where the sinks were. He was sure that his plan would be accepted, and they would be able to invade Arcturus. It was like an itch in the back of his mind that could only be relieved by wiping out the inhabitants. "Now if talking to Tabitha goes as smoothly," he said aloud as he put the tray down beside the large sinks. "You'll be set, Jimmy-boy."

Chapter 19

"Permission to come aboard?" Jeffrey called into the ship. They had rotated the Proclamation around so that they could access one of its top hatches. It wasn't nearly as large as the typical one they used for mooring it to Space Ten, but since they weren't moving large pieces of equipment, it worked just fine. Especially since the bottom of the ship was still haphazardly repaired.

"Granted!" Someone inside the ship called back. Then: "Who's asking?"

As Jeffery started to speak, Lori elbowed him in the side. "Mister and Misses Simpsons," she shouted back. She looked at him and smiled. "I've been waiting to say that to someone."

Jeffrey put his arm over her shoulder and led her into the gangway. It was a large round tube so walking on it required them to tilt in toward each other. The two entered a large storage room.

"The newly formed Simpsons clan, huh?" Bill McGrath stepped into the room. "Welcome aboard you two. What can I help you with?"

"That's what I was wondering," Jeffrey said.

Lori elbowed him again. "What my husband meant was that we are here to help you out."

"Oh?"

Lori nodded. "I was just hoping we could help get the Proclamation back on the active rotation."

Bill smiled. "Sure thing." He looked at Jeffrey. "Now what do you have in mind?"

"Well, what needs to be done first?" Jeffrey asked.

Lori looked from Bill to Jeffrey and back as they spoke.

"A lot of cosmetics. We've got some EVA's scheduled for tomorrow to start getting the hull back to specs. But mainly I'd say a lot of cosmetics."

"Excuse me. Now that I'm a lowly wife, I don't get a say?"

Bill held out a hand. "No, no; that's not it at all." He smiled at her. "I know exactly what you can fix for me." He ticked off on his fingers. "Electronics, hydraulics, welding. It's him I don't know about."

"He's eye candy." Lori said.

"Wow." Jeffrey staggered back, holding his hand over his heart. "That hurts." He tilted his head. "Wait... Being called eye candy doesn't, now that I think about it."

Bill laughed. "No, I suppose not. So... what talents besides flying do you have?"

"I can cook." Jeffrey hesitated. "I'm pretty good at poker. Oh! I'm good at painting."

"He's good at following directions." Lori elbowed him playfully. "By the second time, usually."

"So... about those cosmetics." Bill deadpanned.

"Cosmetics?" Jeffrey said.

"It's a fancy way of saying painting." Bill admitted.

"Painting? Just painting?"

Bill laughed. "And grinding, of course."

"Like this?" Jeffrey rotated his hips in a circle. "I can Salsa pretty good too."

Bill stared at him.

"No, no; he's right." Lori said. "He really is a great dancer." She crossed her arms and appraised his dancing.

"How about I get you a grinder and five gallons of standard-issue grey paint?"

Jeffrey stopped gyrating. "That doesn't sound very exciting."

"Oh, okay. How about you go swap out the plasma inversion conduits for the atmospheric engines? Six of the twelve are bad so you'll have to diagnose them manually to make sure you get the right ones."

Now Jeffrey stared at Bill. "Grey you say."

"Where do you need us to paint?" Lori asked.

"We're working our way down. We've made it to deck eight, amidships. Storage rooms. Just three more to go" He poked Jeffrey playfully with a finger. "Oh, and those inversion conduits and of course the port-side fuel tanks need fixed at some point." He glanced at Lori. "Which we'll leave to a professional."

"Wait a minute," Jeffrey said. "You can swap those things out?"

"It's just some simple soldering, really. You just have to make sure they are pre-polarized, and the shunts are..."

"Where's the paint?" Jeffrey interrupted.

Bill smiled wide. "The paint room, of course."

"Bill, what are you..." Tabatha stepped into the room. "Oh, hey you two." She smiled. "What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be honeymooning?"

"That's what I thought," Jeffrey admitted. "Seems this is more romantic than paddling a boat."

"Hey, Tails." Lori looked at Jeffrey. "I thought we could spend time together working on the Proc'. It did bring us together."

"She does do that." Tabatha said. She sidled up to Bill.

Jeffrey did a double take. "Oh." He looked at Lori for help.

Lori patted his shoulder. "You should keep up with current events, love."

"What?" Bill asked. "What are you talking about?"

"It seems Lieutenant Simpsons here..." Tabatha hesitated. "Cripes. Now you're both Lieutenant Simpsons. That's going to get confusing."

Lori laughed. "Just stick with Coyote."

"It's nothing, never mind," Jeffrey said, looking uncomfortable. "Forget I mentioned it."

"Oh," Bill said. "That." He nudged Tabatha with his shoulder. "It's been a good couple of months now."

"Good?" Tabatha said.

"What?"

"Just a good couple of months?"

"Oh. I meant, a great couple of months." Bill said.

"I'm sorry," Jeffrey said. "I wasn't trying to pry. I just thought that you and Robert..." His voice trailed off.

"We were having issues then Kevin McCain explained it to me." She hesitated. "Let's see, it was in second Corinthians, chapter six; Do not be unevenly yoked."

"Unevenly yoked?" Jeffrey said.

"Yes, when you have two animals and one is stronger than the other..."

Jeffrey held out a hand. "I know the Bible verse. But I thought all the unbelievers left on the DMS. Robert's still aboard."

"Not all the unbelievers left the ship," Tabatha explained. "There are at least two that I know of."

"I don't understand. Does Nick... err Chief Hauser know about this?"

"I have no idea," Tabatha said.

"I've talked to Robert," Bill said. "And all I can tell you is that he's unsure what to believe. But, unlike the ones who left on that other ship, he's not violently against other people believing. That's good enough in my book."

"Huh. I never considered that." Jeffrey said. "I'll definitely bring it up when we talk again."

"You and Robert?" Tabatha said. "He's not too keen about talking religion. I mean, I gave him a copy of the Bible, but I don't know if he's read it or not. He's pretty reluctant at the moment."

"Me and Chief. He should definitely be made aware."

"I guess so," Bill said. "Sorry about that; I suppose I should have let leadership know."

"As long as they're working for the benefit of the crew, it's not like it's a big issue, I don't suppose." Jeffrey said.

"Agreed."

"Great." Lori rubbed her hands together. "In the meanwhile, let's go get some painting done."

Bill pointed down at the deck toward a corner. "Paint room is down a deck, and aft a little. There's even jumpsuits there so you don't get your clothes messed up."

"Nice." Jeffrey said. He held out his hand, "Shall we?"

"We shall," Lori said. She took his hand. "We'll grab some grey paint and a couple of grinders and get to work. It'll be fun, you'll see."

"Yes, dear." Jeffrey said. He nodded at Bill and Tabatha. "See you two later."

Chapter 20

Bradley Uhlein ran along the path as fast as he could. The leaves crunching underfoot as he took long strides balancing between speed and endurance. He looked over his shoulder to see if he was still being chased. Not seeing his pursuers, he sidestepped into the underbrush.

Bradley fought to control his breathing as he heard approaching footsteps. He crouched even lower as they came near.

"Where did he go?" Chief Hauser raised his rifle and sighted through the scope down the path.

"Yeah, come out. We just want to talk to you." Lieutenant Simpsons said as he smiled.

There was a long pause- Bradley breathed through his shirtsleeve to be as quiet as possible.

Lieutenant Simpsons pointed farther down the path. "Let's see if he went back to his camp."

"Right. Let's go."

With that, the two continued running down the path. Bradley sat on his butt, knowing that no matter what he did, his dream would continue the same way it had always done.

"Let me help you up,"

As usual the voice made Bradley startle. He looked up and to his left. There was a tall man standing there- he had not heard him approach. "What?"

The man offered his hand. "Take my hand so I can help you." He said.

Bradley took the man's hand and allowed himself to be pulled to his feet. He looked familiar but Bradley couldn't place him. "They're heading back to the camp. I heard them say that."

"I know."

"We need to get there first." Bradley turned and started in the direction the other two men had gone. He looked over his shoulder. "Come on!"

The man shook his head. "It's too late. They're all dead. You waited too long."

"What are you talking about?" Uhlein pointed down the path. "Let's go!"

In two long strides the man closed the distance between the pair. He was over a full head taller than Bradley, almost nine feet in all. He loomed over him. "*You waited too long.*" He growled.

Bradley looked up at the man. His eyes seemed to be dull black. "Too long for what?"

The man took Bradley by the shoulders. "Too long to get rid of them. What did you think would happen with a bunch of armed lunatics living so close to you? Did you think they would just leave you alone?"

"We don't have anything they need. Why are they even here?" Uhlein tried to get out of the man's grasp but couldn't.

"You need to kill them before they kill you."

"There he is," Chief Hauser said. "Nice plan, Lieutenant."

Bradley turned to face Chief Hauser and Lieutenant Simpsons. "What do you want?" He looked back for the man beside him for help.

He was no longer there.

"What do we want?" Chief Hauser said. "Explain it to him Lieutenant."

"Sure thing, Chief." The Lieutenant brought his rifle up to his shoulder in one smooth motion then pulled the trigger.

As the round hit Bradley squarely in the chest, he jolted upright. His hand reaching for where the bullet should have struck. Once again, he was covered in sweat. He fell back in his bed, breathing hard. "They're going to kill us." He said aloud. He sat up again. "I know they are going to kill us."

Bradley swung his legs over the side of the bed. He had to find Captain Miner and convince him to preemptively attack the murderous Chief Hauser and the others in his cult.

Before it was too late.

Chapter 21

Nick sat in the mess hall at a table alone. Even though he was looking around the room, and sipping his coffee, he was praying. They had been sailing for two months and he had spent less than a handful of those days sitting in the pilot's seat- spending his time either in the astrophysics department, or with Kevin McCain in the large conference room that had become a worship center.

"Hey there, Nick," Brian said as he slid into the seat across from him. "How's your day going?"

Nick smiled. "Good. I was thinking of actually doing some flying today."

"Nick, you know as well as I do there is no flying going on." Brian chuckled. "Seems I heard someone say a monkey could do this straight-line stuff we're doing."

"That is true. I hate to get rusty though."

"You need to keep letting those kids get time behind the controls." Brian sapped his fingers. "Hey, you know what? We could have a large chair mounted behind the flight deck where you could sit to keep an eye on things. You could even have your coffee brought up there."

"You mean like they have on tugs?"

"Destroyers and Carriers have them too." Brian reminded. "Big glorious ships."

"Sure, sure. Then once I'm in *the chair*," He made quote marks with his fingers. "They won't even let me go on away missions; they'd send Jeffrey instead."

"Who's they?"

Nick waved a hand. "You know... they. Them. I'd be stuck in the chair talking to aliens while my crew went on exciting away-missions."

Brian laughed again. "You're watching too many science fiction shows, I think."

"There's not much else to do. Honeymooning, routine ship's functions, blissful married life. It's all clear sailing."

"Oooh. That is dangerous," Brian said.

"Dangerous? It's anything but."

"Complacency can be dangerous. Too much of a good thing can be dangerous. If you're like this- just going through the motions, then a lot of the crew is probably the same way."

Nick considered that as he took a sip of coffee. "Who's just going through the motions? I've been diligently managing while walking around. It's a tried and true method of leadership you know. And I have to say, I have also completely mastered rowing a boat."

"Rowing a boat? You're still paddling around that circle?"

"It's about the most relaxing thing around. When we get planet side, I'm getting me one." He considered that for a moment, "Maybe something with a little sail so I don't have to paddle all the time." He took another sip of his coffee to collect his thoughts.

"Nick."

"Okay Brian, okay. I suppose you're right. But, now that I think about it, you're pretty much the same way lately." He raised an eyebrow at his friend. "What are you doing about it?"

"At my age Nick, calm and complacent is how I like my days. These youngsters are different though."

"What do you suggest?"

"We're about three months out from arriving. I say we start organizing colonization efforts. Set up teams to handle different events." Brian leaned forward and lowered his voice to a conspiratorial level. "We haven't had a staff meeting in three weeks."

"Managing by walking around means we don't have to have them as often. I've talked about that very subject with a lot of people." Nick said. "Three weeks, really?"

"Really. I'm glad you've discussed that. I've been talking to Kevin and he said you haven't even brought up what he said to you about that other ship. Nick, at some point you're... we're going to have to make a decision about what's to be done about the crew of the Admiral Sanderson."

"Okay. Okay then. I'll get a staff meeting set up for..." Nick paused. "What day is this?"

"See what I mean? It's Wednesday." Brian smirked. "Before noon."

"Okay then, how about Thursday at twenty-hundred hours? Pull in all section heads, get updates on ship's operations, confirm what the sections have set up for colonization efforts. And I've been praying about what to do about those other folks and I have to tell you Brian, I'm still not sure. Does that work? Thursday?"

"Twenty hundred?" Brian looked at his watch. "Thursday you say?"

Nick took another sip of coffee. "Sure, need to give folks a chance to get things together before the meeting." He gestured at Brian's watch. "You have a better time in mind?"

"I was thinking Noonish."

"Noonish? Thursday noonish? I don't know. Folks trying to eat and have a staff meeting never works."

"Ehh; more noon than ish."

Now Nick looked at his watch. "Fine. Noon on Thursday, Doc. I'll send a..."

"Well, about Thursday," Brian interrupted. "Here's the thing..."

"Friday then? You think folks need that much time to be ready?"

"Not exactly," Brian said. "I was thinking maybe..."

Gunny sat at the table. "Hah! Fifteen minutes early. Means I'm right on time." He smiled. "I always like being the first."

"First for what?" Nick asked.

"The staff meeting, of course." Gunny said. "If you weren't on your honeymoon for the past six weeks, you'd have known about it, Nick."

Nick looked at Brian. "It wasn't six weeks."

"I figured you were still on it," Gunny said.

"Brian..." Nick began.

Brian smiled sheepishly at him. "Oh look, Mister Bagley is here. How strange." He gestured behind Nick.

"Dang Gunny, I was hoping to beat you here." Kent Bagley sat across and down several seats from Gunny.

"Just barely missed doing it, Chief." Gunny said with a smile. "You're second, so there's time for you to get a coffee if you want."

"Funny; I don't remember setting up a staff meeting," Nick said.

Master Sergeant Tompkins sat beside Kent. He nodded at everyone. "Gentlemen. Supply is duly represented."

"For the staff meeting?" Nick asked.

"Of course, Chief."

Kent stood. "Coffee?" He looked at the others at the table. "Coffee, coffee, coffee?" He asked as he pointed at the others.

"Sure." Tompkins said. "I'll save your seat." He pointed at Kent's notebook. "I'll even guard your really nice-looking pen if you bring some cream and sugar."

"Deal."

"You know, as the one in charge of the ship, you'd think I would be aware of a staff meeting," Nick said as Kent moved off.

"Of course, you knew," Brian said. "You were the first one here, in fact."

Gunny raised a finger. "I was second, I want to point that out."

"Third, really." Brian said.

"Does that make me fourth?" Lieutenant Simpsons said as he stepped up to the table.

"Fifth," Gunny said. "Chief Bagley is on a coffee run."

"Crud. As long as I'm not last, that works for me." Jeffrey sat beside Chief Bagley's chair. "Hate being last."

Doctor Popovich sat beside Jeffrey. "Hello all."

"Doc," Jeffrey said as he stood. "Here swap with me so you can sit across from the esteemed Mister Bagley."

"Oh, okay." She slid across her seat onto the other one. "Where is he anyway?"

"Apparently he's getting coffee for this already planned staff meeting," Nick said.

Brian smiled at him. "You can start when he gets back."

"Monkey pushes button for staff meeting." Nick said with a headshake. "How the mighty have fallen."

Sergeant Mellow walked up to the table. Rebecca was with him. "Sorry we're late."

"We haven't started yet, Sergeant," Nick said. "Have a seat." He eyed Rebecca. "So, you're in on this as well?"

Rebecca looked back and forth between Jeff Mellow and Nick. "In on what? You need to be more specific on which secret plans you're talking about."

Nick squinted at her. "There's more than one secret plan going on?" He looked at the young Sergeant, who he knew was very interested in his daughter. Now his eyes got large. "What sort of secret plans, Sergeant Mellow."

"I'm... I don't think I'm at liberty to say, Chief." He sat quickly.

Rebecca sat as well. "Well said, young man." She patted his shoulder.

Nick pursed his lips. "Sounds kind of mutinous, if you ask me."

Chief Bagley returned to the table. He had a tray with a carafe of coffee, several cups, milk, sugar, and what looked like pastries. "Hey ho, everyone. Refreshments have arrived."

"Well done," Doctor Popovich said.

Kent put the tray in the middle of the table then sat. "Okay, Chief. It's all yours."

Nick sighed. "Well then, around the horn, I guess." He looked across the table at Gunny. "Gunny, updates on ship's operations?"

"They're going well. We're still running ranges to keep proficiency up. Hate to have any carnivores get the best of us when we get to the planet. Plus, I've got classes on dressing animals that are coming along nicely. Doc Sanderson is giving briefings on edible flora, so we've got all the bases covered, I think." He paused as he looked at his notebook. "Oh, we need to look at promotions; they've pretty much been on a holding pattern since we left Earth." He hesitated. "The first time, that is."

"That's true, I suppose." Nick said. "Of course, that brings up another issue; pay. Everything's electronic but what's pay even good for nowadays? I mean, is everyone just going to be an electronic millionaire living in the same houses as everyone else?"

"That's a good question, Chief," Gunny said. "I've no idea."

"Think on it, folks. We do need to set up some sort of economy at some point, I think." Nick said. "Master Sergeant Thompkins? How's the food?"

"Food rations are looking really good, Chief. As you've all noticed, we're doing fresh food for most meals. Our gardens are producing well with our tubers and beans. And we have plenty of meat stock to last well into landfall so that won't be an issue as well. I've been working with Jason McCain and we've got a plan- once we get on the planet, we'll put our current vegetables in the ground and be self-sufficient within three months. Probably sooner when we add whatever local plants we come across."

"Excellent news." Nick said. He looked at Jeffrey. "How goes the Jeffrey Simpsons School o' Flight?"

"Flight ops are moving along nicely. I've got half a dozen sitting in the pilot chair getting hours under their belts. Between that and the simulator, we're going to be okay for pilots in case we need them."

"We need extra pilots?" Nick said.

Jeffrey looked at Gunny. "Well, just in case, you know."

"In case of what?" Nick asked.

"Air to air combat." Jeffrey said nervously. "That's why I've got them all in the simulators."

"Yeah, I get it. I've talked with Kevin about something along those lines." Nick said. "You know, maybe we need to add Kevin to the Staff Meeting roster."

"Why didn't you do that, Nick?" Brian Sanderson asked with a smile. "You're slipping I think."

Nick shook his head. "I must be. So, thanks for that El Tee. More pilots are better than not more pilots, I think is the saying."

Brian looked at Rebecca, "Is he always making up sayings like that?"

"Some days, he's practically a poet." Rebecca said.

Nick looked at Doctor Popovich. "Doc, medical?"

Doctor Popovich laughed. "Well, medical is running along nicely. We've set up extra tanks so when we get to the planet, we'll be prepared for any accidents. And with three more pregnancies onboard, I wanted to have tanks available just in case we needed them. Besides that, we've only had a couple of broken bones due to cannonballs but besides that, nothing serious at all."

"Wait, what?" Nick asked.

"From The Gardens. Seems some young men don't use the platform and instead ride the cable up all the way to the ceiling then jump off."

Gunny shook his head. "Damn it all. I've discussed that several times, Doc. Kids these days."

Rebecca snorted and stifled a laugh.

"Kids surprise you, Doc Hawking?" Gunny asked. "No kidding?"

"Oh, it's not just the kids doing that. I have to tell you..."

"Well, if that's it for medical, we'll just keep moving along." Nick interrupted quickly. "What say you, Mister Bagley?"

"No. Chief." Gunny shook his head. "You're doing it too?"

"Just once. For scientific purposes." Nick tried.

"Gads." Gunny said. "Save your fellow Warrant, Mister Bagley."

"I've been working with the engineers to make sure our Em-Squats are operating as they should." Mister Bagley said.

"Why wouldn't they be?" Nick asked.

"We had Sergeant Uhlein leave under less than ideal circumstances and we just wanted to make sure he didn't leave any unauthorized programs behind for us to deal with."

"Did he?"

Kent sighed. "Yeah, he did. Seems that he added a couple of subroutines in different programs that would allow him to override any commands we had given them so he could control them as he wanted."

"That is not very neighborly at all." Nick said. "Nice work. Not that you need it after that, but anything else?"

"We've been refitting some of our EM-SQUATS with construction appendages to help with building houses when we get there. We have plenty of plans for people to choose from so folks can get the home they want. Oh, and we fabricated a cement mixer as well."

"Very nice work." Nick said. "So, I think we all need to think... and pray on what Mister Bagley just brought up; the fact that the crew of the DMS might pay us a visit and how we're going to deal with that. It will be the main topic of our next meeting." After he received nods from everyone, he swiveled his head around. "And now let's hear from Sergeant Mellow." Nick said quickly. He narrowed his eyes at him. "What do you have to say for yourself, young man?"

"Oh, I uhhh." Sergeant Mellow glanced at Rebecca who shook her head. "Right." He said. "Well, Chief, I've been working with a couple of techs and we're prepared to insert five satellites into geosynchronous orbits to give us planet-wide communications. It's straight comms; no frequency hopping but it will give us planet-wide coverage." He gave a nervous smile "More communications are better than not more communications, I think the saying is."

"Man." Nick shook his head. "I suppose it is." He looked at Brian Sanderson. "Doc? What've you got? Anything?"

"Nothing from me." Brian said. "Everything is running smoothly thanks to all these fine folks."

Nick put his hands on the table. "Well then. Due-outs are suggestions on an economy and contingency plans for DMS attacks. We'll meet again in two days at twenty-hundred hours. Anything else?"

When no one said anything, he pushed himself to his feet then rendered a salute. "Dismissed. Go forth and do great things."

The others responded in kind then started to leave, chit-chatting as they went. Sergeant Mellow made a beeline for the chute.

Nick grabbed Rebecca's arm. "Hey, what's the deal with that kid?"

"Which kid?"

Nick exhaled. "The young man who I have noticed has an interest in our daughter."

"Oh, well, you know." She waved a hand dismissively. "Kids in love. Nothing serious."

Nick pointed toward the chute. "L-O-V-E?"

Rebecca laughed. "You don't have to spell it, Nick."

"Do I need to set ground rules? Curfews?" Nick rubbed his hands together. "I mean...does she need *the talk*?"

"You're way too late for that, darling."

"What?" Now Nick's hands went to his hips. "What do you mean too late?"

Rebecca laughed again. "Your adult daughter knows about the facts of life, silly." Now she put her hands on her hips. "She's eighteen and a few months; what were you waiting for?"

"Well I.... I assume she received the appropriate... information at an age-appropriate time from her Mother."

"How appropriate." Rebecca laughed again. "You're turning red, Nick. Take some deep breaths." She patted him on the shoulder. "It will be okay. It's not like you're going to be a grandfather real soon."

"Grandfather? Oh man. I think I need a drink." Nick shook his head.

"She's not a little girl anymore." She tilted her head. "And honestly, she could do a lot worse that Jeffrey Mellow. A lot."

"I suppose so." He started toward the chute, pulling his wife along with him. "I may still have to grill Mellow though, okay?"

"Okay but remember to be nice." She put her arm around his waist as they walked. "N-I-C-E."

"That's my middle name." Nick said.

"I thought it was 'Cannonball'," Rebecca said with a laugh.

Chapter 22

Tom sat on a lounge chair in front of his simple cinderblock house, enjoying the morning breeze.

A feeling of dread filled him- he knew what was going to happen but wasn't able to do anything about it. It was as if he were watching a movie of himself. A movie he couldn't stop or alter in any way.

They had been on the planet almost two years. Houses had been built and even a hydropower station had been set up along some nearby falls. The ensuing lake provided plentiful fishing and a place to relax. Life was moving along well. There had been several children born and there were plans to expand the settlement by another half dozen houses now that the nursery was fully operational. They had opted for traditional as well as genetically spliced children to ensure the community's genetic pool would be as deep as possible so that by their fifth generation there would be over three hundred colonists. Then at that time, they could forego genetic manipulation and rely on the tried and true method of reproduction.

He looked to the side, toward his nearest neighbor- almost fifty yards away. After cramped apartment-style living on Earth and even more cramped cabin-living in space, it was unanimously decided that houses would be placed a good distance from each other; on quarter and half-acre plots in concentric rings with a centrally located meeting area.

Tom noticed the light on his motorbike leaned against a stucco wall changed from flashing red to green, indicating that it was now fully charged. He and his wife had opted for battery powered bikes instead of gasoline powered ones. They didn't have the range of their internal combustion engine cousins, but he and his wife were content with leaving the far-off adventuring to others. Having had one child of their own and two more genetically mixed children, they tended to not stray far with their three toddlers.

Unable to stop himself, Tom took another sip of his coffee even though he knew what would come next.

The house to his left exploded as a missile slammed into it, knocking him to the ground. He scrambled to his feet, dazed as his ears rang loudly. As he fought to compose himself, his neighbor on the other side ran up to him. His mouth moved but the ringing in Tom's ears prevented him from hearing anything.

"What?" Tom shouted.

There was a peal of thunder then a shockwave right after as a second missile hit that neighbor's home, knocking both men to the ground.

"Kill them before they kill you." The man shouted over the din.

"What?" Tom shouted again.

Suddenly everything went quiet- even the sounds of the flames were gone. The man pulled Tom to his feet and looked him in the eyes. The man looked down at Tom- he was quite a bit taller than him- until their noses practically touched.

Tom tried to turn away, but the man's glowing eyes kept him fixed in place. Tom wasn't convinced it was merely a reflection of the flames around them.

"Kill them all before they kill you." He said.

Another explosion made Tom duck. The man didn't even flinch.

"What?" Tom said. He knew who the man meant but as usual, he was unable to not ask the question. "Kill who?"

"Their Bible commands that they kill all unbelievers. They will sacrifice you all to their vengeful God."

"No, that's not true. They won't ever come here." Tom said. He used to believe that, but not anymore.

"They will. And they will destroy all you have built. Kill them. All of them. Kill them before they kill you. Because that is what they are planning to do." He put his hands on Tom's shoulders and leaned in close, their faces inches apart. Even this close, with Tom's face shielding the others from the flames, the man's eyes glowed with fire. "It's the one true way..." His voice took on a deep tone as he growled. "To be saved from certain death."

Tom jolted upright in his bed. As was always the case when he had the nightmare, he was covered in sweat. Of all his dreams, this was the only one he remembered in detail when he awoke. He moved to the food dispenser and punched in a cold glass of water.

He rested his head against the console as the machine processed his request.

"They're going to kill us all. They really are." He whispered.

The dispenser chimed as a door slid up revealing a brown cardboard cup.

With shaky hands Tom took the cup and sat at the large table in his room. He had removed the walls between the other four rooms in his 'quad' and pushed all four smaller tables together in the center, creating an eight by eight-foot table. "They're going to kill us all." He said it louder this time as he took sips of the cool water. He looked at his watch- it was nearly eight in the morning. His nightmare always seemed to be the last dream he had for the night, so it remained fresh in his head for the entire day.

After he finished his drink, he moved to the bathroom to get cleaned up, determined to do something about his dream. It was time to deal with Chief Hauser and his murderous gang of zealots.

Chapter 23

Nick sat at the head of the table in the conference room. "Okay people. We're not going around the table this time. There's only one thing to discuss. So, toss some plans out."

"Planetfall is a week out," Gunny said. "You sure you don't want a little time on that?"

"Everything is locked down tight for that, Gunny." Nick said. "We need to deal with the elephant in the room."

Everyone nodded.

"So.... Kevin? What do you have to say?"

Kevin looked down at his notes- he had written a dozen scriptures down. "I can't condone violence Nick; I want to think the people on the DMS can be reasoned with."

"I get it, Kev'." Nick said. "But if they can't be reasoned with, then what? We can't be looking over our shoulders forever."

"You know where I stand," Gunny said. "Preemptive engagement is my suggestion. Hit them before they hit us. You don't win fights reacting to your opponent's actions, you know."

"Dad," Kevin said. "We can't in one breath say we're followers of Christ and in the other preemptively wipe out everyone on that planet."

"Well we can't wait for them to come here." Gunny tapped the table with his finger. "This pig is... well, it's a pig. If they show up here, it'll take a half an hour just to get it moving at ten feet per second. And that's in a straight line. And if the engines are actually online. It would be an easy target. And, once they destroy Space Ten, we're done for. No more interplanetary travel in reasonable amounts of time. They can just pick us off from the outer reaches of the system when they feel like it. I'm sure the DMS is loaded with a dozen nukes just like we are."

"And then Arcturus would be vulnerable as well." Chief Bagley said. "I've been worried about them. Real worried."

"The Holy Spirit speaks to our hearts," Kevin explained. "It's good you listen."

"Listen, Arcturus is fine. And will continue to be fine." Nick said. He held his arms out wide. "God make it pretty clear to me that He was protecting Arcturus from the likes of us. Their biggest mistake would be to try and attack them. It would be a catastrophically lethal mistake, if current events are any indication."

"I suppose." Kent said. "Still..."

"Hey, maybe we can somehow convince them to attack Arcturus and God will take care of them." Doctor Popovich said. "I don't think we should put our lives on the line trying to deal with them. They were perfectly clear what their choice was."

"I don't think that's what God would want us to do." Kevin said.

"You know, I have to say that just now, Gunny just made a good point that we should consider." Nick said.

"I agree with Chief agreeing with me," Gunny smiled. "What do you agree with?"

Nick laughed. "That destroying Space Ten would leave us stranded in one system. At least for a few decades to get a FTL ship online, otherwise we'd just have accept it would take years to get anywhere."

"That's because it's true," Gunny said. "Then we're moving with a preemptive strike?"

"Nick, we can't go on a killing spree in the name of God." Kevin pleaded. "We just can't."

"I got you, Kevin. What I mean is we go do to them what Gunny said they would do to us."

"Destroy the DMS." Gunny said. "Then they can hang out in their system for the next fifty years working on their own linear accelerators."

"And by then maybe they will have learned a little patience. Or we could even make a visit after a little while to see if they are more willing to talk." Nick said.

"That sounds like a good plan." Kevin said. "But what about the people on the DMS?"

"There are only twenty-one of them total. If they're flying ships down to the surface, there won't be more than one or two on the DMS. We can hit her in the stern, knock off a good five miles of ship. Folks are going to be in the hangars and the doors there will auto seal when the pressure drop of a hull breech is detected. Then it will take it days for its orbit to decay so everyone would definitely be off by then. And even at its size, the odds of that thing actually hitting something they have on the ground would be astronomical."

"What if they're on the bridge?" Kevin said.

"Listen, I understand what you're saying but at some point, we have to think about our crew here. If we put a couple of them at risk to save all of us, I am okay with that." Nick said. "How about this- we know what frequency they are on, so we can even tell them what we're doing the minute we're going to do it. That way they can seal any bulkheads they need to. If someone gets stranded in a section with no exit, their own people can fly up and cut them out."

"Right," Jeffrey said. "Right. It's not like we're taking away all their space flight capability; just their light speed ability. They can move around the system as much as they like."

"Good plan, Chief," Gunny said. "Except we're going to have to take Space Ten to get there. The big question is what if they try to return the favor and poke too many holes in this thing?"

"We will have escorts thanks to the Jeffrey Simpsons School o' Flight," Nick said. "And Space Ten doesn't need to get close to their planet; it just needs to ferry our strike craft into the system."

"That is true," Jeffrey said. "Couple of corvettes would be able to make short work of a LINAC." As soon as he said it, he regretted it.

"A couple of Corvettes is exactly what I thought." Nick looked to Mister Bagley. "Corvettes?"

"The Wildebeest and Eclipse are fully operational. The trip to Mars put the Galileo over in hours for engine maintenance, so it's down unless it's an emergency. Standard life cycle engine maintenance will keep it out for five weeks once we tear into it. We were going to wait

until we were planet side to start working on it. Without an air dock, doing it in space would take double the time."

"How's the Proclamation?"

"According to Mister Piper, it's back on in service. All it's missing is exterior paint and we were waiting till we're on the planet for that. Painting in free space is a real pain." Mister Bagley smiled. "Especially if we have to paint flames on it like Lieutenant Simpsons wants."

"You want flames on that thing, El Tee?" Nick asked. "Flashy."

Jeffrey sighed. "No, not me. The *other* Lieutenant Simpsons. The Coyote one."

"She's kind of taken ownership of it, Chief," Mister Bagley said. "I've already set aside some red, yellow, and orange paint once it's back to grey. It will indeed be fancy."

"I see." Nick said. "Well, we can take the Eclipse and the Wildebeest and leave all the other ships on the planet. That way if anything goes wrong, we mitigate our losses. If we scream into their system and use the sun to brake, we can park it a long way off so it won't be noticed."

"If we cut off the transponders, the odds of them finding it would be..." Gunny smirked. "Just as astronomical as the DMS hitting one of their ships on the ground."

Jeffery didn't hear anything else in the meeting; he was praying furiously that Lori wouldn't volunteer to pilot the ship- a prayer he was sure would go unheard.

"Chief, I hate to say it, but I think we need to also try and push some military assistance to Arcturus. I've had some pretty vivid dreams."

"Okay, well that's kind of a problem then, Mister Bagley. Because if we're running to..." He looked to Doctor Sanders. "Brian? Where are they again?"

"Proxima Centauri. Which means Beta Three. It was on the list of places we were going to set up shop." Brian said. "Nice little planet."

"As I said; that's a problem. Are we going to find the DMS in Proxima Centauri or at Arcturus? We need to get that right because if

we fly this thing to Proxima Centauri and they aren't there, we're going to be..." He looked at Doctor Sanderson again. "Okay Doc, what's the timeline on that?"

"Let's see. We're on a four-month trip to Murphrid, which is about four light years from Arcturus or about a three-and-a-half-month trip. And the trip from Earth to Proxima Beta Three is about six months for them." He smiled wide. "Hey; if a LINAC left Earth for a six-month trip and another left for Murphrid on a four-month trip, who would get to Arcturus first?"

Nick rubbed his eyes. "Brian, please."

"Sorry, Nick. If we do a quick turn-around. Say less than a week then head for Proxima Beta, we would get there about when they get there. If we run to Arcturus first, then to them, we'd be four months behind them, and they could be on their way either here or Arcturus. Or both, really."

"Man." Nick said. "Alright then. We need to be ready to drop off laddie-daddie everybody and be back underway in two days."

"Two days?" Gunny said. "A complete offload in two days?"

"Two days, Gunny. We need to get everything ready to go so that as soon as we get in orbit, we can drop every ship we've got and head to Proxima Beta. If we can get there before they do..."

"Please tell me you're not going to ambush that ship." Kevin said.

"Come on, Kevin." Nick shook his head. "I'm not going to blast them out of orbit fully loaded. We're going to offload the Corvettes and hide Space Ten. Then we keep an eye out for the DMS. Once the DMS is unloaded and before it can head out here, we'll disable it."

"Good plan, Chief." Gunny said.

"Except the part where we do a ship-wide offload in two days," Mister Bagley said, "I mean, that's a huge undertaking that's usually done in a week."

"I understand. But if we have the chance to beat them to Proxima Centauri, we need to take it. And we've got two weeks to get everything prepped." Nick said. "And I hate to say it, but we need to unload everything in case something happens to Space Ten."

"You're not making me feel confident about this plan all of a sudden," Rebecca said.

"Just making sure all the bases are covered," Nick said. "We will load all the ships now, crammed full."

"Plus, a hundred twenty crewmembers." Mister Bagley said. "And all their stuff."

"They can pack everything up beforehand, live out of an overnight bag for a couple of days. Then we put them all in one drop ship. It'll hold twice as many fully-geared troops." Nick said.

"Hey, you know what? We can COJ all the EM-SQUATS to save space." Gunny offered. "They're already programmed for it. They can all be harnessed up in a couple of hours. We can just march them all out an airlock and give them the rendezvous coordinates. They can get there when they get there."

"Once we get in orbit, I can work out where they need to drop from pretty quick." Rebecca said. "From reading probe reports, we are coming into the end of winter, beginning on spring in the southern hemisphere. I was already looking at two of places for potential landing spots. I was going to discuss them at the drop meeting next week."

"You can still do that," Nick said. A thought occurred to him. "How are our shields? Are we good for another eight-month run with them?"

Brian nodded. "You'll be okay. The speeds are considerably less which means less attrition of shield material."

"Okay. Anything else? Any other problems?"

Master Sergeant Thompkins raised a hand. "We'll not be able to load the plants and animals until the day before we get into orbit."

"That's understandable." Nick said. "How about medical?"

"I can just set up shop in one of the drop ships. Move most everything in; it's all modular and plugs into them." She smirked. "As long as we can keep medical requirements to a bare minimum, it's doable. So, you and your fellow cannon ballers need to behave themselves, Chief."

"Gunny?" Nick said. "I'll leave it to you."

"I shall put out the word," Gunny said. "Better yet; I'll remove the entire diving board and then put out the word that swimming is no longer authorized, Chief."

"Good." Nick said.

"Chief?" Gunny drew out the word as he said it.

"Okay, okay. I'll keep out of the water too." Nick exhaled. "Anything else we need to have set up beforehand?"

"We need to decide on the crew for the mission. You're going to need close to a couple dozen folks if you're going on an eight-month trip in this thing." Brian said. "Plus, the crews for the Corvettes."

"They can be double duty," Nick said. "Except for our pilots, we'll fill in the empty seats in them. So, fifteen plus two makes seventeen total for the operation."

"If you want me to handle the new colony, I'm sure Doctor Caricchio would be willing to go on the mission." Rebecca said.

"Doctor Caricchio?" Nick asked.

Rebecca nodded. "Yes."

"If anyone will make an eight-month trip fun, it's him." Nick smiled. "So that's four picked already."

"Four?" Rebecca said.

"Yeah; Doc Caricchio, Me, female Lieutenant Simpsons, Staff Sergeant Stanstead. I'll right seat to Coyote, and we'll get someone else for Tails. Get volunteers for the rest of the positions if at all possible. If we can do it with less, that's fine by me, but I want to make sure we'll get there and back safe and sound."

"Amen to that," Rebecca said.

"Anything else?" When no one said anything, Nick continued: "Fine then, six days from now we'll talk where we are on the plan and any final details for colonization." After he got nods around the table, he stood and rendered a salute. "Go forth and do great things." He looked at Rebecca. "So, about the absent Sergeant Mellow."

"Who?"

Nick squinted at her.

Jeffrey startled back to paying attention as everyone stood. He stood as well on numb legs and rendered a salute. As everyone filed out, he moved to Nick.

When Rebecca saw that Jeffrey was moving towards Nick, she decided to give them some space and retreated as well. "See you in Medical."

Nick nodded as his friend approached. "El Tee, you forget something? You were pretty quiet there through most of the meeting."

"Yeah, or uhhh, no."

Nick smiled. "As long as you're sure."

"I'm being serious." He looked over his shoulder to see if everyone had left then leaned in. "I want you to pull Lori off the mission." He whispered.

"Really? Why? Oh!" Now Nick leaned in. "Is she... pregnant?" He whispered back.

"What?" Jeffrey said. "No; she's not pregnant."

"Then she's on flight status. And since she's claimed the Proclamation, we might as well use that instead of the Eclipse. She's our best pilot. I wouldn't want to dog-fight her and that's saying a lot."

"Take Pastis. Or Lincoln. They're both fine pilots."

"Oh?" Nick crossed his arms. "How many combat missions have they been on?"

"I don't see how that matters. A LINAC is an easy target."

"And if they send ships to intercept? They have their own Corvettes. Identical ships to ours, so the fight goes to the more experienced pilot."

"I just think it would be better to send someone else instead..."

"Alright, Lieutenant," Nick snapped. "Here's a quick professional development lesson for you since there is no longer a Battle Staff College to enroll in." He poked Jeffrey in the chest. "It's important you

hear this before you trade that lieutenant bar in for captain's bars. Otherwise, I'll just take that one myself and you can be Lori's cargo."

Jeffrey stood speechless at the threat.

"Now that I have your attention," Nick started. "Being in command means you have to make tough choices and you have to make those choices without your emotions getting in the way. You pick people for a mission by how well they will make that mission a success. Not by if you'll miss them if they're gone."

"That wasn't..."

"You don't seem too concerned that Staff Sergeant Stanstead is on the mission."

"What?" Jeffrey said. He hadn't even heard that part of the discussion. "I didn't..."

"I'll tell you," Nick snapped. "If that's how you're thinking, you're so far off course you're not even on the map. So, are you saying you would put extra planning into a mission if someone you care about is on it?"

"No." Jeffrey said. "Of course not."

"Because the way it works is you do everything in your power to make sure every single person comes back from every single mission. If this mission needed the expertise of my Samantha to succeed, I'd put her on it. And it would get the same level of my attention as if it needed the expertise of Faceless Engineering Marine Number Three." He poked Jeffrey in the chest again. "Because every single crewman is important to a leader. And you'll notice I'm leaving Rebecca here because she's the most experienced doctor we have and with the majority of the crew being on a new planet, that's where we need her; not on Space Ten keeping me company. I put people where they will make each and every mission a success." Now he put his hand on Jeffrey's shoulder. "And if this speech were being thrown at you a year ago, I would have added 'and you hope they all make it back'." Now he pulled Jeffrey close. "But since it's going on right now, I have to say, 'and you pray that God keeps them…her safe.'"

"Nick," Jeffrey said. "I don't know if I could forgive God if anything happened to Lori." Tears formed in his eyes. "I'm afraid that I would lose them both. I just can't..."

"You can't go through life threatening to turn your back on God if He does anything you don't like. I'm surprised that you of all people would even suggest that." He looked Jeffrey in the eyes. "What would your Uncle say to that?"

"I just... I'm saying it's easy to say it, but when it's someone you love, it's a whole lot harder."

"Jeffrey, you need to feel that way about *everyone* working under you."

"Sure, sure; love thy neighbor. You don't have to tell me that."

"No! Not at all." Nick slapped him on the shoulder. "I'd have told you the same thing a year... ten years ago. You need to watch out for every single person under you. They are your family. Even a heathen should do that." He shook his head. "Your Uncle would bonk you on the head if he heard you right now." He raised a finger. "We need our best pilots to make sure that not only the DMS is destroyed, but it is done precisely so that it doesn't endanger any crew still aboard. Jeffrey, I don't want to kill *any* of them; I want them to find God. I want them to come join us on Murphrid or at least join us in following God. Right?"

"Right." Jeffrey said. "You're right, Nick. I'm sorry."

"And, if they send ships to engage us, our pilots need to be up to the task to defend themselves and Space Ten as it sails out of the system. Personally, I don't want to try the journey at just under light speed in Corvettes bolted to each other at the belly. Wallowing along at just under one Cee. Four months there and four months back is long enough, thank you very much."

"I got you." Jeffrey said. "I don't know what I was thinking."

"You were thinking with your heart."

Jeffrey let out a long breath. "I'll go let Lori know what the plan is." He sighed again. "She'll probably be excited about it."

Nick laughed. "She sure will be, you poor guy. Eight months. You better have the Simpsons household completely set up by the time she gets back."

"I'll either spend my time doing that or go crazy with worry." Now Jeffrey patted Nick's shoulder. "Man, that was harsh. You'd make me cargo?"

"Either that or you're going to be running the show. Remember I'm still planning on retiring." He smiled. "First I'll set up a brewery, then I'll retire." Nick pushed Jeffrey away. "Go let your better half know, then get ready to start a new colony. That'll keep you busy. I want to shove off as soon as possible."

"I agree; we need to deal with them before they head this way." Jeffrey said.

"I'm sure we discussed that during the meeting you tuned out of," Nick said with a smirk.

"Yeah. I'll let..." A thought occurred to him. "Wait, you're taking Stanstead as well?"

Nick nodded. "Yup. We'll put them in a Corvette each. The way those two work together, anticipate each other, they'll give anyone who comes around a run for their money."

"That's a lot of firepower for Coyote and Tails to be issued. I should pray that those DMSers stay on the surface."

"A good prayer." Nick patted Jeffrey's shoulder again. "Now go forth and do great things."

"Aye, aye, Chief." Jeffrey rendered a sloppy salute then walked off.

Nick flopped back into his chair. "Lord, please watch over everyone on this mission and on the planet. And the people on the DMS." He prayed. He sat with his eyes closed for over five minutes then with a sigh, pushed himself to his feet and heading for the medical department.

Chapter 24

Tom stepped into the Astrophysics Lab. "Hello?" He called into the empty area. "Anyone here?"

"I am," a familiar female voice called back. "Just a sec."

As Tom stepped farther into the lab, more automatic lights turned on. He moved to a chair next to a large screen. He tapped an icon labeled 'PCB-3'. Dutifully, the screen came to life showing a recorded view of the planet from the orbiting probe. Tom pressed the 'fast forward' icon several times until the planet was rotating fast enough to see it turning. As it rotated, callouts would appear highlighting fresh water sources, types of forests, and the occasional volcano.

After a few minutes, Terry Fishbourne stepped into the room. "Sorry; I was in the head."

Tom smiled. "No worries. I was poking around our new home." He gestured at the screen. "Got a spot picked out yet?"

"I've got a couple of places that look real promising."

"Not near those volcanoes, I hope."

"One is a little closer than the other, but both are well outside any danger zone for an eruption."

"That's good to hear."

"And both are near large rivers that would work for a hydroelectric plant."

Tom thought back to his dream. "Oh, that's good too, I suppose."

"Practically free electricity is always good." Terry sat in the other chair at the view screen. The pair watched in silence for several minutes as the planet rotated. "What brings you down here, Tom?"

"I'm worried, Terry."

"We're on a good trajectory and at the next meeting we can decide between the two spots. They're both really good places to start a colony. One is just closer to an ocean." She smiled. "We can always put a settlement at the second spot later on. What's to worry about?"

Inwardly, Tom cringed. "Space Ten."

"You're worried about their colony? Personally, it wouldn't bother me if they slammed into the sun."

"That's not what I'm worried about." Tom began. "I've... been having this dream."

Terry nodded. "The tall, dark-eyed man."

"What?" Tom did a double take. "How do you know about him?"

"Other crewmembers have mentioned him to me. I always act like it's the first time I've heard of him though." She looked at him. "You want to know how many?"

"I... sure, I suppose." Tom leaned back in his chair. "Hit me with it."

"Well... there's you, Private Alystock, Sergeant Uhlein, Violet Wilds, Captain LaBianca." She said.

"Oh man."

"And of course, me." She held up a finger. "Oh, Uhlein has all sorts of really disturbing dreams. I don't suggest eating a meal with him. And if you do and he asks if he can tell you about his dreams, don't make the mistake I did and say 'sure'. It will spoil your meal."

"Oh man," Tom said again. "You too? What's going on? How are all of us dreaming about the same person?" He thought back to his dream. "What exactly are they... are you dreaming that this man is doing?"

Terry shrugged. "As far as I can tell, it's the same thing; he is warning us that we are all in danger."

"In danger from Chief Hauser and the rest of Space Ten."

"Yes." Terry nodded. "And you know what? I think he's right. Those people aren't going to just let us live our own lives here."

"I know." Tom said. "But they have us outnumbered every which way there is. I suppose between LaBianca and me we can run those Corvettes at them. And Uhlein's Em-Squats. But they've got five crew for every one of us. And they have Em-Squats as well."

"Not necessarily." Terry said. "From what Uhlein said he's got a couple of subroutines inserted into their Em-Squats that will keep them out of the fight."

"A couple?"

"Yeah, one that's easy to find and another one that isn't. He was worried they'd run a sweep of them when we left so he put one in a kind of easy place to find. He figured once they found that one, they be all proud of themselves and stop looking for anything else."

"Tricky. But what if they found them both?"

"We won't know that until we get there. Exciting, huh?"

"So, you think we should go there and attack their settlement?" Tom said. "It sure seems like we'd be outnumbered."

Terry leaned forward in her chair. "You and I both know we have ten nukes aboard. Five one-megaton tactical nukes, four five-megaton, and one of those one gigaton Continent Buster monsters."

"So do they." Tom said. "So, there's that."

Terry shook her head. "They won't nuke us from space. They'll want to come down here personally to attack us. Then they can try to convert us under threat of death."

"Convert or die." Tom shook his head. "You know, I wanted to talk to you about something else."

"What's that?"

Tom leaned in closer to her. "Our population. Or lack thereof."

"Oh boy." Terry grimaced. "Here we go. Listen, you're cute and all, but I'm not planning on becoming one of those breeders like the other men have suggested."

"What? No, that's not it at all." Now Tom grimaced. "The other males on the ship propositioned you? Gross."

Terry's eyes got large. "I think I'm offended."

Tom laughed. "Again, that's not it at all. You are very attractive and all, but I can't believe that there are males on the ship just going around propositioning the females just to make babies."

"It's happening, bub. So, what is your suggestion?"

"According to Jim Hooper, we can deepen our genetic pool with those Arcturians. Apparently, we already have monkey and shark genes spliced into us. It would be much safer than trying to get samples from the Space Ten crew. And if we nuked them from space, there wouldn't be any useful material to collect. What do you think?"

Terry considered that for a long moment. "He is right that we have monkey genes spliced into ours. And sharks too. I don't remember the reason for the monkey one, but the shark gene makes us really resistant to cancers."

"Jim said the monkey one made us resistant to UBT and a couple other sexually transmitted diseases."

"Yeah, that does sound familiar now."

"I have to tell you, I was pretty against it when he pitched me the idea, but the more I think about going toe-to-toe with the Space Ten crew, the more I think we are better off dealing with those Iron Age aliens with spears and arrows."

"I suppose so. It's not like we can afford any casualties." Terry said.

"That's what Jim said." Tom rubbed his hands together. "So, I think first priority is to get settled on the planet, get the colony up and running, then make a trip to Arcturus to grab a dozen inhabitants."

"Just a dozen?"

"We just need to see if the splicing will produce viable babies. If it doesn't work, then we only have to get rid of a dozen of them. If it works out, we can go grab more of them. A lot more. But there's no reason to have to house, feed, and control more than a dozen until we're sure they will work."

"That's reasonable."

"And," Tom continued, "If it does work out with them, I think that when we make our second Arcturus run, we swing by Murphrid and lob that gigaton nuke down on Nick's camp. Since we won't be needing their genetic material anymore."

"That would be effective, I think." Terry said. "Are you going to brief that plan at the next meeting?"

Tom nodded. "I am. I just wanted to get your opinion of it."

Terry raised an eyebrow. "How many are on your side as of now?"

"I have a majority." Tom answered as he stood. "Thanks Terry. See you later, okay?"

"Okay. I'll have all my recommendations locked in by then." Terry said as she turned to face the screen. She was glad that Tom hadn't pressed her on who she thought the mysterious man everyone was dreaming about at the same time. She had her suspicions and they worried her. She half considered asking him for his name in her next dream, but was even more worried that his answer would confirm her suspicions.

Tom left the laboratory, heading up to the bridge. He was relieved that Terry would agree with his plan at the meeting. Even though he was the de facto leader of the group, he still wanted to make sure he had a majority of the leaders on his side to keep things running smoothly. He also decided he would do all he could to befriend Sergeant Uhlein. To ensure the Em-Squats were also on his side if the need arose.

Chapter 25

"Alright, have we got everyone online?" Tom looked toward the monitors and received a thumb's up from Captain LaBianca on the bridge and Alyssa Whitburn down in the reactor room. "Excellent."

"First off, I think we need to deal with Arcturus first," Corporal Fields said. "Just in case."

"First off, if we could please not just shout out comments, Corporal," Tom said. "And second, just in case of what? That Iron Age society suddenly develops faster than light travel using their spears and animal drawn carts?"

This generated laughs from several of the crew there.

Corporal Fields stood. "It's not funny, Sir."

"I didn't say it was. Now please sit down and let me speak first." Tom smiled what he hoped was an endearing smile. "Every single person who wants to, will get the chance to speak, I promise."

"Fine." The Corporal said as he sat roughly.

"Okay then," Tom began again. "We have a few things that need to be discussed and I think we should go through them in order. First, we need to decide on our landing site." He ticked off on his fingers. "Then we need to decide what we're going to do... if anything... about the people on Murphrid, and third..."

"There's people on Murphrid?" This time it was Private Sierra. "There's a colony there?"

"No and Yes, Private Sierra," Tom sighed. "No there isn't a colony there at the moment. Yes, there will be when Space Ten arrives there. Right Doc?" He looked at Doctor Cortez.

"Yes, Captain. They were planning on heading to Murphrid Four when we left. I do not see why that would have changed."

"Thanks, Doctor Cortez," Tom said, trying to keep the meeting as formal - and civilized- as possible. "Alright, number two is what to do about Space Ten and number three is dealing with the sustainability of our own colony. Which brings Arcturus into the discussion." He gestured at Terry Fishbourne. "Lieutenant, regarding our colony choices."

"Thanks Captain," Terry said. "I have two very promising locations. Both are near large rivers that can easily be used for hydroelectric power. One is closer to the mountains which will give us four distinct seasons with an average of six feet of snow during the winter and..."

"Wait, we will be buried under six feet of snow? How is that even an option?" Private Bitburger interrupted.

"Let her finish, please." Tom said, now regretting he had included the lower enlisted in the meeting.

"Okay, sure."

"As I was saying," Terry continued, "we will experience an average of six feet of snow during the winter. That isn't all at once of course. First snowfalls will happen in the late Fall, continue through the winter, and end in the early Spring. So, in about four to five months, we would get six feet of snow in total. The other location is closer to the coast at the head of the same river. Thanks to the warmer climate caused by the ocean, the winters will be milder, with no snowfall but we'll still possibly get frosts. Summers will be warmer, a lot warmer. Getting into the high nineties, warmer." She crossed her legs. "So, the decision to make is do we want colder winters or really hot summers?"

"Can't we live someplace in between? Split the difference?" Captain LaBianca said through the speaker.

"We could, but we'd have to clear a good bit of heavy forest to make that happen, and we'll be farther from other resources. The one valley near the mountains, Landing Zone Alpha, is very fertile and crops would be easy to establish. Game moving through the valley would make meat easy to get until we started an animal husbandry program and ranched them. L-Z Beta is closer to the ocean affording us plentiful seafood as well as good farming as well." She shrugged. "The real consideration is- are you folks interested in skiing in the winter, or lounging by the ocean in the summer?"

"Wow, I like tough choices like that," Jim Hooper said with a smile. "I say we live by the ocean and then set up an outpost in the valley as a winter vacation spot for those so inclined."

"I also think that's a good choice," Tom said. "Who's for Beta by the sea?"

Most all the people raised their hands.

"Fine then." He smiled. "And once we get settled, I'm sure we can set up a ski camp to visit."

"Very nicely done; that's one problem down," Terry said as she looked at Tom with a smirk. "Okay, let's see how number two goes."

Tom took a deep breath. He was hoping that the crew decided on getting rid of Space Ten without his input, just to make things easier. "Okay, folks. We need to discuss what we should do about the Murphrid Four colony. Or if we should do anything at...."

"Kill them before they kill us," Jim Hooper interrupted. "It's plain and simple survival. Am I right?"

Most of the people in the room agreed, with conversations breaking out all around. Captain LaBianca even clapping.

Tom raised his hands, relieved that was the prevailing attitude. "Alright, alright. Everyone settle down."

"You aren't for getting rid of them?" Sergeant Uhlein asked.

"Oh, I'm for getting rid of them," Tom said. "I really am. But..."

The conversations started back up.

"BUT," Tom said loudly, "I want to mitigate the danger to us when we do it!" He raised his hands again. "Let me bring up my third point and talk about both at once. Because they kind of fit together."

Everyone quieted down except Sergeant Uhlein who was speaking quietly with Corporal Fields.

"Gentlemen, if you could hold side-bar conversations until we're done, I would appreciate it."

"I was just telling him about the Glimmer."

"Fine, fine," Tom said. "Talk to Fields about that later, please."

"But..."

"As I said," Tom said over the Sergeant, "the third thing we need to discuss is the sustainability of our society." He held his hands out wide. "As it stands, twenty-one individuals are not enough to maintain a genetically viable population."

" 'Ere we go," Alyssa said from the reactor room. "Yer aif yer haid if you think I'm gonna roll around with all these lads."

"Same goes for me," Sergeant Whiddon said. "Disgusting."

"Aye!"

"Alyssa, please." Tom said. He smiled at her. "And you know how much I love hearing your accent and unrecognizable threats."

"I'll show ya' a recognizable threat." She smiled back at him.

"What my suggestion is, from speaking with Jim Hooper," He gestured at the man, hoping for some support if he needed it, "was to improve our genetic diversity with other donors."

"You want to use the crew of the Space Ten?" Violet asked. "How do you propose that and like you said, mitigate the danger?"

Tom made eye contact with Jim. "The actual plan is using the inhabitants of Arcturus to increase out genetic depth."

Jim gestured at him to continue as conversations broke out around the room.

"There is precedent for this, in case you didn't know."

"Yeah, yeah," Sergeant Uhlein said, "We got shark genes to keep us from getting cancer. We all know that."

Now Tom gestured at Jim. Partially to make sure the facts were given correctly, and more so to divert any anger to someone else. "Jim?"

"That's true, Sergeant," Jim said. "But we also have genes from the Bonobos Monkeys spliced into ours. It happened a couple hundred years ago. It improves our autoimmune system."

"So now you want to add aliens? Little short aliens?"

Jim nodded, "Yeah, I mean, we'll keep our height but take other things from them. After all, as bipedal humanoids, they are probably

well in the ninetieth percentile for compatibility with us. They sure look more like us than sharks or monkeys." He paused and looked around the room- the conversations didn't start up, so he gestured at Tom. "Captain?"

"Right." Tom said. "Right. So, what I think the plan should be is we go to Arcturus and grab a dozen of the inhabitants to bring back here to see if they are a viable alternative to the Murphrid colonists."

"And if they aren't?" Violet asked. "Are we women back on the menu?"

"No, not at all. If that is the case, then we come up with a plan to capture the other colonists. We can enter the system quietly, land a bit of ways off, grab a dozen or so of them, then come back here."

"I'm sure Chief is going to be fine with that," Corporal Fields said. "He'll just wave and tell us bye."

Sergeant Uhlein started whispering to Corporal Fields again.

"No, that's not the plan." Tom took a deep breath to gather his thoughts. "That is what we will do if the inhabitants of Arcturus aren't compatible. We'll sneak in, grab as many as we can; dead or alive, then destroy the colony from space. But, if the Arcturians are a viable alternative for genetic material, we will return there, grab several hundred of them and on our way back, destroy the Murphrid colony… Sergeant Uhlein, what is so *damned* important that you can't wait to talk to Corporal Fields about?" He finished testily.

"Sorry, Sir," Sergeant Uhlein said. "I was just talking about the Gimmer with him. I think that will solve some of our problems."

Tom stared at the man. "What's the glimmer?"

"The ship."

"What ship?"

"The Glimmer, sir. You know; the Glimmer." He paused as he waited for Tom to say something. After a few seconds, he continued: "How don't you know?" Sergeant Uhlein looked around the room. "Doesn't anyone?"

"Why don't you fill us in, since you're the only one in the know." Tom said.

Sergeant Uhlein started to get up then stopped. "Sir?"

"Sure, sure; come up here." He pointed beside him. "That way everyone can hear about the Glimmer." He rolled his eyes. "It's a ship, I've been told."

Sergeant Uhlein stalked up beside Tom. "The Glimmer, Sir, is a four-mile long LINAC attached to our farthest aft, starboard docking port."

"What?" Tom said.

The conversations started up again.

"Quiet down everyone!" Tom said loudly. "Quiet down." He looked at the man. "And why wasn't this something you shared earlier?"

Sergeant Uhlein shrugged. "I figured as the Captain you knew about it. I mean, when I got aboard, the first thing I did was poke around to see what was here. Didn't you?"

"I've been kind of busy." Tom said. "So, there's a second LINAC?"

Sergeant Uhlein nodded. "It's a close-system hopper. Like for where we're going; the Proxima Centauri star cluster has three stars and a bunch of planets in it. They're all within five light years of each other. To have to use a full-blown thirty-mile long LINAC to move around the system is a huge waste of time, resources, and personnel. I mean, the DMS is pretty huge for a commuter ship."

"I'm pretty sure I would have noticed two huge asteroids stuck to the side of this ship when we got here." Captain LaBianca said.

"That's true." Tom nodded. "Okay, Sergeant Uhlein, give us the down and dirty on the Glimmer." He moved to a chair off to the side and sat. "You're on."

"Oh. Okay." Sergeant Uhlein said. He looked around the room. "Well, it's a four-mile long, double LINAC ship that can get up to about nine Cee. What makes it really nice is that it doesn't use asteroids as shields, and it doesn't take a lot of people to run. It's basically two four-mile linear accelerators, a four-mile-long tube full of feeder material, and a small living area stuck on the front end."

"How does it work without a shield? Space dust would pound it to bits." Captain LaBianca said.

"It has a really small profile and it's angular. Plus, it has this new hyper-fluid polymer paint that makes the surface of it have a dynamic friction coefficient of practically zero. Nothing reacts with it. If you put your hand on it, it feels as if it is pushing your hand away it is so frictionless. You have to keep the lid on the can of paint while it's a liquid or it will just flow right up out of it." He smiled. "I actually painted an EMSQUAT with the stuff to see if it would make it bulletproof."

"Did it?" Tom asked.

"For all intents and purposes, it does. You have to put a gun barrel up to its skin perfectly perpendicular to get the bullet to even transfer force to it."

"I'd love to see that thing," Jim Hooper said.

"It's back on Space Ten," Sergeant Uhlein said. "Maybe after we get rid of them, you can see it."

"Deal."

"Back to the Glimmer, please." Tom said. "You two can talk Em-Squats later."

"Right. The ship is centrally controlled from the bridge, so it only needs a crew of eight to operate, four per shift. Which of course, makes it smaller and therefore sleeker."

"Where is this thing again?" Tom said.

"Starboard side, aft-most dock. The living capsule is there. The rest trails back from there."

Tom looked up at the screen Captain LaBianca was on. "Ernie, bring the cameras online. I want to see this mystery ship of ours." He turned to Sergeant Uhlein. "How it is I've never heard of this thing?"

Ernie disappeared from view as he worked the appropriate controls. "I'll pipe it through to this screen,"

"Apparently it's a prototype. They completed it a little over a year ago and added it to the DMS because it's the flagship." Sergeant Uhlein said.

"Where'd you find all that out?" Tom asked.

"It's the first entry in the ship's log. I've been going through her on my..."

"There it is." Captain LaBianca said from off-screen. "Wow, what a beauty. I'll hop around cameras to give you the whole view." The image on the screen switched to an exterior view of the DMS. There along the side of the ship was the angular nose of a ship. The leading point of it looked lethally sharp. "You can't get the scale from the camera," Ernie said, "but that front hull is two hundred, two hundred fifty feet long and only fifty feet tall. Can't be more than three decks total." He switched to another camera showing the square back of the front of the ship. It seemed to shimmer an orange color. "Wow, that's shiny."

"It's a nanotech super-fluid paint. It is actually able to capture light and slow it down as it passes by." Sergeant Uhlein said. "I looked at the physics of it, and it's way above my head."

"How many of those things are there?" Tom asked.

"There are three of them. One here on the DMS, one on the Admiral Alberto Santiago, and the third was in orbit around Earth. They were going to attach it to Space Ten when it got back from Arcturus. Until the planet fell apart. I watched a news program on them."

"Wow," was all Tom could say as he watched the camera feed.

The image panned backwards showing the thin linear accelerators disappearing behind it, changing to different ones as it showed the ship's entire length. The image finally changed back to Captain LaBianca. His face was filling the screen. "Man, I want to fly that thing!"

"You'll get your chance, Congo," Tom said. He looked back at the Sergeant. "Okay, so we have a second LINAC. What's it have for capabilities, Sergeant?"

"It's essentially a ferry. It has berths for the crew plus fifty or so people and supplies for a year-long round-trip journey. It can get up to nine Cee seventy-five percent faster than the longer LINACS and also decelerate at that same rate as well. It has no atmospheric capabilities at all to help keep a small profile."

"I mean offensive capabilities."

"Oh, it has none, Sir," the Sergeant said. "It's just a way to make short trips. But it does have clamps running along the LINACs, behind the cabin area where you could clamp down storage containers or even Em-Squats. As long as they are under fifteen feet tall, they sit behind the shadow of the cabin."

He's keen on his Em-Squats Tom thought. "Alright then. We could use that to get the first batch of Arcturians, then if they work out, use it to grab more of them and drop that continent killer nuke on Murphrid on its way back."

Sergeant Uhlein shook his head. "Oh, that thing's too big to put on the Glimmer," He said matter-of-factly. "That piece of ordinance is basically a thirty-meter icosahedron." He hesitated. "It has twenty sides."

"Fine. We'd have to use one of the smaller nukes. Would the five kiloton one fit?"

Sergeant Uhlein nodded. "Sure easily, but it would just be cargo. We'd have to EVA out there and shove it toward the planet. I'm not sure how accurate that would be." He startled. "Hey, if you got that thing up to its max speed, you could just slam it into their colony. At nine C, it would almost be as powerful as that gigaton warhead. That would do the trick."

"I'm not going to lose an asset like that. We can't even make more of the paint that's on it, can we?"

"Not without a full-blown lab. There was ten gallons of it on Space Ten. You had to keep the lid on it, or it would just flow right out of the can it was so viscous."

"Then we need to figure out a delivery system for it. Stick some small rockets on it." Tom said. "Once it's heading toward the planet, gravity will do the rest. That's easy math to get it to land where we want. Terry?" He looked at her.

Terry nodded. "Sure, it would be pretty easy to take a two or three of our Hellfire missiles and strap them to the thing. Once their guidance systems were synched, we could put in the coordinates for the colony and give it a shallow reentry path to avoid burning up." She nodded again. "I'd bet I could do that in a day."

"You and Uhlein get working on that." Tom said. "Excellent. Things are..." He paused. "Sorry everyone." He looked back at the crew. They were all sitting quietly. "I want to make sure everyone is onboard with our plans. What do you all think? Harvest from Arcturus if we can, otherwise we capture from Murphrid. And either way, we drop a nuke on them when we're done."

Most everyone in the room nodded their approval.

Tabitha sat in the back of the room, next to the young Robert Garvin. She leaned in close to him. "I don't know if I'm okay just killing them. What have they done to us?"

Robert leaned toward her. "Right? I mean, what if my parents go there? That don't seem right."

Tabitha slid her chair around closer to his, so they wouldn't be overheard. "I've been having doubts about all of this." She frowned. "I never should have left Alec."

"What are we going to do?"

"I don't know." Tabitha said. "But I'll try to figure out something."

"Tabitha?" Tom called from the front of the room. "You and Slim okay with the plan?"

"I was just thinking..." Robert began.

"We were just thinking about how we could help," Tabitha interrupted the young man. "Sure, sure. We're good with the plan. It's a great plan." She gave what she hoped was a convincing smile. "We love it."

"Okay," Tom said, unconvinced. "Just making sure." He stood. "Thanks for the briefing, Sergeant. I think that about covers everything."

"You know, if we sent one ship to grab those aliens and another to get rid of Chief Hauser and his zealots, that would save a bunch of time." Sergeant Uhlein said. "My Em-Squats would be able...."

"But we can't kill them until we're sure we don't need their DNA." Tom said. "Is killing them more important that our colony surviving?"

Sergeant Uhlein stared at him for a long moment. "Are we putting that to a vote, Sir?" He whispered.

"I don't think so." Tom whispered back. He put his hand on the other's shoulder and started to push him back toward his chair. He raised his voice. "Besides, there are barely enough of us to keep the DMS going, much less fly this thing after losing eight crew to that other ship."

Sergeant Uhlein fought against the push. "Maybe we should put it to a vote."

"That's a no." Tom said. He pushed harder, forcing the man to take a step toward his seat.

"We'll see about that," Sergeant Uhlein whispered as he moved to his seat. When he sat, he looked at Tom and winked.

"Alright everyone. So, the plan is to get the colony started on Beta Three then take the Glimmer for a raid on Arcturus. If that works, out we'll plan another trip a month afterwards to get rid of Space Ten and its crew. Sergeant Uhlein and Lieutenant Fishbourne are going to put together a guidance system for one of our warheads. Everyone else, keep doing what you're doing working with Doctor Cortez as well as ship's functions. Agreed?"

He received nods from most everyone. Sergeant Uhlein just winked at him again. He noticed that Tabitha didn't respond either way. He was sure she had her reservations about the plan, but didn't want to have to listen to her bemoan her life choices, so he decided to just ignore her.

"Thanks all. Dismissed." He started to give a salute then decided against it. "Thanks," he said instead with a half-hearted wave.

"So that's it then?" Robert said. "We're going to be stuck here, it looks like."

Tabitha shook her head. "No, I'll figure something out. You know, I can pilot a ship."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I'm rated up to a thousand tons. I was flying for Queensland Gliders before I met Alec."

"How's a glider going to help?"

"No, no. I flew for Queensland Gliders, the *airline* out of Australia. I was flying low orbit cargo routes around the world. I can fly a Corvette or a landing craft."

"How's that going to help?"

"I'll think of something. In the meantime, see if you can find anyone else that thinks the way we think."

"But... how's that going to help?"

Tabitha exhaled loudly. "If we can find more people that think like us, maybe we can commandeer that Glimmer and make a run for Murphrid. Or find something else to fly there, I don't know."

"Okay." Robert said. "I'll ask around."

She put her arm on his sleeve. "Don't just go asking around. If word gets out that we want to leave, we'll find ourselves locked up." She thought of the propositions she had received from some male crewmembers. "Or worse."

"Oh."

"Tell you what, just leave it to me. Don't talk to anyone about this," she said, now worried that the youth would put them both in jeopardy. "Okay?"

"If you say so, I suppose. Can I go back to work with Doctor Cortez? Drawing up houses and stuff is really fun."

"Sure. You do that and I'll let you know what I find out."

Robert smiled wide at her. "Okay. That sounds good."

"See you at dinner then." Tabitha said as she stood. She wanted to leave before she had to talk to Tom. She was fairly sure he didn't trust her commitment to the crew.

Chapter 26

"Eclipse." Nick said. "What have you got, El Tee?"

"Nothing on my end," Jeffrey said. "Looks clear out there."

"Proclamation?" Nick called. Since arriving in the system, two Corvettes has been launched to act as escorts. The other two- as all the other accompanying craft- had been packed completely full.

"Proc here," Lori answered. "I've got nothing. We'll swing a little farther out just to do some flying."

"Biggs, you getting any hands on the stick?" Nick asked.

"She's flying out, I'm flying back," Lieutenant Biggs said. "That's the agreement."

"That means you'll get back faster, good thinking," Jeffrey said.

"I heard that." Lori said.

"Buzz the landing site before you dock, Proclamation."

"Roger that, Space Ten," Biggs answered.

"Told you it would be smooth. You need more faith, Chief," Jeffrey said.

"I'm working on it. How're you doing Lincoln?"

"This is great," Lincoln said. "Man, this is a lot better than a simulation!"

"Remember to not be greedy with the stick, Ground Zero. See you in a few." Nick flipped the switch to off. He looked to his left- Sergeant Stanstead was in the copilot seat. "I'm going to talk to Gunny about the disembarking schedule, you got this?"

"Oh, roger that, Chief." She answered. "Go get us off this can."

"I'm with you." Nick said. He walked back to the operations board where Gunny was seated. "Tommy, what's the word?"

"We're ready to go..."

"Great."

"... Once the weather allows it."

"What, still?"

"Well, the sun's just come up, but we've got thunderstorms in the area. It's a small line of storms pushing through. They'll be gone by eight A.M. local time. No sense in getting wet, right?"

"I suppose three more hours won't hurt us. Everyone ready?"

"When I told them it was raining, and I wanted to wait a couple of hours, I practically had a mutiny on my hands." He pointed at the view screen. "It's not just a friendly summer shower Nick; it's a micro-burst with forty mile per hour winds. They... uhm... we... we have gotten three inches of rain in the past eight hours."

"I can see how that would be miserable. What's the forecast for the rest of the week?"

"Clear skies for four days, then thirty percent chance of afternoon showers after that for the rest of the week. It is springtime down there, after all."

"Tommy, I know I don't have to tell you that the one true constant in the universe is that weathermen are all conmen and liars."

Gunny laughed. "But you can trust me; I work for the government."

Now Nick laughed as well. "That's good enough for me. Give me a ship's wide." He reached for a microphone, pulling the coiled cord tight.

Gunny held up a hand. "You're on in five, four..." He went silent as he counted down on his fingers then pointed at him when the mike went live.

"Attention all. Chief here. Listen, I know we've got everything crammed into ships ready to drop but I need your patience. There's a micro-storm dumping rain on our future abode right now and I really think it would be best to wait another three hours instead of getting

drenched. The forecasts from our ever-reliable Gunnery Sergeant is that they'll be done by ten we'll dump everything toward the planet at fifteen hundred ship's time, ten thirty local time. By noon, you should be picking out your new homesteads. Now head toward the ships, but take your time so we'll have great weather to start out." He paused for a moment, "And if you'll permit me a little longer, I'd like to thank God for getting us here safe and sound and back on track." He smiled then un-keyed the mike.

"Great; I'm on the hook for the weather reports." He took the mike from Nick. "I'd have done the same to you if I had the chance."

"You know, we humans don't like getting drenched, but those EM-SQUATS don't care one way or another. We should dump all of them while we wait." Nick suggested.

"Good idea. I'll get on that right now. If nothing else, it will show we're moving in the right direction."

Nick gave him a thumbs up then returned to the flight deck.

Gunny flipped a switch. "Mister Bagley. You busy?"

After a moment, Kent replied: "In a holding pattern, Gunny. Like everyone else it seems. You sure it's a storm and not just a shower? You know, I've never actually been outside in the rain where I didn't have to worry about it causing a rash. It would be a novel experience, I think."

"You'll get plenty of chances to get rained on later. Get astrophysics to pipe their planet feed around the ship so folks can see the storm down there. Forty mile an hour winds, you know."

"I'll get on that right now. That all you needed?"

"No; we think we should dump the EM-SQUATS. As long as they're close, they can just walk to the coordinates."

"That'll give us something to do. I'll get Rebecca to run the numbers for the exit time. She's working on the route to PCB for Chief right now, so the distraction would be good."

"Sounds good," Gunny turned off the link as he leaned back in his chair. "Sounds really good." He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. "Smooth sailing."

Chapter 27

"Go away!" Rebecca shouted. "Honestly you're the most annoying... Just go!"

The Em-Squat stood perfectly still. "What is my desired location?" It asked.

Rebecca pointed into the forest. "Take up a position six hundred yards that way, you shiny annoying thing!"

"Complying." The Em-Squat -which was indeed still completely clean and shining unlike all the others- turned and moved in the direction she had pointed, claws tearing up huge tufts of grass as it went. Even the mud and grass it dug up as it walked seemed to just slide right off its luminescent orange paint.

Rebecca turned to look back at the campsite. It was a mess. The Em-Squats- all thirty-six of them- dropped three hours before anyone had left Space Ten had made their way to the rendezvous coordinates and then milled around waiting for further instructions. In the process, they had tilled all the wet grass into a muddy soup. "Nick!"

Nick walked over- he was covered in mud from the knees down. "Yes dearest?"

"Whoever thought that sending those mechanical beasts down ahead of us should be shot!"

"It was Tommy," Nick said immediately. "Completely his idea."

Rebecca crossed her arms. "That's odd because he said the idea was yours."

"I'm sure that is open to interpretation. Trust me."

Rebecca stomped her feet in the mud. "At this moment, I think I'll trust my wet feet." She gestured around. "What are we supposed to do about all this? Or more importantly, what are you going to do about this, Chief of the expedition?"

Nick looked around the area. Only a very few people were standing around in the mud, most were just looking out of their ships' hatches. Lori and Tabitha were sitting on the delta wing of the Proclamation at the edge of the encampment- it's landing gear sunk a good foot into the mud. Lori waved at him when she saw him looking. "Well, I can tell you this; this is probably not the best place to set up camp. Doesn't seem to have any drainage at all." He stomped his feet as well. "We'd be like this every time it rained."

"What do you suggest?"

"Me? I need to suggest something? You mean some sort of 'Plan B'?"

"So now there's a Plan B?"

"Lady, there's always a Plan B." Nick keyed his mike. "Pendulum, Tide, Piranha?" He said, calling three of Space Ten's six PTEs- Patrol, Transport, Exploration ships that had been deployed in the nearby area. They were small, very fast inter-system ships designed to carry only fifteen passengers and one EMSQUAT. "What have we got?" He winked at Rebecca.

"We've talked it over; location Delta looks just right. Good drainage, lots of open spaces. It's even right on the water." Sergeant Pastis replied.

"Excellent work, Tide." Nick said.

"The other two ships are heading to me." Pastis said. "We're all going skinny dipping, so come join the party."

"Thanks, I'll pass." Nick flipped his comm link off then slogged through the mud to Rebecca, taking her in his arms. "Oh, what a wonderful wife I have."

She looked up and raised an eyebrow at him.

"One that is so clever to figure out that our original landing site was on a flood plain and we should look for a more suitable place."

"Uh-huh."

Nick keyed his mike again. "Space Ten, give me an all-call, if you please."

After a moment, Sergeant Mellow responded: "You're on, Chief."

"Hey all. Sorry about the mess. It seems we're about two miles south from where we really should be. Sergeant Pastis is there in the Tide. He's pushing out the coordinates. Everyone get back aboard and let's do a quick up and down there. Oh; PTEs together, Corvettes together, and so on."

Cheers and clapping went out from the crewmen as they returned to their ships.

"You know, I think we should leave the EM-SQUATS here for the next couple of days," Nick said.

"Very astute." Rebecca smirked at him.

Nick kissed her. "That's me; I'm as toot as can be."

"You're a hoot, alright."

"Toot." Nick corrected.

"Fine; toot."

Nick started toward the ship. "Let's get aboard so we can be on our way."

Rebecca frowned. "Yes. So you can be on your way. Eight months away, to be more precise."

Nick hugged her close. "I know. But I have to go. Not only for us but for the people on Arcturus. I can't just leave them defenseless against the DMS."

"I'm sure God will protect them, Nick."

"Jesus said 'do not put your God to the test' in Luke. Jesus was quoting Moses in Deuteronomy. Moses also said a verse later 'Do what is right and good in the Lord's sight so that it may go well with you and you may go take over the good land that the Lord promised." Nick said. "I feel responsible for my friends there. If I can protect them, I need to. How can we settle here knowing they might be in danger there?" He smiled. "When we go back there, I really want you to meet them."

"That would be great, Nick." Rebecca hugged Nick tight. "I've got your route to PCB down to three and a half months with a couple of course corrections."

"Nice."

"Well then, let's get moved to the new spot so you can get on your way. The sooner you leave, the sooner you get back."

"Exactly." Nick started toward the landing craft, mud squelching as he went. "Man, I can't believe Gunny suggested sending those robots down here first."

"Uh huh." Rebecca bumped him with her hip as they walked back to the drop ship.

When they got on the ship, it rose into the air, sending mud in all directions. Without going over a hundred feet, it started toward the signal being sent from the Tide. As soon as the ship started flying, Nick closed his eyes.

"Asleep already?" Rebecca said.

"Just saying thanks for getting us here safely is all," Nick said without opening his eyes. "Next step is to grow old together paddling around that river."

The pair sat in silence as the ship rocketed off. Within a mere two minutes, the front of the ship rose sharply as it prepared to land- rear landing gear first in case there was more mud to be found.

Nick opened his eyes and looked around. The other people in the landing ship were smiling and having conversations. He noticed that none were looking in his direction. He looked to his left to see tears streaming down Rebecca's face. "Honey, what's wrong?" He put his arm around her. "Rebecca?"

She sniffed. "I don't deserve any of this. Any of it."

He smiled. "The mud? Yeah, I agree; you didn't deserve that." He hugged her tight.

"You know that's not what I mean." She gestured around the ship. "This. I don't deserve this. Or you. We should all have died on Earth when it was destroyed."

"You're right." Nick said. "You're absolutely right."

Rebecca wiped her eyes. "You... you see it too then?"

Nick turned to face her. "Absolutely I do. This is all a gift from God." He held up a hand. "And whether we deserve it or not, He saw something in us... all of us, that got each one of us on the Space Ten

mission. And after a bunch of flying around the galaxy, got us here on Murphrid. It's all part of His plan. His will, Rebecca. We just need to make sure we live up to his expectations." He hugged her again. "Right?"

"I suppose so."

"Remember, we are all unworthy. It says in Romans that God proves His love for us because while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

"Romans, huh?"

Nick stood and held his hand out to her. "Yeah, Romans. I spend so much time there reading and in my dreams walking around, I should be an honorary citizen."

"Nicolaus Maximus." Rebecca said with a smile as she let herself get pulled to her feet.

"Whoa, hold on now! I might paint that on the side of my ship. I like the sound of that."

"What ship? You're retiring, remember?"

"Crud, you're right." Nick put his arm around her as the exit ramp lowered. "How about boat? The Nicolaus Maximus. That's got a nice ring to it."

"That's not a good boat name. At all."

"I'll work on it." Nick said.

The pair waited as the people seated between them and the exit filed out. There was a slight delay because as people reached the open air, they all stopped for a moment.

"What are they stopping for? I hope there aren't dinosaurs out there." Rebecca said. "Not really; dinosaurs would be really cool."

Nick laughed. "I'm not sure how dealing with dinosaurs on a daily basis would go over."

When it was their turn, they walked down the ramp into the sunlight. The ship was in a very large valley- miles across. A wide river meandered through it on its way to the ocean. Where they had landed, the river widened into a massive lake over two miles across before

continuing toward some craggy mountains in the far-off distance. The grass was only knee deep and the ground was firm under their feet.

Rebecca came to a halt at the top of the ramp. "Oh Nick." Her eyes welled up again.

"Stop, you're going to get me crying too." He pulled her down the ramp and into the grass. "Hey, should we get the Em-Squats to trample this grass down for us?" He smiled at her.

Rebecca looked up at him. "Don't you dare." She reached down and ran her hand across the top of the grass. "Real, honest to goodness grass. I never imagined." She sneezed.

Nick let go of her. "Okay dearest, if you're going to be okay, I need to make sure things go in the right direction right from the start."

Rebecca sneezed. "I'll be fine." She sneezed again.

Nick laughed. "Now that's something we didn't consider. Mayhap you need to find an antihistamine, Miss Sniffles?"

"Get to work." She shoved him. "But I'll go find Tanya and see what she's got available. I'll go..." She sneezed again. "Just go." She waved him off.

Nick leaned in and kissed her. "See you later." He walked off toward where the PTEs had parked in a large circle. The Corvettes had parked in two rows about a hundred yards away from them.

Gunny Sergeant McCain jogged up to Nick. "Hey now this looks a lot better, huh Nick?"

"Right? We've got the start of a good and proper motor pool going on over there." Nick pointed toward the ships. "Once we get it paved, you can order the privates to sweep it late on a Friday afternoon just for fun."

"No, not that." He stomped his feet. "I mean the ground that isn't threatening to steal my boots." He gestured across the lake. "And look at those views. I hope the sun goes down behind those mountains over there."

"Oh yeah, that too." He stomped his feet as well. "Nice and solid."

"Now you're doing it on purpose," Gunny said.

Nick smiled at his friend. "Yeah, sorry." He looked around. "I never imagined I'd be living in a place like this."

The two men took in the scenery in silence for a long minute. Finally, Nick pointed toward the ships. "Where's the Aggressor going to land?" He asked, referring to the missile cruiser.

"Down that way." Gunny jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "It's going to set up as a southern wall."

"You worried?"

"If I were worried, I'd put the Em-Squats around the camp. I just want to keep any large predators away until we get an idea of what we've got for carnivorous neighbors."

"Rebecca is hoping for dinosaurs."

Gunny laughed. "What? Tell her that under no circumstances is she to pray for those things. Tell her to pray for good fishing instead. You know the probe didn't see anything that big anyway."

"So, it's good fishing then. Got it." Nick said.

Gunny looked at Nick. "Dinosaurs?"

"They would be cool to see. Admit it."

Now Gunny pointed at the other end of the area. "Might sit a couple of the Corvettes on that end before they get too settled, now that I think about it. Just to give us a north and south boundary."

"Good plan." Nick looked toward the river. "How soon do you think we can push off with Space Ten? I was hoping in one, two days tops."

"Two would be better, honestly. Even with all the ships loaded up, it's still going to take a couple dozen trips to get all the gear out to start putting houses together."

"I was thinking of a circle, with a large meeting area and church in the middle." Nick said.

"It will look pretty from the sky that way," Gunny said. "Listen, we'll get set for the day, give the pilots some crew rest, and then tomorrow early start our flights back and forth. I think by the end of the day, we can be ready to give you a sendoff."

The pair stopped in front of the PTEs. "Have you decided on a command crew yet? I heard that Jeffrey was pretty upset you were taking his wife."

"It's purely for selfish reasons; she's the best pilot we've got, and I want to make sure I can get back here."

"That's completely understandable." Gunny said. "I want you back here too, Nick. I'd hate to go fishing all alone."

"I just wish we had something smaller, so I didn't have to take two dozen folks with me."

Gunny shrugged. "Play the hand you're dealt, Nick." He put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "I'll get this colony up and running." He turned around as he surveyed the area. "Once we get a layout everyone approves of, we'll get those inflatables set up in a few days." He said referring to the modular thermo-plastic rooms that once inflated, hardened in the sun in two days. The square, fifteen by fifteen rooms could be inflated next to one another, bolted together then doors were cut between them to create multi-room dwellings. Once they were cured, holes were cut in the tops of the hollow walls to either be filled with concrete or just dirt. Similar roof panels were used to complete the structure. He panned his hand around. "We'll do a half circle along the river, temple hall in the middle with streets spiraling out from it."

"It's going to be great, Tommy. Man, it's going to be great." Nick smiled. "If I can make just one request."

"What's that?"

"I really would like to have gardens like they had on Arcturus around the town. Spiraling out."

"You want to lure God in?" Gunny chuckled. "I don't think it works like that."

"More like lure us to Him. Even if He doesn't walk around the gardens like He does on Arcturus, I think having gardens that people can go to and pray and relax would be a really good thing."

"If the Gardens on the ship were any indication, I would have to agree," Gunny said. "We'll get the town up and running, then I'll see what Jason can get going. I'm sure we can move around some local plants as well as what we brought with us to make it really nice."

Nick looked around the area. "It's really going to be great. I'm sorry I'm going to miss it."

"Miss it? Are you crazy? All you're going to miss is the hard work and sweat it will take getting it going. You'll show back up in eight months when all the heavy lifting is done." Gunny pointed out. "Pretty convenient, I'd have to say."

"Still." Nick said. "I wish I could be here for it."

"Don't worry; you'll be back for some well-deserved relaxation. As long as your mission goes to plan. Otherwise this is one big kill-zone." Now Gunny pointed at the high hills that formed the valley. "Me? I'd put my artillery up there, long guns about halfway down the slopes. Mechs at the south side pushing north to keep everyone packed together. Yeah, it'd be like..." He paused for a moment. "I've never shot fish in a barrel, but it would be a lot like that, I think."

"You're really not helping, Tommy." Nick looked at the hills. "Now I don't want to go."

"You need to go so that this place *doesn't* become a battle zone. But if it makes you feel better, I'll set the Em-Squats up on the hilltops and set them in sentry mode." He pointed at the top of one of the taller hills on the ridgeline. "A wind and solar array per side will let them wander over and charge themselves up once in a while."

"That would be worthwhile to do until you figure out what the apex hunters are around here." Nick said.

"We've got several W-S arrays. Plus, a couple of nuke generators thanks to you. Power is one thing we won't have to worry about." Gunny pointed at the river. "That's flowing fast enough where it narrows that a large paddlewheel out there would generate a good bit of power twenty-four seven." He paused. "Or whatever the days and weeks run to around here."

"Rebecca could tell you, I'm sure." Nick put his arm on his friend's shoulder. "Might as well get things rolling if I'm pushing out tomorrow night."

"We'll all be praying for a speedy return." Gunny said as the pair walked back towards the encampment.

"Thanks."

"Sure, sure. If you get back fast enough, maybe you can do some of the work as well." Gunny said with a laugh.

"Deal."

Chapter 28

Sergeant Uhlein peeked his head up to the next level- there was no one there. He quickly scrambled up to it. He was trying to get to his quarters without being seen- he had one more piece of luggage to move then he was done.

As he rounded the corner toward his room, he ran straight into Robert Garvin. "Hey!" Uhlein said caught off-guard because this wasn't the deck the youth lived on. "What are you doing here, Slim?"

"I was walking back to the cable," Robert said with a frown. "Just call me Robert, I guess. It was my Dad that started calling me Slim. And now..."

"Right, right. Robert," Uhlein cut him off. "Call me Bradley. What are you doing here, Robert?" He asked again.

"I was walking to the cable." This time he pointed in that direction. "Bradley," he added.

"Yeah, I heard that. But..." Uhlein said. He shook his head. "Forget I asked."

"Okay."

Bradley Uhlein stared at the young man. While he was very intelligent and great with mathematics, he was sure that the young man had just indeed forgotten what they were talking about. "Keeping busy?"

"I guess. Got all the houses drawn up." The youth shrugged. "In another three weeks, we'll get to build them, so that'll be fun, I suppose."

"Yeah. Life on Beta Three. Lots of fun." Bradley started past the youth; he wanted him to continue on his way so he could get his suitcase from this quarters unobserved.

Robert sighed. “I don’t know. The houses were fun to build, but I’ll miss my parents.” He leaned out and grabbed Uhlein by the arm. “Do you know what I think, Bradley?” He whispered conspiratorially.

Bradley stared at Robert. “I can’t imagine.”

Robert stepped even closer while he pulled Bradley by the arm until they were up against each other. He ducked his head and whispered into Bradley’s ear, “I think my parents and a whole lot of other people are on their way to Murphrid.”

Uhlein brushed Robert’s hand off his arm and pushed the youth away. “You don’t have to whisper; there’s no way anyone else is on this deck.”

Robert took another step back. “I think my parents and a whole lot of other people are on their way to Murphrid.” He said again in a normal voice.

“I heard you the...” A thought occurred to Uhlein. “You know what? You’re probably right.”

“I know I’m right,” Robert frowned. “I wish I could go see them. I miss them a lot.”

“I miss them too,” Uhlein said. “Hey, you want to go get them? Bring them back here?”

“You miss my parents too?”

“No.” Uhlein started to reconsider his idea. He was, however, critically short of people who would be willing to help him, so he pressed on. “What I meant was I miss all those other people. It would be great to have them here too.” He looked around the corridor. “I want to go get them and bring them here.”

“That’s a great idea! I’m glad Captain Miner wants other people here too.”

Uhlein shook his head. “No, he doesn’t know just yet.” Now he leaned in close. “It’s a secret... a surprise, really.”

“A surprise?” Robert smiled. “That sounds like a lot of fun.”

“Oh, it will be.”

“How’s it work?” Robert asked. “This surprise.”

"I'm going to take the Glimmer to Murphrid and get those people," he said, not being able to stop himself from making a double entendre.

"And bring them back here? That's great!"

"Yeah." Uhlein said. "So, if you want to go bring them back here, I could really use some help flying the ship."

"Oh. I can't fly a ship." Robert said, let down. "Maybe I can learn once we get on the planet?"

"No." Uhlein took several breaths. "You know Blair? Blair Alystock?"

"Al." Robert nodded. He brightened up. "Hey! He's a pilot."

"I know. He said he wants to help with the surprise so he's going to fly the ship. If you help with managing the ship's systems that would help a lot... in getting your parents back here."

Robert hugged Uhlein. "That sounds great! Really great."

Uhlein hugged the youth back. "I'm so glad you're willing to help." He shoved the boy away from him. "The plan is to take the Glimmer and go there now."

"But we're still moving at something like ten Cee right now."

Uhlein nodded. "It will get us on our way that much faster. We'll detach from the DMS and already be going at our top speed. We can do a broad turn toward Murphrid so we'll knock off a month's worth of acceleration. I've already worked out the trajectory."

"Wow!" Robert frowned again. "When are we leaving?"

"Real soon, Robert. Real soon. Once I get another couple of people, we'll head out."

"Oh, I can help with that!"

"No," Uhlein said flatly. "Remember it's a secret, so you can't go blabbing about it to everyone. Let me figure out who to ask."

"But I know just the perfect people!"

"How do you know they're perfect for this... surprise?"

"Because we've talked about wanting to get off the ship," Robert said. He understood that his other conversations were supposed to be confidential, but now it seemed that Sergeant Uhlein was like-minded. "I've been talking with Tabitha and Renée and they..."

"Tabitha?" Uhlein said. "I don't know about her."

"Oh, I do," Robert nodded at the man. "And she really wants to get off the ship." He snapped his fingers. "Hey! And she's a pilot too!"

"Tabitha's a pilot? I didn't know that."

"She flew for..." He paused as he thought back to his conversation. "The Queensland Gliders. But they're not gliders; they're really aircraft with engines and everything. She flew cargo ships. She said she's rated at a thousand tons," he said, recalling their conversation.

"Huh." Bradley considered that. Having a second pilot would be worthwhile for the three-and-a-half-month trip. Once they arrived and destroyed the colony, he would be able to kill Tabitha as well as Robert, then only have to make the return trip with a skeleton crew of him and Alystock and the others. "You know, that might work, now that you mention it."

"Great!" Robert said. "What about Renée? She wanted to get off the ship too."

"What's she good at?"

"She can grow things; she's an agricultural specialist."

"A scientist is a scientist," Bradley said.

"I don't think that's how it works." Robert pointed out.

"Do you want to get to see your parents again?"

"Oh sure!"

"Then let's go talk to them together. Right now." Bradley said. He also knew that Sergeant Whiddon was on board for the mission, as well as Alyssa Whitburn.

"Is three people enough to fly that ship?"

"Not really," Bradley admitted. "It will be really a lot of work," He said thinking to the return trip. "But I've got a couple of other... friends that said they wanted to help too."

"Who are they?" Robert asked.

"It's a secret, remember? You'll see them on the ship. But first let's go talk to those other two. If they are with us, we can leave in a couple of hours."

"A couple of hours?" Robert asked. "Is the ship ready to go?"

"I've got everything set up," Bradley said. For the past three weeks, he had been quietly sending Em-Squats on EVAs to attach to the Glimmer. He had twenty-five of them in place. There were enough clamps for another six, but if he had a crew ready, he was prepared to leave right away. Twenty-five heavily armored Em-Squats were more than enough to handle a hundred or so Space Ten crewmen. He had looked at transferring one of their nuclear warheads, but the onboard sensors of the ship would have alerted the bridge of the change in radiation levels outside the containment room. Of course, adding in Space Ten's full complement of Em-Squats meant that the colonists on Murphrid didn't stand a chance. "We're all set."

Before Bradley could stop him, Robert tapped his comm link. "Tabitha? Where are you?"

Bradley reached for the youth. "What are you doing?"

"Tabitha?" Robert said again.

"Stop!"

"Tabitha here, Robert," Tabitha said. She had learned that if she tried to ignore the eccentric youth, he would just keep calling until she finally answered. "Is this about my home design?"

"No, I just needed to talk to you." Robert winked at Bradley, "in person if you're not busy."

There was a long pause. During it, Robert leaned in close to Bradley. "Maybe she's in the shower?" He snickered. "Or pooping!"

Bradley let out a long sigh. While he realized that Robert wasn't responsible for the way he was born or the way he acted, Bradley was

sure he would feel no remorse when he jettisoned the young man out an airlock before leaving Murphrid.

"I'm in the mess hall, Robert," Tabitha finally responded. "Renée and I were just finishing eating if you wanted to meet me here." And because she knew that he would sometimes get distracted on his way to places- "If you want to talk you need to hurry because I need to get back to work."

Robert did a little hop. "They're both there! Oh boy!"

Bradley just shook his head. "I don't know." He was sure that convincing both of them at once could prove formidable. Especially since he was sure they disliked him as much as he disliked them.

Robert tapped his link again. "Ask Renée to wait too. I'm coming straight there. Straight there, I promise," He added because he had been scolded for getting sidetracked going to meet people. He grabbed Bradley's sleeve. "Let's go; she doesn't like it when I keep her waiting."

Bradley let Robert pull him to the cable, knowing it would just make ejecting the youth into space that much more enjoyable.

Chapter 29

Robert crouched down and poked his head around the corner into the mess hall at waist level. "The coast is clear," he said in a whisper.

"If you can't just act normal... I'm not going to take you," Bradley said. It was the third time he had made the threat since leaving the deck his cabin was on just a few minutes before.

"Okay, okay." Robert stood. "Act natural." He stepped into the doorway. "Hey you two." He waved as he sauntered toward them, Bradley close behind.

Bradley saw both women tense up as they noticed him. He tried to put on his most friendly face even though he knew killing the two women would be just as enjoyable as killing Robert. He fantasized about getting all three of them in an airlock together so he could watch them fight each other before venting them into space. He thought of what promises the two women would make to him for the chance to live. The thought exhilarated him, giving him an even bigger smile.

"Robert," Tabitha said. Her eyes shifted to Sergeant Uhlein. "What's so important?"

Robert let the increased gravity of their deceleration do the work and flopped into a chair next to Renée, across from Tabitha. "Have a seat Bradley, this is great."

Tabitha kept her eyes on Bradley as he sat down next to her.

No one said anything for a long moment until Robert broke the silence: "This is a secret, just so you know."

"What's a secret?" Tabitha asked.

"This will be good" Renée said sourly.

Bradley decided on the direct approach. "Alright, I know that you know that I don't like you. And I know that you don't like me probably the same amount."

Tabitha laughed heartily; head tilted back.

Renée tried stifling her laugh unsuccessfully.

Robert just looked between the pair, not sure what they were laughing at.

"When you're through," Bradley seethed.

Tabitha looked at Renée. "Did you know that I know that you know that he knows that I know he's a creep?"

"Oh, I know."

"I knew this was a bad idea," Bradley said. He started to stand.

"Oh, calm down, Sergeant," Renée said. "That was right out of that comedy show 'Saturdays with Dad'."

Tabitha nodded. "Thanks; I've needed a good laugh."

"What's so funny?" Robert said. He was used to not getting jokes.

Tabitha pointed at Uhlein. "Him, trying to act all secret cloak and dagger, then he says a line from a comedy show instead."

"I don't have to sit here and take this. I've got better things to do." Bradley turned to leave the table.

"Okay, we're sorry," Tabitha said. "What do you have to tell us?"

Bradley looked at the group at the table, deciding what to do.

"What is it already?" Renée asked. "You've got poor Robert excited about something, so let us in on it too."

Robert leaned forward and ducked his head close to the table. "We're getting off the ship," he whispered.

Both Tabitha and Renée got serious.

"What?" Tabitha said. It was something she had been thinking about since coming aboard- and abandoning her husband of five years.

Renée looked up at Bradley. "You're getting off the ship?" She gestured at the seat. "How are you getting off the ship?"

Bradley returned to his seat. "I'm..." he looked back and forth between the women. "This is in confidence."

Tabitha nodded at him. "We can keep your secret, Sergeant. If Robert thinks it's something worthwhile to hear, then we want to hear it too."

Bradley thought for a moment. "Okay. So, as I said... I realize none of us like each other. But that doesn't mean we can't work together for a common goal."

"Getting off the ship?" Renée said. "That's the goal of everyone. We're all getting off when we get to Beta Three. What's the big deal?"

"I mean getting off now," Bradley said. "Right now. I mean getting on the Glimmer and going to Murphrid."

"What business do you have there?" Tabitha said. "I'm pretty sure you don't like those people either."

Bradley leaned back in his chair. "I don't. Not one little bit. But I believe that other ships are headed there thanks to Chief Hauser's beacons he was dropping as he left our Solar System," Bradley lied. "I want to go there and give the people who show up an... alternative to Chief's lifestyle."

"I see." Tabitha said. "And if they refuse?"

"They can stay for all I care." Bradley snapped. "All I care about is getting enough people on Beta Three that we are a viable colony." He narrowed his eyes at her. "That doesn't include the options I'm sure you women have been pitched."

Renée shifted uncomfortably in her chair. "It's not pitched as an option, just so you know."

"Then I don't see how you wouldn't be willing to join in. We go to Murphrid, see who's there that wants to come our way, drop our own beacons to let other ships know where we are, then come back to Beta Three."

"And what about us?"

"Again." Bradley shrugged. "I don't really care about you. Stay on Murphrid for all I care. The last thing we need on our new colony is troublemakers."

"It's a good plan," Robert said. "And even if my parents aren't there, they'll know where I am so they can come here."

Tabitha sighed. "And what assurances do we have for our safety?"

"Assurances? Against what?" Bradley put his hands on the table. "If I wanted you two dead, this ghost ship is the perfect place to make that happen. I need people to help fly the Glimmer there." He pointed at Tabitha. "You're a pilot, so I hear." He then pointed at Renée. "And you could run the sciences and life support station. You're both valuable members of the crew."

"What about the return trip?" Tabitha asked.

"On the way there, I can get enough of the basics that I can give you and Al a break on flying. And we can double up on the other stations. If I can avoid us showing up at Murphrid like zombies that have been working twenty-four-hour shifts for three months, then that's half the battle." When Tabitha opened her mouth to speak, he continued, "And it would get a couple of troublemakers out of the colony in trade for like-minded colonists. And then they could help fly the ship back. That's a real big gain in my book."

Tabitha glanced at Robert quickly. "You actually think you're going to come across other survivors?"

"I absolutely believe it," Bradley lied. "Why else would I be willing to take a seven-month trip?"

"Seven?"

Bradley nodded at Tabitha. "We leave today. This evening. While the ship is moving so we don't have to waste time getting up to speed. We'll do a big arc toward Murphrid and save a month's acceleration time."

"Tonight?" Renée said. "I don't know."

Bradley brought his hands up and gestured around the empty room. "What do you have planned here that's so important? Is there a Bingo night I don't know about? Another show to watch? Just remember that every day I... we wait, the ship continues to move farther away from Murphrid and decelerate. That's speed we're going to have to get back on our own. And it pushes us into an even larger arc to get there. It's not like you got people around here you need to hug and kiss goodbye." He smirked at Tabitha. "Right?"

Tabitha looked away- it was common knowledge that she regretted her decision to leave Space Ten. "No, there isn't." She said softly.

"Great!" Robert said. "When do we leave?"

"We?" Bradley said. "You're not going, Robert."

"What? Why not?"

"Because it's going to be bad enough when five of us go missing out of just twenty-one crew. Someone's liable to notice that and we need to be able to get aboard the Glimmer without anyone trying to stop us."

"But... my parents." Robert said.

"If we find them there Robert, we'll be bringing them back with us." Bradley raised his hand- the lies were getting easier to tell each time. "And if they aren't there yet, they'll have our beacon to lead them here. You can even add yourself to the message, so they hear your voice."

"But you said I could I could go along. You said so!" Robert whined.

"Don't be stupid," Bradley snapped. "With Renée going, what do we need you for?"

"I'm not stupid!" Robert snapped back- it was an accusation he had heard all too often. Even when he was a fifteen-year-old freshman protégé at Florida Technical Institute. "Don't call me that."

Tabitha put her hand on the youth's shoulder. "It's okay, Robert. I don't think you're stupid." She glared at Bradley. "No one thinks that. You're the one designing all the houses, remember?"

"Yeah." Robert said, not sounding convinced. "I suppose."

"Sorry about that, Robert," Bradley said as bile backed up in his throat. "Sure, you can come." He stood and moved to the food processor. He pressed buttons for a glass of soda. "I'll be glad to have you along." He said. *So I can kill you personally.*

"Great!" Robert said, instantly elated. "I'll go pack my bags!"

Bradley returned to the table quickly with his drink. "Alright now, you can't be seen lugging your bags down the cable." He gestured at him. "See? That's what I'm talking about, right there."

"But I'll need some clothes." He leaned toward Bradley. "Underwear and stuff like that," he whispered.

Tabitha stifled a laugh. "Tell you what, Robert. I'll help you with that." She looked at Renée. "We could... we could put your stuff in a tactical-box. That way it looks like you're helping me move some supplies. All our stuff should fit in one box," She said, referring to the large, green waterproof plastic boxes used for moving a myriad of equipment on a mission. "One of the large four by fours would be perfect."

"Hey! That's smart." Robert said. He smiled at Bradley. "How's that sound, Bradley?"

"Yeah, sure. That sounds good." He took a sip of his drink to push the bile down again. "You three get your stuff to the ship. I've already cross-loaded food supplies and everything else we'll need. We need to push off at twenty-one hundred hours. We'll be just under ten Cee at that point and we'll be projected for a fourteen-week run to Murphrid."

"I can work with that," Renée said. "I'll get my stuff loaded in a couple of soft bags. If anyone sees me, I'll tell them I'm moving down closer to hydroponics. I've been thinking of doing that anyway just to save the twenty-minute commute on the cable anyway."

"Great. Now get to the ship before twenty-one hundred hours because if you're late, I'll just leave you behind and deal with the lack of sleep later." Bradley stood. He toasted them with his drink, downed the rest of it, then left the glass on the table, then walked off.

"What do you think?" Tabitha said. "Do you think it's a trick, Ren?"

"Like he said himself, if he wanted us dead... and I think he does... he could do that here. He needs our help to fly that ship."

"I'm still not going to get near any airlocks with him behind me." Tabitha said. "I want to get off the ship, but not like that."

"Agreed." Renée shook her head. "I don't trust that guy one bit. I'm going to draw a pistol on my way to the Glimmer. I'll get one for you too."

"Do I get one?" Robert asked.

"No." Both Tabitha and Renée said at once.

"Oh." Robert said, let down.

"I don't think that's necessary," Tabitha said. "We're both trained with pistols I'd hate to see you get hurt." She smiled at him. "We want you to stay safe and sound so you can find your parents."

"That makes sense," Robert smiled back at her. "Thanks."

"Why don't you go get your stuff organized and I'll be by in about an hour with a Tac-Box?"

"Sure, sure!" Robert stood quickly. "I'll be ready."

"Remember it's a secret," Tabitha said. "Just act calm going to your cabin. And don't leave until I get there."

"Right, right." Robert said as he half-walked, half-jogged to toward the cable.

Tabitha sighed. "That kid."

"Yeah, but we can't just leave him here. They all seem to hate him. I mean, it's obvious he's on the edge of the spectrum."

"He's more like knee-deep in it, I think. You don't actually believe he's going to find his parents, do you?" Tabitha asked.

"Not a chance." She gestured toward the doorway. "And I don't know what Uhlein is up to, but I don't think he's going there to find any wayward ships either."

"Why else would he be going to Murphrid?"

"To get revenge on Chief, I'd think." Renée said. "He's got to be up to something."

"Either way, I'm for hitching a ride to Murphrid." Tabitha said.

"Tabitha." She reached across the table and took her friend's hands. "Do you think he'll even be willing to take you back?"

"I think he will. I mean, all he talked about was forgiveness and love. They all did." Tabitha squeezed Renée's hands. "I have to believe it."

"We'll find out together then. Because I'm not staying here to become a baby factory. I'll watch your back, you watch mine." Renée said.

"Deal." Tabitha said. "Make sure you get plenty of rounds." She added.

"Oh, you know it."

The two women stood. Tabitha looked at Uhlein's glass. "I'm not cleaning it."

"Me neither. Let's go."

The pair left, one toward the armory, the other toward her quarters.

Chapter 30

Nick hugged Rebecca tighter. "I need to go, Rebecca. Everyone's waiting."

"Fine, fine." Rebecca let go of him. "Just hurry back."

"As fast as I can." He kissed her. "See you soon." With that he turned and went up the ramp of the Proclamation. The other Corvette - the Wildebeest- had already docked with Space Ten. Everyone except Nick and Lori were already aboard. When he got to the top of the ramp, the engines rumbled to life. Nick turned and looked out at everyone. *Lord, it's me again. Please watch over them and keep them safe.* He raised a hand and waved. Jeffrey caught his eye. He pointed at Jeffrey and Jeffery pointed back. With that he turned and entered the ship as the ramp started to go up.

"Ready?" Lori said as Nick entered the bridge

"Ready." He settled into the co-pilot seat.

She smiled. "Alright, Chief. Let's go settle the score."

"We're not settling a score..." He chuckled. "El Tee."

"What's so funny?" She glanced forward as she flipped the switches to raise the landing gear. She angled the stick over to the left then to the right then back again, dipping the wings of the ship at the people below in a traditional aviator 'wave'.

"Oh, I'm usually giving my sage advice to another young lieutenant."

Now Lori laughed. "I see. We're not settling a score then?" She narrowed her eyes at him. "You can tell me now that we're away from the others. It'll be our little secret."

"Seriously, we're not." Nick watched for a moment as the ship passed through the clouds. "Wow; beautiful."

"Right? And they're white and puffy instead of grey and filled with acid rain. Man, I'm going to love this place." She looked back at Nick. "Changing the subject, Chief?"

"No. Got distracted is all. We're not going to settle a score," he repeated. "What I would actually love is for us to come to an agreement where we just ignore each other. Or even just be cordial enough to provide help to each other as needed but not necessarily share meals together." He paused for a long moment. "But I don't think that's going to happen any time soon."

"Or ever, I think." Lori said. "I've been talking to Jeffrey about this a lot and he really thinks that those people on the DMS have given themselves over completely to hate. They absolutely hate that we have found God. They hate that the Earth was destroyed. And they hate that they didn't die with it."

"I think he's right. You know, I was worried they would just crash the DMS into us when they commandeered it. Or run a Corvette into us. I'm glad they didn't."

"They're cowards."

Nick laughed. "Listen, just because *you* make a habit of ramming things doesn't mean you can call people who don't, cowards."

Lori shrugged. "Everyone knows that the nose of a Corvette would easily take the impact of the two thin vacuum chambers of a LINAC."

"And the surrounding bulkhead? Three hundred feet or so?"

"Eh. I might not even suit up when I try it."

"When?"

"If." Lori corrected.

"If?"

"Hypothetically," Lori said with a smirk.

"I'm glad you're on our side." Nick said. "Seriously. When we get there, I'm torn between trying to reason with them, or destroying the DMS and then sending a pod down with the Bible in case they ever do decide to read it. I really need to give them that opportunity."

"God has given them plenty of opportunities." Lori said. "Plen-ty."

"No one is beyond God's forgiveness. No one. They just need to ask." Nick pointed out.

"Uh oh. That sounds dangerous."

"Relax, El Tee. I just made a command decision and downloaded the Bible as well as all the plans we took from Earth onto an Ice Block." Nick said, referring to the six-inch square polymer with trillions of nanocrystals embedded into it that were etched with data at the molecular level by lasers. The crystals were arranged isometrically and the entire block still retained an opaque look which made people call them 'ice blocks.' "I've put ten petabytes of designs on it as well as the Bible as well as all the videos Kevin found with religious services on them."

"Come on, Chief; really? They're just going to build another ship and come kill us."

"It will take them a decade to get to where they can build another LINAC. Before then, I would want to try and contact them to see if they're willing to talk."

"That really sounds dangerous."

"We could easily send a probe there; we wouldn't have to go in person." He smiled. "Or we could program an EMSQUAT and send it as an emissary. One of them would fit on a Class Three probe. And if we put one of a twisted pair of electrons on it, it would let us set up an instantaneous communication link between our two planets."

"I don't know Chief," Lori said. "Those people..."

"Those people are also..." Nick's voice trailed off as the blue color of atmosphere gave way to the blackness of space. A smile came to his face. "Love that."

Lori smiled at him. "Is anyone aware of this person called the Soft-Hearted Chief?"

Nick looked at her. "Nope; because he doesn't exist."

"Uh-huh." Lori flipped several switches. "Starting docking approach. Everything looks clean."

"Take her in." Nick gestured at Space Ten. Its parking lights were on and the entire ship was bathed in bright white light. "Man, she's a beauty, huh?"

"I prefer my ships a little smaller and faster, truth be told." Lori smiled at him. "Call us in, will you, Chief?"

Nick nodded. He flipped a switch on the console between them. "Space Ten this is the Mighty Proclamation."

"Mighty?" Lori snorted. "I'm going to add that to the tail in red letters."

"Mighty Proclamation. Go." Sergeant Lincoln replied.

"Requesting permission to dock."

"Permission granted, Proclamation." Lincoln said.

"Mighty. Mighty Proclamation," Lori corrected.

"Where do you want us?" Nick asked.

"Put her beside the Wildebeest, if you please."

"Roger that," Nick thumbed the switch off and gestured at Space Ten. "Steady as she goes, El Tee."

The ship executed a smooth barrel roll as it approached Space Ten.

Nick flipped the communications switch again. "Space Ten?"

"Go, Proclamation."

"I'd like to set up a quick meeting when I get to the bridge. We can pipe it ship-wide but if folks were leaving the bridge, ask them to hang around another half hour."

"Roger, Chief. We'll be waiting."

Nick flipped the switch again. "We need to get our plan locked tight."

"This is that Benjamin Franklin thing isn't it?" Lori throttled back the engines to match Space Ten's speed as she closed the distance between them.

Nick pursed his lips. "Maybe a little. But..."

"Relax, Chief. We've got them off guard and out gunned and God is on our side. How can we lose?"

"As I told my wife earlier today, 'do not put your God to the test."

"They have no idea we're coming, and we've got them outgunned."

"On that second part, they've got their own Corvettes. A full complement of Corvettes, that is."

"Sure, but how many pilots? Three?"

"Four that I know about. I checked." Nick ticked off on his fingers, "Lieutenant 'Fangs out' Biggs, Captain Miner, Captain 'Congo' LaBianca, and Private Alystock."

"Private Alystock; he flies?"

"He was in the top ten of his class at NAS Kingsville." Nick said, referring to the jet fighter training school at the Naval Air Station in Kingsville, Texas.

"As a Private?"

"As an Ensign. Once he got to the Jin Sing Pao, he punched out his Air Boss and ended up Private Alystock instead of inmate Alystock." He pointed at her. "But that doesn't mean he's forgotten everything he was taught."

"Oh." Lori tapped the maneuvering thrusters, pushing the Corvette upward toward the latches.

"So that means you, me, Stanstead, and Lincoln will be dealing with either two fully manned Corvettes or four Corvettes with a combined pilot and gunner. Either one of those doesn't sound like they're outgunned."

"I didn't know about Alystock."

"Even so, three pilots to two is not the kind of odds I like. Even with the famous Coyote and Tails on my side."

"Whoa! Now hold on, Chief. We're the team to beat, Stanstead and I." Lori laughed as she tapped the thrusters one more time. The ship snapped into its moorings smoothly and neatly. "In fact, I was going to talk to you about a battlefield commission for her. She's a Top Gun in my book."

"Nice dock."

"I aim to please." Lori said with a smile. "So… Lieutenant Tabatha Stanstead. What do you say, Chief?"

"Lori." Nick said seriously as he swiveled around in his seat to face her. "Please. Please listen to me."

Lori turned off several switches then turned to face him- their knees practically touching. "Okay Chief. What is it?"

"We're not just dealing with the people on the DMS. There are powers at work here that we barely understand."

"Powers at work?" Lori scoffed. "Chief."

"There are powers at work here. Powerful ones. You agree that God has been blessing us with an easy trip and a beautiful planet?"

"I do."

"And Satan has been making their path easy to get them to a planet. A planet where they can be used to strike against the last of God's people from Earth. And I honestly can't say whether Satan knows we're coming or not." He put his hands on his knees. "Just how far does Satan's power range? How audacious are his plans? Remember Satan went to Jesus Himself in the desert and tried to bribe Him. That's one gutsy move."

Lori leaned back. "I never considered that. Oh man. We're going to have to fight Satan himself?"

"I'd rather we don't fight *anyone*. That's why I want to blaze in at just under one Cee and settle into a wide orbit around the system to keep Space Ten safely out of the way. Doc Sanderson and Rebecca have us plotted for an orbit around the entire system, just outside their Oort Cloud."

"That's huge. How far out is that for this system?"

"Almost three quarters of a light year."

"Radius. That means we're looking at a..." Lori paused as she did the math. "A four-year circuit around the system?"

"About that, yes. But we won't be here that long. We ease into our orbit, drop the Corvettes, they fly to the planet and hide out. Sometime

in the next couple of weeks, the DMS shows up. They engage the DMS after it is unloaded then slingshot around the sun and meet up with Space Ten just a few degrees off from their original inward route."

"Yeah; and pretty much out of fuel. We're going to need a refueling station at some point."

"They'll just piggyback on Space Ten. Once we're back at Murphrid, it's not an issue."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, Doc Sanderson says we can set up gas miners on the second planet in from Murphrid. It's a lot like Venus so we're going to set up HAVOC floaters like we did back home. Scrub the atmospheric sulfuric acid and pull out the hydrogen. Fuel galore."

"And when do we drop your package; as we run off or just skip it?"

"We will definitely drop the package."

"When we run off."

"I prefer to call it a tactical flanking maneuver." Nick said. "That's what I want to get locked down tight. I don't want to be close to the planet longer than an hour. We need a place to lay up and wait in the Corvettes for them to arrive and get down business once they are off the ship. Remember I don't want to kill any of them."

"How far ahead of the DMS are we?" Lori asked.

"Doc Sanderson says we'll be just over three weeks ahead of her. Twenty-two days. So, we hang out in Space Ten on that wide orbit around the system for two weeks, then send the Corvettes in to set up and wait. No sense in being cramped up in a Corvette for any longer than we have to, right?"

"Sounds like a good plan." Lori said.

The outer hatch banged as pressure was equalized between it and the inner hatch of the ship.

"Sounds like we've got company." Nick pointed at the rear of the bridge. "Let's get this show on the road."

"Roger that, Chief."

The pair pushed out of their seats easily thanks to the low gravity and floated toward the exit hatch.

Chapter 31

"Any updates?" Tom asked as he stood at the back of the flight deck. The ship's giant monitors had been linked together to show a panorama of space.

"Everything's in the green," Lieutenant Biggs said. "We've just dropped into single digits; nine point eight Cee and dropping within acceptable parameters."

Tom dropped into the co-pilot's seat with a grunt. "Man, I hate this extra gravity."

"Only twenty-five more days of it." Biggs smiled. "Then it's smooth sailing."

Tom frowned. "I don't see it that way."

"No?"

"No. We're still going to be short staffed tryin' to set up the colony. That's a lot of work for a few people."

"I can live in a Corvette with no problem at all. We almost have enough ships for everyone to get their own. We can just live in those for now."

"I suppose we could do that." Tom put his feet up on the console. "We'll look more like a..."

The entire ship shuddered.

Tom swung his feet off the control panel and leaned forward to look at it. "What the hell?"

"Astrophysics," Biggs said as he flipped the communications switch. "Did we just hit something?"

No one answered.

"Stellar Cartography!" He shouted. "What's going on down there, Cortez?"

"Doctor Cortez here," came the reply. "What seems to be the trouble?"

"Trouble? The entire ship shaking like we hit an asteroid going ten Cee. That's the trouble! What's our shield status?" Biggs snapped at the man.

"Shields are fine. I don't understand." Cortez said.

Tom patted Biggs' shoulder. "Hey Doc, we were just wondering what that shimmy was that just happened. We weren't tracking anything up here."

"What? They said you authorized it."

Tom looked at Biggs. "You authorize anything, Lorenzo?"

Biggs shook his head. "Not me."

"What was authorized Doctor? Who were you talking to?"

"Uh oh."

"What!"

"Well, it seems that Sergeant Uhlein and Private Alystock may have taken the Glimmer for a joy ride. They said we were separating for our final approach to the planet. They were going to do a sweep to make sure Space Ten wasn't waiting for us. He said you approved the mission."

"I didn't okay anything." Tom seethed. "Thanks, Doc. Out."

"Oh man. Uhlein and Alystock? Those two hot heads?"

Tom switched the control on the communications panel. "Glimmer, this is the General Sanderson. Come in." He said as casually as he could.

"Glimmer here." Sergeant Uhlein answered after a moment.

Biggs patted Tom's shoulder and shook his head. He gestured at the fire control panel then hovered his hand over the lateral guns.

Tom shook his head. "Sergeant Uhlein. There seems to be some miscommunication."

"About what, Sir?" Uhlein answered.

"About our current plan. We never discussed separating the two LINACS."

"Sure we did, remember? At dinner a couple of nights ago."

Tom closed his eyes. "Okay, yes. You did say you thought we should use the Glimmer to run around the system to make sure it was clear. But..."

"Right. So, we talked about it, Sir."

"...I remember I said we were going to talk about that with the whole crew before doing it."

"I guess I forgot that part, Sir. My bad."

"Tom," Biggs whispered.

Tom waved his hand to silence the man. "Well, no harm, no foul. Just dock back up and we can all discuss it to put together the best plan possible."

"Oh, okay. Sorry about that." Uhlein said. His microphone cut off.

"You there, Sergeant?"

"Tom!" Biggs said.

Tom switched off his end of the communication link and looked at the man. "What is it?"

"They're pulling away hard. They were stalling. I say we disable them. Now."

"We can't afford to lose that ship. Besides, where are those two going to go by themselves?"

"Hey General Sanderson," Sergeant Uhlein said. "You still with me? I think I lost you there for a second."

"I'm still with you." Tom frowned. "Initiating docking procedures?"

"Yeah, about that." Uhlein said. "We're going to have to decline. Tell you what, we'll meet back up in a few months."

"A few months?" Tom said.

"Oh no. They're going to go after Space Ten," Biggs said.

"Hey there Lieutenant Biggs," Now it was Alystock. "Keep her flying straight and we'll handle the heavy lifting with Space Ten. See you in a few." The connection went dead.

"Alystock! Uhlein!" Tom shouted. "Come in!"

"She's now out of range of our lateral guns, Tom. She's gone."

"Damn it all!" Tom hit the communications button hard. "Those idiots! How are they going to fly that ship with just the two of them?"

"Oh man." Biggs said. "Are you sure it's just the two of them?"

Tom looked at his friend. "Hell." He turned and flipped several switches on the communications panel. He took several deep breaths to calm himself, then casually said: "Attention all. We have had an unauthorized departure. Please sound off so we know who is still here."

"I hope someone answers," Biggs said. "They might be able to handle that little ship with just a couple of people. We sure can't."

The pair sat anxiously as crewmembers called in one after another.

To their shock, there were seven that didn't.

Chapter 32

"How are we looking?"

"We're on the edge but still in the green for our orbit, Chief" Sergeant Lincoln said. "This thing takes a good ten thousand miles to turn at these speeds."

"Excellent," Nick said. "Nicely done, Sergeant." Nick slipped into the copilot seat.

Sergeant Lincoln slouched back in the pilot's seat. "I have to tell you, Chief, flying that Corvette wasn't nearly as stressful as flying this thing."

"Because more people depend on you here." Nick said.

"Exactly! Just me and a pilot to worry about in that thing." He flipped several switches. "The ship's yours Chief. Boy, I'll be glad to be on that Corvette running toward Beta Three." He started to push himself out of the pilot seat.

Nick grimaced. He had been avoiding the subject. "Really?"

Lincoln froze in mid motion and looked at Nick. "Sure, Chief. I've been in the simulator pretty much the whole trip on my off time. Lieutenant Wick says I'm good to go."

"Sergeant Lincoln, I really and truly appreciate your efforts in preparing for this mission..."

"Oh. I see." Lincoln let himself fall back into the seat. "Okay."

"But I... What?" Nick startled.

Sergeant Lincoln smirked. "Listen, Chief; I may only be a Sergeant, but I've been around the block a few times. And I've been around pilots a whole lot here lately."

"Oh, I see." Now Nick said. He smiled at the man.

Lincoln leaned in toward Nick. "Do the others know your plan?" He whispered.

"Mister Lincoln, I would appreciate your discretion concerning this... uhm..." Nick was at a loss for words.

"Minor personnel reassignment?"

Nick pointed at the man. "Yes. Minor personnel reassignment."

"And this poor reassigned person, what will he be... reassigned to?"

Nick pointed at the seat Sergeant Lincoln was sitting in. "At least it's a really short commute."

"Oh boy." Lincoln slouched even farther in his seat.

"You'll be fine."

"Our whole future depends on the safety of this ship and I'm the pilot? That's a lot of responsibility, Chief."

Nick raised his hands. "It's not like you can do anything. Just keep the lights and transponder off and the radio on. And keep up that two degree turn to the left."

"That's true I suppose," Lincoln said. "But... I wanted to help. You know, make a difference."

"You made a difference when you volunteered to come here right after getting to Murphrid. I'm sure your fiancé wasn't very pleased with it."

"Katherine understands that this is part of us starting over. Tying up loose ends, I suppose."

"That's a good way of putting it." Nick smiled. "So, when's the wedding?"

"It'll be in a couple of months. Once we get a house built. She's tired of living in a ship, you know?"

"Oh, I understand completely. Well, we'll make sure you get a nice house with extra space for lots of kids."

Lincoln smiled wide. "That is the plan, Chief."

"Does she speak Russian as well?" Nick asked. He genuinely liked the man and was glad he was keeping him out of danger's way.

"She does." Lincoln smirked. "I might just take her name to get back to my Russian roots."

"You know, I've wondered that; how did 'Lincoln' happen?"

"After Kaluga was destroyed in the Moscow Uprising, I ended up in foster care in Australia. I was adopted by a really great family. They were the Lincolns."

"Oh, yeah. I remember the battles over there. Tough times." Nick said, thinking back to his missions over Moscow as well as the surrounding towns. He hoped he wouldn't have to mention flying in support of the government to put down the citizens. "You could just go back to your family name."

"Chief, I was *two* when Moscow went under. I have no idea what my family name was."

"Two?" Nick shook his head slowly. "Come on, you were two? I figured you were fifteen or something. You're killing me, Sergeant!"

Lincoln laughed. "Sorry about that, Chief. It was twenty-three years ago."

"Man." Nick thought for a moment then smiled. "Hey, I hope it wasn't Yahontov."

"Katherine's family is from Khabarovsk on the east coast; a little town called Gavan." He smirked. "But I did do a quiet genome check on her just in case. We're related only about as much as other Russians are related to each other."

"Then it's settled. A big house and lots of little Yahontovs running around." Nick winked at him. "Sem'ya ne glavnaye. Eto vse." He said in Russian - 'Family is not an important thing. It is everything'. While flying missions with Russian pilots for six months, they had taught him a few handy phrases- this was one of the few he still remembered.

"Da, absolyutno," answered Lincoln. He frowned. "Did you come all the way up here just to give me the bad news?"

"Telling you over a comm link wouldn't have been right." Nick pushed himself out of the copilot seat. He extended his hand to the man. "Keep her steady, Sergeant. And thanks for your service."

"Stay safe out there, Chief." Lincoln shook his hand. "See you in about a week."

Nick shook the man's hand one more time then left.

Nick rode the cable down to the flight deck, praying the entire way for the people back on Murphrid as well as those on Proxima Centauri Beta Three. With his eyes closed, he rode past the flight deck.

"Chief!" Lori called. "You asleep?"

Nick opened his eyes- he was a full ten feet below where she was. "Well crud." He started climbing hand over hand to get to her.

Thanks to the cable moving in the opposite direction, he barely made any progress.

"Chief, just ride down to the next deck then come up on the other side." Lori laughed. "You're not getting anywhere."

Nick stopped climbing. "I'll be right back."

Lori waited patiently as Nick rode down to the next level, walked around the large shaft and took hold of the other cable traveling in the other direction. "We're getting an official send off, Chief? A prayer would be appreciated."

Nick came into view. "Yes, that's exactly it. An official send off."

Lori leaned out and looked up and down the shaft. "Where's Sergeant Lincoln?"

"There has been a... minor personnel reassignment."

Lori's eyes got large. "Chief, no. You can't. Not after I promised Rebecca I'd keep you safe. You just can't."

"Safe? You know all the trouble I could get into on this ship all by myself?" Nick smiled.

"I'm being serious, Chief. We need you back on Murphrid."

"Katherine needs Nikolai back on Murphrid."

"And doesn't Rebecca?" Lori put her hands on her hips. "Doesn't the entire colony?"

"Listen. I did it for the colony and Rebecca." Nick reached out and put his hand on her shoulder. "Tell me truthfully, who would you rather have in the cockpit with you, me or him?"

"He's a good pilot, Chief. I've been training him hard."

"He's a good pilot and a good man. I agree completely. But if we fail to disable the DMS, everyone is at risk. Do you want a good pilot out there, or a really great, audacious pilot out there?" He smirked. "I mean that with all the humbleness I have."

"I thought they removed your humbleness organ at Warrant Officer Candidate School." She turned. "Fine. Let's get this show on the road. Everyone was waiting for Lincoln and he wasn't answering his comm link."

"Ahh; he's a good pilot, good man, and smart."

Lori exhaled as she pressed the button to open the hatch to the main hangar area. "Here we go."

As the door opened, everyone turned to look.

"Did you find him?" Sergeant Pastis asked.

Nick stepped into view.

"Oh, Chief. You didn't." Sergeant Stanstead said.

"He did." Lori said.

"Did what?"

Stanstead looked at Pastis. "He swapped places with Lincoln."

Pastis stepped closer. "Chief, I don't know if that's a good idea." He looked at Lori. "Right?"

Lori just raised her hands plaintively.

Sergeant Mellow leaned in toward Sergeant Carnes. "Hey, swap ships with me," he whispered.

"What?"

"Just do it, please."

Carnes shook his head. "We've been training as a command crew; we can't go switching that up now."

"Oh man."

"Sergeant Mellow?" Nick said.

"What me?" Mellow answered.

"Yes, you. Come over here." Nick pointed at the young man. He knew that he had been dating Samantha for the better part of four months. "And bring that other troublemaker you're whispering to with you."

"Yes, Sir." The pair of young sergeants moved closer to the group- they had been standing away from the others.

"Bring it in, everyone." Nick said. When everyone was around him, he tapped his comm link. "Private Hutchinson?"

"Chief?" Answered the young Marine- he was manning the communications station on the bridge.

"Set me up ship-wide, please."

After a moment, the young man replied: "You're on, Chief."

Nick cleared his throat. "Attention to orders!" Be barked.

Caught off guard, it took a moment, but everyone came to the position of attention.

Nick placed his hands behind this back. "To all who shall see these presents, greetings. Know Ye that reposing special trust and confidence in the patriotism, valor, fidelity and abilities of Staff Sergeant Tabitha Stanstead, I do appoint her to Second Lieutenant in the Army on this day. This Officer will therefore carefully and diligently discharge the duties of the office to which she is appointed by doing and performing all manner of things thereunto belonging.

"And I do strictly charge and require those Officers and other personnel of lesser rank to render such obedience as is due an officer of her grade and position. And this Officer is to observe and follow such orders and directives, from time to time, as may be given by me, or the future leader of the Murphrid Colony, or other Superior Officers acting in accordance with the laws of the Murphrid Colony.

"This commission is to continue in force during the pleasure of the leader of the Murphrid Colony for the time being, under the provisions of those Public Laws relating to Officers of the Armed Forces of the United Americas until such time new laws are created." He looked at Stansted. "Step forward."

On numb legs, she stepped in front of him.

Nick ripped her rank off the Velcro patch in the center of her uniform then tossed it over his shoulder. He reached into his pocket and pulled out an Army Lieutenant rank. He pressed the rank onto the now empty space.

"First Lieutenant Tabitha Stanstead, welcome aboard." He saluted her.

Stanstead saluted him back, tears in her eyes.

"About face."

In one smooth motion, she turned.

Nick started to clap. "Let's hear it for Lieutenant Stanstead."

Everyone applauded as they approached to congratulate her.

Lori sidestepped the group to get to Nick. "Chief."

"Careful what you say, El Tee or I'll promote you to Lieutenant Commander." He smiled. "I'm in that kind of mood."

Lori hugged Nick. "Chief."

Nick hugged her back.

"If you promote me ahead of Jeffrey, his head would pop off." Lori said.

"See? I told you to not say anything. Now I really want to promote you." He let go of her. "But we've got more important matters at hand than tormenting your poor husband."

"Roger that, Chief."

"Besides, you can't very well have her flying her own ship as a Staff. It just wouldn't be proper."

"Yeah." Lori turned to look at her friend. "Yeah, I suppose so."

"Lieutenant Wick," Stanstead said.

"Lieutenant Stanstead," Lori replied. "You ready to start earning your lieutenant pay?"

"Whoa! We're getting paid again?" Mellow asked with a smile. "That's good news."

"We get back pay too, right Chief?" This time it was Sergeant Carnes.

Nick turned and picked up the staff sergeant rank he had tossed. "I think I'll hold onto this just in case."

"Good plan, Chief." Carnes slapped his friend on the back. "I know just the guy."

Nick smiled at the pair. "Have I told you lately that I really and truly appreciate your service?"

"I'm pretty sure you have, Chief." Carnes answered.

"Okay everyone," Nick said in a loud voice. "Let's get this mission moving in the right direction; to its successful conclusion."

"Roger that, Chief," Lieutenant Stanstead said. "Sergeant Pastis, Carnes you're with me." She pointed at the hatch that led to the Wildebeest. "Let's get her out of this stinking fresh air."

"Shall we?" Nick gestured at the door on the other side of the hangar.

"Let's get this show on the road," Lori said. "Sergeant Mellow?"

"Right behind you, Ma'am." He said halfheartedly. He had been avoiding Nick pretty well lately, now he was going to be stuck with him in a Corvette bridge.

The two groups split off, heading to their respective ships.

Chapter 33

Nick pushed the transmit button on this headpiece. "Wildebeest. Making our final pass for the day."

It had been eight days that they had been taking turns taking off from the closest of Beta-Three's two moons to see if the DMS had arrived. Tensions were rising as the ship hadn't arrived when they expected it two days before.

"Hope you find them." Came the reply. "We're going to burn up all our fuel just flying back and forth."

"I just hope they didn't run into trouble on the way here. Random asteroid encounter as they entered the system, solar flare as they braked." Nick replied. "I really want to get the Bible to those folks."

"I suppose so." Sergeant Pastis replied.

After many lengthy discussions, everyone agreed on the importance of getting a copy of the Bible to the crew of the DMS- some just agreed more than others.

The Proclamation glided toward the planet on inertia alone. Not only did it save fuel, it made them nearly impossible to see. Without running lights or the flare of the engines, they would have to be within a mile of the DMS for them to even have a chance of noticing them. Especially since they never approached with the sun behind them.

"There!" Lori said. "Right there. See it Chief?" She pointed at the bottom corner of the view screen.

"No, where?"

Lori tapped her pad and the screen zoomed in where she was pointing. There was a long shadow creeping across the image of the planet halfway between its equator and its northern tip. "That's her. It has to be. It's way too big to be one of our probes."

Nick watched as the image sharpened as more cameras trained in on it. "Oh yeah, that's her all right." He thumbed the button on his headpiece. "Wildebeest. The package has arrived."

"Praise God, Proclamation," Pastis answered. "Sneaking your way now."

Since arriving at the planet, the two ships had set up an encrypted communication channel as well as an encrypted signal that transmitted their position to the other ship.

"We'll coast in a little closer to see what there is to see," Nick whispered.

"Are you whispering?" Lori snorted.

Nick looked at her. "This is how I normally talk," he whispered to her. He flipped the switch for the ship's internal communication. "Sergeant Mellow, please report to the bridge. The game is afoot." He was still whispering.

Lori snorted again.

Nick shook his head. While he was glad that Jeffrey had found a wife with as good a sense of humor as his had, he was grateful that his wife didn't snort when she laughed. "You crack me up."

"Roadrunner, Tails here." Stanstead said. "Where do you want us?"

With the ships entering into what may become a combat situation, the pilots switched to their call signs for the sake of brevity instead of names and rank like they were using for the casual conversations they had been having for the past week.

"Let's go with a mile to our starboard, Tails. They're in orbit on the northern half of the planet. We'll shadow them fifteen miles out."

"Laying up now, Roadrunner," Stanstead answered.

"You know, I never asked her." Nick said. "Why is she 'Tails'?"

Lori feathered the thrusters to slow their approach as she maneuvered the ship closer. "She was on the Horse Head." She said "It was a missile cruiser named after the Horse Head Nebula."

"I'm not familiar with it." Nick admitted. "Was there an... inappropriate incident aboard?" He asked since most nicknames were given due to an embarrassing incident.

"The Horse Head was a missile cruiser on patrol at the diamond collectors on Neptune when some separatists who had apparently taken over the naval labs on Proteus opened fire on her."

Nick nodded. He had heard of attacks against the diamond collectors on Neptune since it was a low-risk, highly profitable endeavor. Thanks to the giant gas planet's hydrocarbon-rich slushy atmosphere around its solid core, extreme pressures split the hydrocarbon molecules into atoms of hydrogen and carbon. The carbon molecules would then crystallize into diamonds under the extreme pressures. As the diamonds grew in size, they would fall like rain through the planet's atmosphere until they landed on the planet's solid core. Heavily fortified flat-topped ships would fly into the crushing pressures to gather the 'rainstorms' of diamonds before they fell too deep to retrieve. They were then transported back to Earth for industrial use. "Firing on a missile cruiser is a good way to have your day ended. Permanently." Nick said.

"Normally that's true, but they hit the Horse Head with a thousand-gigawatt LaWS that was going to be fitted onto her later that month." She said, referring to a Laser Weapon System. "They cut the ship in half."

"Wow." Nick said. He was familiar with the laser weapons- they were typically used on carriers and destroyers as anti-ship defenses within the solar system. They were very effective since the beam moved at the speed of light it was accurate over long distances against fast moving targets. "How'd she survive that?"

"She was in the engine room at the time. So when the ship was cut in half, all the bulkheads sealed when they sensed the depressurization. The front half of the ship deorbited into Neptune."

"How many were aboard?"

"Thirty-seven."

"Thirty-seven? What are so many people doing on a ship that has a crew of twelve?"

"They were techs. They were prepping the Horse Head to swap out its railgun for that LaWS."

"Oh. So, how'd she survive that?"

"Like I said, she was in the engine room, so she took apart the ship's navigation control relays and manually flew the ship with a dozen crewmen standing at the bulkhead portholes at the new front of the ship giving her directions. She got them away from Neptune and close enough to Titan that another ship was able to dock with them and pull everyone out. And she became known as 'Tails."

"No kidding! How many people did she save?"

"Twenty-one including herself. She wasn't even a pilot at that point. She was a Boatswain's Mate in the engine room."

"That has to be probably the most over the top way anyone has gotten a nickname that I've ever heard."

"Sure, *Roadrunner*."

"A lot of that story has probably been exaggerated." Nick said.

"There's a video of the entire incident, Chief. I saw it at the academy."

"Never mind then. But blindly piloting the back half of a ship by shorting wires together while other people yell directions at you? Epic. That's where that Silver Star with 'V' device came from in her records. I saw it, never researched it. Wish I..."

"What have we got?" Sergeant Mellow said as he entered the bridge.

"Company," Nick said. "Finally."

"You can say that again, Chief. I've got things to do and these people are lollygagging around the galaxy. Rude is what that is."

Lori smiled. "I can see you've been a good influence on the young Sergeant."

Sergeant Mellow sat at the Communications Station- which was also doubling as a tactical. "You want me to ping them?"

"They don't know we're here yet." Nick said. "Let's keep it quiet for now. Find out their plan."

"You don't think they've changed their frequency?" Lori asked.

"Mister Mellow, if you please."

"Roger." Mellow put on his headset and turned on his communications system. "Hey, hey; I've got chatter."

"Yeah?" Nick said. "What's going on over there?"

"Lots of cross-talking. Folks are upset." He listened for a while more. "Three ships going down with crew. Seems they're short pilots?"

"They've got four that I know of."

"Okay, here we go." Mellow said. "I've got Captain Miner talking to Fangs Out and Congo. They're going down to leave a ship then coming back up on one of them. They want to offload all the ships that way; three down, one up."

"Smart." Nick said.

"That makes, what five pilots? That's a heavy pilot to passenger ratio and they say they want more?" Lori looked at Nick. "I wonder what's got Private Alystock grounded."

"Maybe he punched someone else?" Nick offered. "The kid's a loose cannon."

"They've got ten people going down now in the three ships.... Huh."

"What?" Nick said.

"The other four are staying aboard. I thought there were twenty-one of them." Mellow said.

"Indeed, there were. I wonder what happened to the other seven."

Now Lori looked at Nick. "A mutiny?"

Nick shook his head. "Maybe, but still, they're too short on personnel to just kill seven off."

"Maybe it was self-defense? Maybe they didn't need the people, just their genetic material? They might have just stuck them in a tank."

"Proclamation, we're here." Stanstead said.

"Just sit tight, Wildebeest," Nick said. "We've got chatter on... Sergeant?"

"One eighty-five point seven." Mellow said.

"Got it," Sergeant Carnes said.

The two ships sat in the darkness of space just over a dozen miles from the Admiral Derek Michael Sanderson, listening in to the conversations as they shadowed the massive ship. Waiting for it to be emptied so they could destroy it.

Chapter 34

"Anything?" Sergeant Uhlein was seated in the captain's chair in the middle of the bridge.

"Nothing, Bradley," Alystock said. "Maybe they've changed their transponder codes?"

They had decided after they had taken the ship to dispense with all military ranks and just address each other by first names. Bradley Uhlein went along with the decision mainly because Sergeant Whiddon outranked him; this decision kept him in charge.

"So where is Space Ten?" Bradley looked at Sergeant Whiddon. "Jean, got anything?"

"Just some talk down on the planet," She said. "There's a ship running a survey mission into the mountains talking with their base camp. Two others are checking out the shoreline. I can triangulate their position in a couple of minutes with that many people talking to the base."

"Good. I want to get this done so we can head back." Bradley said.

"Do you want me to drop the communications buoy now?" Robert asked. He was off to the side of the bridge at the environmental station.

"Not yet. We don't need to be blasting out a signal that we're here." Bradley moved to the tactical station where Tabitha was. "We need the position of their camp so we can drop the EM-SQUATS." He looked at the instruments. "Where is that stupid LINAC?"

"They might have parked it on an asteroid nearby," Renée Bisset said from the tactical station. "It's a good way to keep an unmanned LINAC in one place and out of the way. I've seen it done before. If they aren't using the thing that would be the smartest thing to do with it. Power everything down and anchor it down."

"Do you know how many are on those other two missions?" Bradley asked.

"It's the Eclipse, Tide and the Lightning, so one Corvette and two PTEs. I would guess there's just a pilot and maybe a copilot in each. Everyone else is probably still setting things up at the basecamp." Renée looked at her screens again. "Okay. I know where they are. They're in a large valley in the Southern Hemisphere."

"When should we drop?"

Renée looked at her screens and inputted the variables. "Calculating."

Everyone sat quietly as she worked out the numbers.

"Well crud," Renée finally said.

"What now?" Bradley asked.

"We should have dropped them twenty-two minutes ago. We'll have to do it on our next pass in... Forty-seven minutes."

"That stinks." Alystock said.

"No, no; it couldn't be better, Blair," Bradley said.

"Why?"

"Because if she'd have said we drop in ten minutes or something, we'd be scrambling to get ready. As it stands, we've got almost an hour to get any last-minute program updates to the EM-SQUATS and for us to get into the drop ship."

"Yeah, that's true," Blair agreed. "Nice."

"Okay people, I say we leave this thing in orbit and all fly down."

"We're going to leave the ship empty?" Renée said. "Isn't that dangerous?"

"Do you think someone's going to steal it? Who's around to do that?" Bradley snapped.

"Fine. But... I would feel better if someone stayed here."

"We need a show of numbers down there. If they see just one person, they're going to know something isn't right. So, we all go down with the Em-Squats and wipe them out. The last few out on their recon missions can just rot down here. Six people isn't enough to run a LINAC, wherever they've hidden it. Besides, we can leave the EM-

SQUATS behind on orders to kill any humans they see. That's over fifty of them; that's plenty. Let's go. Put the ship on autopilot for this orbit and let's get this done."

"Okay, just a second, Uhlein," Tabitha said. "Just so you know, I'm not going to be able to go down there and shoot anyone. I've never shot anyone. Ever."

"I haven't either," Renée said. "I mean, I qualified with my weapon but that's different."

Bradley scowled. "Okay. Blair, you got issues with it?"

"Nope," Blair said with no hesitation.

"Jean?"

"Me neither," she said flatly.

"Where's Alyssa?" Blair asked.

"She's... indisposed." Jean said. "But we've talked it over and she's okay with whatever needs to be done." She hesitated. "Oh, when we were talking about it at dinner last night, she did bring up that we should take as much genetic material as we can."

"This isn't a science mission," Blair said.

"Wha' I miss?" Alyssa said as she came onto the bridge.

"Where've you been?" Blair snapped at her.

"None of yur business is where I've been." Alyssa snapped back. "Wha' I do in m'private time tis private."

"Fine." Blair said. "Do you have issues with shooting anyone if things get ugly on the surface?"

"Nae a bit."

"Alright, Tabitha, Renée, and Slim will stay on board and watch for any trouble while we're on the surface. If anything comes up, you let us know. Got it?" Bradley was keenly aware that the three people requesting to stay behind were the three he trusted the least.

"Of course," Tabitha said.

Renée looked up from her screens. "What?"

"We'll wait here and stay out of the way." Tabitha said as she looked back at her friend.

"Right. Where would we go anyway?"

"Fine. Let's draw weapons and get to the drop ship. Once the Em-Squats jump off, how long until they're on the surface and ready to go?"

Renée looked at her screens again. "At three-hundred miles, you're looking at about fifty minutes."

"Well that means we've got plenty of time." Bradley patted his belly. "Let's all get something to eat then hit the drop ship."

The entire group moved toward the doorway that led to the sleeping quarters and a central meeting/eating area.

Bradley gestured for everyone to go through the hatch before him. When Jean passed, he grabbed her arm. He pulled her in very close to her and whispered into her ear- "Lock the engines down so they can't steal the ship."

Jean was caught off guard by the closeness of the man until he started whispering. Her eyes got large. "You think they'll steal the ship?" She whispered back.

"Not if you put an encryption on the startup procedure." He whispered back. "Set it up so if they try, all systems shut down."

"Life support too?" Jean whispered back.

"Yeah. Vent the atmosphere."

"Something we all should know?" Blair asked.

Bradley looked- everyone was looking at him and Jean. "Don't you people have a meal to eat?" He kissed Jean on the cheek playfully.

A chill ran up Jean's spine- while she was fine with him being in charge, she found the man disturbing. "We'll talk later, dear," she said loud enough for the others to hear.

As soon as the pair entered the area, Jean moved to the other side of the large table, opposite Bradley.

"How will we get the Em-Squats back?" Blair asked as he selected a meal from the dispenser. "We can't just lose them all like that."

"Oh, we aren't abandoning them. Permanently anyway. Once we get back to Beta Three and let them know that we took care of Space Ten, they can send this ship back for the Em-Squats and any other tech we want. We can sling load them a dozen at a time with the landing craft then clamp then in manually. They can pack them in tight along the LINAC, behind the landing craft."

The Glimmer, like other LINACs was not capable of atmospheric flight due to its delicate design. To get the crew onto planets or asteroids, it was equipped with a small, forty-foot landing craft. It was only eighteen feet tall and wide so thanks to fuel tanks, electronics, and other components in the ceiling and floor, its passengers had less than a foot of room above their heads. And it would only hold twelve personnel at a time.

"Uhlein's Army." Blair said.

"What did you say?" Bradley seethed. He had heard several people refer to the Em-Squats that way and it bothered him. Even though, secretly that's what he considered the mechanical soldiers to be.

"Nothing." Blair said as he went to the table with a tray of food. "Just too much time in space is all."

"Fine." Bradley looked at Jean. "Just as long as everyone sticks to their tasks, we'll be back on Beta Three in no time."

Jean nodded at him. "The mission will be locked tight, don't worry."

"Who's worried?" Bradley said.

The crew ate in silence, each one thinking of their future back on Beta Three. Except Bradley Uhlein- he was thinking of different ways to kill Renée, Tabitha, and Slim once he returned to the Glimmer. Each one more gruesome than the last.

Once they were finished, Sergeant Uhlein dispatched all the Em-Squats while Jean Whiddon programmed the ship's pumps to vent the atmosphere if the engine was turned on without the proper code first.

Nearly an hour later, they gathered by the airlock, prepared to kill everyone on the planet.

Chapter 35

"Here we go." Nick said, "They're down to just two people aboard; Miner and Hooper. They've got to have the DMS ready for a long-term orbit by now. There's no way they both won't leave together."

"Finally." Lori said. "Okay, so when that last ship is on the way up to get them, you want to hit them? That way they can just pick those two up and head back to the surface."

"That sounds like a good plan." Nick said. He keyed his mic. "Tails, when that other ship is within a couple of minutes, I'm breaking radio silence to tell Miner and Hooper to get off the DMS."

"Roger that, Roadrunner. We'll keep an eye out from here, Tails out."

Lori tapped the engines to push the Corvette forward.

"Hey Chief, just so you know, I've been trying to keep track of which ships come and go from the DMS and we might have a problem." Sergeant Mellow said.

"What's that, Sergeant?" Nick craned his neck around.

"Like I said, I've been tracking which ships go down and which comes back up. It's all sorts going down but it's always a Corvette that comes back up."

"Well, it holds the most fuel and is about as quick as a PTE for these up and down hops."

"I suppose. But to me, it kind of looks like they are escorting the ships down. It's always the same Corvette going back and forth; the Smyrna"

"So, you think they know we're here?" Nick asked.

"No, but I think they're worried someone is," Mellow answered. "And if I'm tracking it all right, there's still one Corvette that's never left the DMS. The Ganges."

"Do you think the final run is going to be two Corvettes?"

"Yeah, I do, Chief. But what I don't get is if they are worried someone is here, why leave the DMS undefended?"

"I think they are worried someone is out to kill them. They aren't even considering the ship itself might be the target." Nick said. "It takes a lot of people to fly it so it's not like a couple of people could steal it."

"And there's another problem." Sergeant Mellow said. "From what I'm hearing, Jim Hooper is staying aboard to get everything set on the DMS for it to stay parked in orbit. He'll probably be there for a couple of days, he said."

"Another couple of days?" Wick said. "Oh man, this tin can is getting smaller by the hour and now we've got two more days, Chief?"

"Let's get some opinions." Nick keyed his mike. "Wildebeest?"

"Wildebeest. Go, Proclamation." Sergeant Pastis answered.

"Just to keep everyone in the loop. The DMS has been escorting ships down with a Corvette. They're leaving Jim Hooper aboard for a couple of days to button everything down to park the ship in orbit. Miner is leaving on another Corvette, but he hasn't yet. So, our two options are to sit for another two days and wait for Hooper to gets off, or tell them we're here now and we will have to deal with one Corvette with 'Fangs Out' flying."

"If we do it now, Chief, it will be just the one Corvette; the Smyrna. Captain Miner isn't in the Ganges as far as I can tell. It'll take him a good twenty minutes to get there from the bridge and launch." Sergeant Mellow said.

"Two against one isn't bad odds," Lori said. "What say you, Wildebeest?"

There was a minute while the crew of the other Corvette discussed options.

"We say go now." Tabatha said. "A couple of warning shots will keep that Corvette from doing anything stupid against the two of us."

"Okay. Stay alert." Nick said. "Here goes nothing." He switched the transmitter to the frequency that the DMS would be on. "DMS? Come in DMS."

After a moment, Jim Hooper answered. "DMS here. Who is this?"

"It's Chief Hauser." Nick answered.

"Here we go." Lori said off-mike.

"I need you to get off the DMS, Mister Hooper."

"So you can kill us? He told me you would try that!" It sounded like he was running.

"Who told you?" Nick said, genuinely curious.

"It doesn't matter."

"I'm not here to kill you, Jim." Nick said. He gestured at Lori. "I just want to talk."

Lori put her hands on the control, ready to turn on the engines.

"I know you want to kill us, Nick!" Hooper yelled again. He seemed to be breathing hard.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of them." Lieutenant Biggs said.

"Tracking their transponder, Chief," Mellow said. "They're heading this way."

"Stand down, Smyrna," Lori said.

"Oh, look who's here. *Coyote*. This will be a pleasure." Biggs said. "A real pleasure."

"Right behind you," Captain Miner said.

"The Ganges is moving too, Chief," Mellow said. "Hooper must have been in the hangar already. Sorry about that."

"It's fine. They think it's two on one." Nick keyed his headset. "Wildebeest, you following the conversation?"

"Roger that, Proclamation."

"Keep off their net; they think it's just us."

"You got it." Tabatha answered. "Sitting high left, behind you."

"Listen, Ganges," Nick said, deciding to talk to the ranking officer instead of the lieutenant. "I just want to talk."

"He said you people would try something like this." Captain Miner said.

"Who are you talking about?" Nick asked- he had assumed Lieutenant Biggs was referring to Captain Miner. "Listen, I just want to talk things out, work out a compromise if we can, then we'll be on our way."

"We don't need your preaching around here!" Captain Miner said.

"I don't want anyone to get hurt." Nick said. "Please."

"Me neither," Biggs said. "It's the last thing I want."

"We've got two missiles incoming!" Mellow shouted. "From the Ganges."

"Tails?" Lori said. She flipped a switch and pulled her stick to the left and shoved it forward putting the ship into a downward spiral.

"Got them." Tabatha answered. "Stay on that vector."

As the Proclamation dove down and to the left, the missiles turned in a broad arc to line up behind it. This brought them directly in line with the Wildebeest's guns.

The two missiles continued toward their target oblivious to the streak of green tracer fire moving toward them. In a flash of soundless light, the two missiles exploded one after another- the first when the Wildebeest's rounds hit it, the second when the first's explosion hit it.

"There's two of them!" Biggs said as he engaged his engines to find the other ship.

"They can't see us, Wildebeest; they don't have our transponder code. Keep quiet and away."

"Two more missiles!" Mellow said. "Uh oh. From the Ganges; she's away."

The two missiles started their flight a mere ten feet from each other as they left the Corvette. Within seconds they spiraled away from each other, each one searching for its own target- the magnetic footprints of the Proclamation and the Wildebeest.

"Striker coming your way; watch your six, Wildebeest." Lori said as she executed a steep climb to put more room between her and the much faster missile.

"Got it." The other ship answered- there wasn't enough time for small talk.

"Weapons free," Nick said. While he was sorry that it had come to this, it was obvious the other two ships were not interested in talking at all. Thanks to the advice of someone else.

"Nineteen seconds to impact." Mellow said. He thought of his time with Samantha and how he was glad he had gotten to know her. He had volunteered for the mission in hopes he could become closer to Nick- which had happened. He was going to ask his permission to marry Samantha on the return journey. Now it all seemed as if it was in vain. "Coming in at one eighty-five, two-twenty, neg-fifty. Impact twelve." It was established practice for ships to use a simple x-y-z, three-number reference to identify objects around it. Zero was always both straight ahead and straight up in relation to the ship since in space, there really wasn't truly an 'up' or a 'down'. The final number denoted if the object was above or below the imaginary line running through the center of the ship.

The ship straightened out, engines going to maximum output. Even so, the missile was easily three times as fast as the Corvette over short distances and continued to gain, albeit slower since the Corvette was now accelerating hard. With more time, a Corvette's top speed was indeed more than a missile's however it couldn't accelerate nearly as fast since it had to deal with keeping its human passengers alive. This safety feature on manned ships allowed missiles to overtake their targets before running out of fuel.

"Coming about?" Lori said. Several bladders in her seat inflated to help ease the pressure of the hard acceleration.

"Do it." Nick already had his hand on the weapon's control. It was braced on his knee to keep it steady.

Wick turned the engines to zero output then executed a flat spin, snapping the ship around one hundred eighty degrees but still keeping the ship on its current trajectory. Now however, the ship's weapons were pointed toward the incoming missile.

"Got it." Nick tracked the yellow triangle of his shots across the screen to the red diamond that signified the missile. In a flash of light, it was gone.

"Tails?"

"Still here."

Lori feathered the engines back on and swung the ship around, turning in a broad arc. "I'm through being nice, let's get this done."

"Yup." Came the reply.

Chapter 36

"What if they noticed the Em-Squats coming down?" Slim asked.

"There's no way they would give them a second look." Bradley explained. "They would look like a meteor shower. Why are you worried?"

"I just don't want to get stuck up here is all."

"I'm soooo glad you're worried about our wellbeing," Bradley seethed. He had the urge to punch the young man in the face. "Just sit tight and we'll be back in a couple of hours. Tops."

"Okay Robert," Tabitha put her arm around the young man. "Let's stay out of the way while they work."

"We'll keep an eye on things from the bridge," Renée said. "If we see anything, we'll keep you posted."

"That's the smartest thing I've heard you say in a month," Bradley snapped. He gestured at the landing craft then thumbed his rifle's safety off. "Let's go."

With a nod, Blair, Jean, and Alyssa climbed into the small craft. They each were carrying a Mönchshof 703.

As the door closed, Tabitha let out a long breath- she had been holding it.

"I thought he was just going to kill us right then." Renée said.

Tabitha shook her head. "He needs us to keep an eye on the ship and let them in when they get back. Then all bets are off."

"Well what are we going to do about it? We're stuck up here with no way down."

Robert smiled. "We could jump down like the robots did!"

"I am not jumping out of a perfectly good aircraft." Tabitha said flatly.

"Well, what other option do we have?"

"Let's go to the bridge while we decide." Renée pointed. "At least we can keep an eye out and hear what's happening."

The three of them walked to the far end of the docking hatch and into the sleeping/eating area. "I kind of like a ship that doesn't take thirty minutes to get from the mess hall to the bridge," Tabitha said.

"I couldn't agree more." Tabatha said as the trio entered the bridge. "Real convenient." She moved to the navigation station. "I'll turn on the cameras to see what's going on around us." Images of the planet and surrounding area appeared on the screens across the front of the ship.

"I'll get on the net and see if I can listen in on those guys." Renée sat at the communications station. "Uhlein, this is the Glimmer." She said.

"What is it now?" Uhlein snapped.

"I was just making sure comms were up." Renée said. "If you need anything, we're monitoring."

"What would we need?"

"Some patience," Renée snapped back, emboldened by the distance between them. "For starters." She closed the channel. "Some people." She looked at the planet. "Man, it's beautiful down there."

"You know, I don't think Bradley likes me very much," Robert said. "Or at all, I think. He likes you two though. I can tell by how he looks at you."

"That's not comforting at all." Renée said. "We really need off this ship."

"We're stuck here until they get back." Tabatha looked at the view screens. "Do you think you can find what frequency those other ships were on?"

"I can try." Renée started searching for the proper frequency. "It's a shot in the dark, really."

"You do that, and I'll get the engines started up. If nothing else, we can move this ship out where they can't see us until we figure out what to do."

Chapter 37

"Suit up."

"Please tell me you're not going to ram something." Nick said. He reached for his helmet- per protocol, they were already wearing their space suits.

"You never know. Better to be suited up and not need it than to be in a vacuum and wondering why your blood is boiling." She gestured across the controls. "This all still works with no atmosphere. Us? Not so much."

"On that note." Nick pressed the intercom button in case Mellow didn't hear her. "Helmets on!"

"Please tell me Coyote isn't going to ram something." Mellow said back.

"Come on! You ram ONE little ship and you're branded for life!"

"Little? That tanker went up like a super nova." Mellow said. "I saw the news feeds."

"*Fine*; one little tanker."

"Now if you'll think back, you ran into two other ships that day before you finally hit that tanker. You forget; I was on the board of inquiry." Nick held up a finger.

"Who counts little details like that?"

"Everyone but you, it seems. Say, I think I remember reading where you rammed a freighter once."

"Wait." Lori opened her mouth then closed it. "No, no, no! That one definitely does *not* count. I was pushing it back onto a trajectory that would keep it from burning up as it reentered. It had a full-engine failure and was coming in way too steep. That was a helpful bumping, not a ramming. There wasn't even an inquiry on that one." She snapped her fingers. "So there!"

"Alright then." Nick laughed. "Give them Hell, Coyote."

"You got it, Roadrunner. Coming about. The Coyote is looking for trouble."

The three of them were pressed tightly in their seats as the Proclamation made an extremely tight turn back toward the DMS and ostensibly the Ganges.

Chapter 38

Jeffrey looked up at the sleek landing craft as it passed overhead. Whoever was flying it made no attempt to hide their approach- they had flown directly over the village, done two complete circuits overhead then set down at the end of one of the wide dirt roads that spoked out from the centrally located church.

"Who is that?" Kent Bagley said. "Nice looking little ship." He slapped Jeffrey's shoulder. "Hey, you know what? We've got *aliens* visiting us."

Jeffrey shook his head. "Be serious. Aliens?"

"Hey, we did it. I hope these folks are friendlier than we were when we showed up places." He tapped his communication link. "Hey Gunny, we've got company."

"I saw them. I'm heading toward them now."

"Maybe you should swing by the armory first," Kent said. "Just in case."

"Yeah, good idea."

As the pair walked to the road that led to the ship, Pat approached them. "You want some Em-Squats brought in? I've got them hanging out in the corral."

Corporal Ivan Jaszczak ran up to them. "What's up, Gentlemen?"

"We're not sure." Kent said. He patted the Corporal's shoulder. "You want to say hello?"

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Ivan said. "I'll just follow your lead."

"Em-Squats?" Pat said again. "Just in case the good Corporal needs some backup."

"Maybe one or two. It's a small ship," Jeffrey smiled. "Since we've got the Jaz with us."

Pat tapped his comm link. "Orange, Army, and Red. Report to Second and Philadelphia immediately to safeguard locals."

Once streets were laid out, there was a long discussion on naming conventions. After deliberating on street names more than anything else being done in the colony, it was decided that the streets radiating out from the church like spokes would be numbered from one to twelve. The roads that ran around the centrally located church would be given actual names of places.

"Complying," came the deep voiced reply. "Combined estimated time of arrival is three minutes."

"An even three, huh?" Jeffrey said. He looked around. A large group was starting to gather at the edge of the street- most everyone had seen the ship approach. "Let's wait for the backup."

Kent tapped his link. "Comms, give me an all-call."

"You're on," Austin McCain answered. Since arriving, Gunny's middle grandson had started working in the communications center.

"Hey everyone, Kent Bagley here. Let's keep our distance until we know who's in that ship, okay?"

Kent and the other men started down the street toward the ship as its door opened.

The metal clanking of Em-Squats to their left made them both look.

"I feel better already," Kent said. "Let's go, guys. Stay close behind us."

"Affirmative," the gleaming orange one said. "Program for defense of local colonists is active."

"No poem? No third line?" Pat asked with a smile. The machine had been improving greatly in its poetic endeavors.

"Once the visitors egress and no threat is detected, requests for poetry will be accepted." The Em-Squat rumbled.

Jeffrey laughed. "Are you programming that thing or is it just making them up on its own?"

"It's has thousands of poems a well as the rules and structures for all sorts of poetry as well as algorithms to create its own original rhymes." Pat explained.

"Some of the times," the Em-Squat added.

"Alright, let's keep serious until we know what we're..." Jeffrey stopped about fifty feet from the landing craft as Sergeant Uhlein stepped out. Holding a rifle.

"Sending program updates to acquired units," Orange said.

"Fine, fine," Jeffrey said. "Do it quietly."

Kent casually tapped his comm link. "All call, Austin." He said without moving his lips.

"You're on, Sir."

"It's me again. Visitors are from the DMS," he said again without moving his lips. "We've got Sergeants Uhlein and Whiddon, Private Alystock, and I think that's Alyssa from engineering; the Scot. They're all armed."

"We've got a bunch of Em-Squats moving in, Mister B.," Master Sergeant Thompkins said over the link. "A lot of them. This is going to get messy; I think."

"Oh man." Kent said.

Gunny jogged up to the pair. "I just heard." He had a pistol strapped to his waist and a rifle slung over his shoulder.

"Everyone just keep calm," Jeffery said. "Let's pray for a peaceful solution to this. The last thing we need is a bunch of folks hurt."

"Amen to that," Gunny said.

Kevin McCain ran up to the group. "Hey guys. I was worried about this."

"You knew this was going to happen?" Jeffrey asked.

"No, not really. I just had a feeling that something wasn't right. Just a gut feeling, you know?"

"What else does your gut tell you, Son?" Gunny asked as he put his arm around him.

"It tells me we need to trust in the Lord."

The group continued to walk towards the armed interlopers. When they were within twenty feet, they stopped.

"Is there something we can help you with, Sergeant?" Jeffrey asked.

"No, not really." Sergeant Uhlein said. He looked to his left and right as grey Em-Squats stepped into view. "Nothing I can think of."

"What is it you want?" Kevin asked, as he shrugged out from under his father's arm.

"It's pretty simple." Sergeant Uhlein pointed his rifle at him. "I want you all to die, that's what I want." He reached up with one hand and tapped his comm link. "Enable program Uhlein two point three." He said.

"There's dozens of Em-Squats around the town," Rebecca said over the comm link. "They're all over the place."

"Do'em in," Alyssa snapped. "Blas' the bloke's 'ead clean off."

"That's not going to happen," Kevin took another step forward.

"Kevin, get back here," Gunny said as he unslung his rifle.

"Oh yeah it is, you fool." Uhlein shouted. "You're all fools!" He pointed at Orange. "Kill them now!"

Now Kevin raised his voice. "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust. Surely He will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence!" He took another step forward. "*Now get back in your ship*!"

Uhlein raised his rifle and sighted at the young man. "Kill them!"

"Unable to comply. Additional subroutines have been deleted," Orange said. "Current program of defense of local colonists is active. Updates proceeding..."

"Yeah, sorry about that," Kent said. "I found that first program pretty easily. Which made me think that maybe it was a diversion to keep me from looking for anything else."

Kevin started walking toward Uhlein again. "He will cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you will find refuge; His faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday."

"Kevin, come back here!" Gunny said.

"Updates complete," Orange said.

Kevin stopped with Sergeant Uhlein's rifle pressed against his chest. "A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you."

"Shut up!" Uhlein shouted at Kevin.

"Shoot him, Bradley," Alystock said.

"Kill them!" Uhlein shouted to the Em-Squats beside him as he pointed at the group of men in front of him.

"Additional subroutines added to Mark Three Multipurpose Sentry-Cordon-Quarantine Automated Turret Soldiers which was in direct contravention to ongoing local program of defense of local colonists has been deleted as part of a routine maintenance update." Orange said.

"What?" Uhlein looked left and right again at his Em-Squats. "Kill them now!"

"Command is in violation of local current program." Said one of Uhlein's robots. "Cannot comply."

Private Alystock brought his rifle up to his shoulder. "Shoot him, Bradley. Shoot him now!"

"You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked." Kevin took a step forward. As the rifle pressed into his chest, Uhlein stumbled back. "If you make the Most High your dwelling- even the Lord, who is my refuge, then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent."

"What tent?" Uhlein asked. "You're crazy!"

Now Sergeant Whiddon and Alyssa brought their rifles up to their shoulders.

"Kevin!" Gunny panned his rifle between the four of them. "Please!"

"For He will command His angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone. You will tread upon the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent." Kevin took another step forward, backing Uhlein to the edge of the ramp.

Uhlein thumbed the safety on his rifle. "SHUT UP!" His finger pressed hard on the trigger.

"Because he loves me, says the Lord, I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges My name. He will call upon Me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor him." Kevin took another step, forcing Uhlein backwards. "With long life I will satisfy him and show him My salvation!"

A strong breeze blew through the area.

Kevin took another step, pushing Uhlein backwards again.

As Sergeant Uhlein stumbled backward, he pulled the trigger.

Chapter 39

"Got him at twenty-two, eighty-five, ten," Sergeant Mellow said. "Eight hundred meters."

"I see him," Lori said, "Coming to. Chief?"

"Tracking," Nick hit a button creating a red diamond call-out for the Smyrna. Once ships were within a half mile of each other, their targeting computers could track other ship's magnetic signature and engine exhaust. "He's heading to the DMS for cover."

As the dogfight progressed and all four ships had passed close to each other several times and at one point Captain Miner ended up following the Wildebeest and Lieutenant Biggs chased the Proclamation.

"He won't make it." Lori pushed the throttles completely forward.

"Six hundred." Mellow said.

"Damn; he's going to make it." Nick said.

"Three."

"Striker Twelve," Nick said as he fired the missile. He had stopped firing them two at a time when he reached double digits. While the Corvette carried sixty of the Striker ship-to-ship missiles, it only had firing tubes for twenty; ten per side. The process of loading more missiles required six crewmen -three per side- to manually load them into the leading edge of the ship's delta wing. During combat, the armorers would reload the tubes as they were emptied so there were always ready for firing. They also reloaded the ship's forward cannons with the million rounds the ship carried in fifty-thousand round cases. Since there were only three aboard the Proclamation, twenty missiles and one-hundred thousand rounds were all they had available.

"I'll pen him in," Lori said as she opened fire with one of the ship's cannons. Since their round supply had dropped to half, they were also now using one cannon at a time. She pulled the trigger as she banked to the left, sending a streak of green tracers across the Smyrna's port side,

forcing it to turn toward the Striker missile that was quickly approaching it. Holes erupted in the DMS as the rounds continued past the Smyrna.

Nick watched the counter roll down so fast he couldn't see individual numbers. He called them off in thousands, which was one every five seconds.

When the missile was within a hundred yards of the Corvette, it deployed what should have been the last of its chafe packets, causing the missile to prematurely explode as it hit the dozen sheets of heated, highly magnetized two-foot square pieces of metal. As the missile exploded, the Smyrna ducked under the DMS.

"Another miss," Nick said. "Down to eight Strikers. Fifteen thousand rounds."

"Yup." Lori said. She pushed the control to the far left, putting the ship in a very tight turn.

"Where you going?" Nick asked.

"I got something else I want to say to him." Lori said as the ship completed the turn and they were heading for the DMS again. She had not throttled back the engines.

"Not seeing him; he's probably hiding on the other side."

"Yup," Lori said.

"You going over or under?" Nick asked. He tapped the targeting computer, readying it.

"Nope."

Nick's heart sank. "You going around the aft end?" He tried.

Lori turned to look at him. Her tinted visor prevented him from seeing her eyes. "Nope."

"Hang on back there!" Nick shouted.

"What now?" Mellow said. He looked at the view screen. The aft section of the DMS filled most of it. "Oh, come on!" He gripped the arms of his chair.

"Where do you think he is?" Nick asked.

"He keeps going left on his evasives. Left, left, left. I think he ducked under that tail, hung a left and parked it waiting for us to blow by to fire a couple of missiles at our tail end at point blank range."

Nick thought back to their maneuvers chasing Biggs- he did indeed turn to the left every time. Thinking about Captain Miner, he realized he went in all different directions- left, right, up, and down. "Huh."

"That means we're going to send a bunch of metal to the left right into his way, I think." Lori said.

Several proximity alarms went off. They were accompanied by red flashing- lights.

"You've seen those before, I imagine." Nick remarked. When Wick didn't answer, he looked at her and noticed -alarmingly- that Lori had leaned forward in her seat as the tail of the DMS completely filled the screen. He was caught off guard when she executed several tight barrel rolls while firing both cannons just before they impacted. "HANG ON!" He shouted as the alarms got louder.

The ship shuddered as it impacted the now-perforated metal skin of the DMS. The ship pushed its way through the three hundred feet of deck, bulkheads, two LINAC tubes and both sheets of exterior skin, cannons firing the entire time. The far side of the ship peeled back and away from the Proclamation as it exploded out.

Lori put the ship in a flat turn, spinning around, causing the still-at-full-thrust engines to push everyone back in their seats. Since passing through the DMS had slowed the Proclamation substantially, it came to a stop quickly. "See him?"

"Just to our right, just ahead." Mellow said. They were within five hundred meters of the DMS- there was no need for precise three-digit coordinates.

"There." Nick pointed. "He went left."

The Corvette was tangled in the wreckage of the DMS.

"Stand down, Biggs," Lori said. "We'll take you aboard and get you planet side."

"Sure, you will." Biggs fired the thrusters to try and free the Corvette. Since it was caught up in the debris of the forward thirty-five-

mile section of the DMS it didn't have the power to push the ship out of his way.

"Shut down your engines, Lorenzo. Please." Nick said. "You're wrapped up tight."

The Smyrna's engines shut down.

"Great, thanks. We'll get you out just sit..." Nick started.

"Your tubes are NOT clear, Smyrna. They are NOT CLEAR!" Lori shouted.

"What?"

The Smyrna exploded in a fireball as the two missies that were fired detonated as they hit the skin of the DMS that was wrapped around its wings.

Nick leaned back in his chair. "Oh man. This is not how I wanted this to happen."

"There's not much we could have done, Chief." Lori said.

"Yeah. Yeah, I suppose not," Nick replied. "Where's our newest Lieutenant?"

"Tails," Lori said. "Status?"

"Mostly later issues, some now issues."

Nick sat up. "What kind of issues?"

"Well, I couldn't get Captain Miner to stand down, so he's disabled and drifting."

"Is he willing to talk?"

"Yeah, I think he's vented enough atmosphere that he's willing to listen."

"See? Better to be suited up and not need it than the other way around." Lori said. "Heading your way, Tails. See you in five." She tapped the engines and pulled the stick toward her to send the ship in the right direction.

"Are we good in here, Sergeant?" Nick asked.

Sergeant Mellow looked over the readouts. "We've got some minor damage to our wings. I don't recommend trying to fire any missiles any time soon. Hull ruptures in cargo areas two and three. Hatches are holding there." He gave a nod. "We're okay."

Lori patted her control panel. "That's my girl."

Nick pressed the latches on the side of his helmet near the neck then twisted it off. "Man, I hate these things."

"It beats the alternative."

"I thought the alternative would be to not fly into things at three hundred miles an hour." Sergeant Mellow said. "That's the alternative I like."

Lori twisted her helmet off and sat it beside her. "Don't be a baby. Just think of the stories you'll be able to tell your kids." She removed the band holding her hair back. It immediately sprang out in all directions.

Nick laughed. "Has Jeffrey seen you in zero-g?"

Lori ran her hands through her wild hair. "Chief Warrant Officer Five Nicolaus Hauser, I recommend you choose what could be your final words carefully."

"Because you are lovely in it," Nick said without missing a beat. "An angel's halo of hair surrounds you. Majestic is what it is."

"I need to get back to Murphrid," Mellow said sourly.

Nick looked at him then at Lori. "Do you think he's worked up the courage to ask me yet?"

Now Lori looked at the young Sergeant. "Maybe this incident did the trick. Honestly, I figured he would have done it by now."

"Hey now," Mellow said.

"Well?" Nick gestured at the young man. "Whenever you are ready."

Sergeant Mellow took a deep breath. "Chief, I would like your permission to marry Samantha. We love each other and get along great."

"When?"

"All the time." Mellow said matter-of-factly

Nick gestured at Lori with his hand. "Did you hear what that young man just said?"

"If you're going to pitch softballs, expect folks to swing at them." Lori answered.

"When do you plan on getting married," Nick said with a smirk.

"Oh! We would need a place to stay first. Probably sometime in the next three or four months?"

"What do you think?" Nick looked at Lori.

"Ehh. You could do a lot worse that this guy." Lori jerked a thumb at Mellow.

"Yeah, I've heard that before. The real question is could I do *better*?" Nick asked with a smile.

"Hey now," Mellow said. "I don't think..."

"Not a chance, Chief." Lori interrupted him. "Not a chance."

"Okay then," Chief said. "It's settled. Once the house is built and you get a date from Kevin McCain, we're going to have a party the likes Murphrid has never seen."

Lori opened her mouth.

Nick pointed a finger at her. "And we will not bring up the lack of parties in Murphrid's past."

"Deal." Lori said. She pointed at a corner of the screen. "Hey, there they are. Wow." She tapped the retro rockets to slow the ship.

The Wildebeest had scorch marks across one delta wing. The other wing came to a jagged end almost twenty feet short of where it should have. There was gas venting from near its engines that was making it roll slowly and a large debris field was floating around it

The Ganges had a thirty-foot hole completely through one of its wings. Part of the tail and one of its engines was also missing.

Lori laughed then held her helmet up to her face. "Hey Tails, we're looking at both ships. We can't tell who won. Please advise."

"Proclamation, we didn't receive your last message," Sergeant Pastis said. "We were too busy looking at the front of your ship. Did you run into an asteroid?"

Lori pulled her headset out of her helmet and placed it on her head. "I'm sure the board of inquiry will clear me of all charges."

"Now there are charges?" This time it was Stanstead. "You didn't punch poor Chief, did you?"

"She threatened me with death," Nick said. "Death!"

"The hair in zero-g?" Stanstead said seriously.

"Yeah." Nick confirmed.

"If you people are done with the stupid banter," Captain Miner said, "I want to get off this ship."

"Roger, Ganges." Nick said "Coming alongside..." He looked back at Mellow. "Where?"

"Starboard hatch two ten." Mellow replied.

"Pulling alongside at starboard hatch two ten." Nick said. "Unless you want us to bring that thing back to the surface for you." He added.

The Corvettes- as well as many smaller space craft were designed so that the landing gear of like-sized ships could latch into the top of another. Then a central umbilical would connect the pair. This allowed for a dozen or so ships to be stacked in space next to a larger ship or station and let support crew move easily from one ship to another. Within a planet's gravity however, the landing gear wouldn't support more than one other ship.

"Starboard hatch two, confirmed." Captain Miner hesitated. "You'd bring the ship to the surface?"

"Sure thing, Ganges," Nick said. "We're not at a point where we can just throw away inventory. I'm sure you're the same way. If you want that thing down, we'll latch up. Please advise."

After a long moment, Captain Miner answered: "Latch up, Proclamation. I'll send the coordinates for the landing site."

"Roger that." Nick said. "We'll drop you off on the surface. And I've got a package for you to take down with you."

"Whatever," Captain Miner said.

Nick switched off the link. "Hook 'em up, Tails."

"He probably thinks we can't blast him out of the sky if he's stuck to our landing gear."

"That's true." Nick said. "He probably feels safer like that."

"You could just release him when you're three hundred feet or so off the ground," Mellow said. "He'd never get his engines started in time."

"Nice! Wait, now I think you're just trying to butter me up," Nick said.

Mellow laughed. "It just popped into my head, Chief."

"You two." Lori shook her head.

"It was just hypothetical." Mellow said.

"That's all it is." Lori said. "The clamps to release *our* landing gear from the Ganges are *on the Ganges*."

"Oh yeah; that's right," Nick said. "It's been a long time since I've stacked ships."

"Rusty, Chief. Awful rusty." Lori tut-tutted.

"I'm okay with that," Nick pushed himself out of the reclined seat, holding onto the headrest to stay in place. "I'm retiring, remember? I'm going to give him the ice block to hopefully get them started in the right direction."

"Bring a pistol," Lori said as Nick stepped out. "Remember there's two of them aboard; it sounded like Jim Hooper ran onto that thing before it left the DMS."

"Oh yeah; thanks," Nick said over his shoulder as pushed off toward the hatch that led to the rest of the ship.

Chapter 40

"We have an issue," Tabatha said. "A big one."

"What's that?" Robert asked. "Are they coming back already?"

"No. Well, not yet. That'll be another issue, I think." Tabatha pressed several buttons. "This is a more pressing issue. Everyone suit up. Now."

"What?" Renée said. "What's happened?"

"It seems that someone programmed the engines to vent our atmosphere when they started up."

"That's crazy," Robert said. "Why would someone want to kill everyone on board the ship? I thought they all liked each other."

"I think they tolerated each other, but this was set up to keep us from stealing the Glimmer."

"But that means they're going to come back to a ship with no atmosphere. How does that work for them?" Renée had moved to a storage locker and had pulled out a space suit. "How would that work?"

"All they'd need to do is grab the tanks from the ship, fly them into the atmosphere below, let them fill up, then release them on the ship. It would probably only take them an hour since they wouldn't even need to land. Even 10,000 feet would fill the tanks enough to do it in two or three trips. This isn't that big of a ship, remember."

"Great; what do we do?" Robert had moved beside Renée and was pulling on the legs of the suit. "These things will only give us about forty-five minutes of air." He said.

"Did you reach anyone?" Tabatha asked. "Anyone at all?"

"No." Renée said. "Not yet?" She added hopefully.

"Well we need to figure something out. And fast."

Renée nodded at her friend as she concentrated to get her suit on- it was difficult to get on over her clothes, but she wasn't prepared to strip in frot of the young Robert Garvin.

Robert stood and hopped as he pulled the legs portion up completely. He reached behind and worked the top half up and over his head. "Oh man. What are we going to do?"

Tabatha smiled at him. "Relax, Robert. We'll think of something."

"Sure, sure." Robert picked up his helmet.

"No, don't do that yet. Wait until you need that air before you start that forty-five-minute counter." Tabatha pointed at the environmental station. "Can you isolate the bridge to conserve our air?"

Robert nodded. "Maybe. I suppose I can close the vents to here. That's smart."

"Do it." Tabatha sat in the captain's chair. "Renée, you said you can't find the frequency the colonists are on?"

"Yes. With frequency hopping, even if I get the initial frequency right, I don't know where to hop to next. I lose them in a thousandth of a second." Renée said.

"I don't see why the people on the surface would be hopping. It would be a straight, single frequency. After all, who do they think would be listening in?" Tabatha asked.

"That is true."

"So, what frequency range would they use if they were just using plain, single channel communication in the clear?"

Renée thought about it as she scanned her communications array.

"Hey, sorry to interrupt," Robert said. "But I've got the vents closed." He looked around the bridge. "With the size of this space and three of us, we've probably got about two hours of air before we need our suits."

"Are you sure?" Renée asked.

Robert nodded, "Sure. Given the cubic feet of space and…"

"Okay. We don't need the math... Thanks Robert," Tabatha paused then smiled at the young man. "Thanks." She looked at Renée. "The range?"

"They'd probably be down at the bottom of the spectrum. Twenty-five to thirty megacycles. Especially if they set up some repeaters." She shrugged. "They're probably somewhere in a five hundred kilohertz range."

"Then blast that entire range with something quick and simple." Tabatha suggested.

"Right." Renée bent over her station. "Let's see..."

"Robert." Tabatha said. "Do you think you can pump the air from the rear of the ship into here to get us more time?"

"Sure, I could, but we can't just over pressurize the bridge. We'd all get headaches and pass out."

"Okay, never mind on that. Do you have any suggestions?" She asked the young man.

Robert thought for a long moment. "No." His eyes teared up. "No. I just want my Mom and my Dad."

"I know you do." Tabatha looked at Renée as she worked the communication controls.

Chapter 41

The two ships banked as they turned toward the planet.

"How's she feel?" Nick asked over the comm link. He had made his way to the arms locker and retrieved a pistol and one magazine. He hoped he wouldn't need the weapon at all.

"It's sloppy. Just won't fly straight with them venting something." Lori said. "Once we get to atmosphere it's going to get worse though, Chief. We'll both be pushing air in all the wrong directions. This is going to be slow going and choppier as we hit thicker air."

Nick tucked the pistol into his belt and picked up the data cube. "Are we steady enough to deploy the tube?"

"Roger that, Chief. It might be a little bumpy as we get lower, but I'll take it nice and slow. You've got about twenty minutes before I start the landing routine."

"Thanks, El Tee," Nick said. "Good flying up there, by the way."

"All part of the service." Lori answered.

Nick thumbed off this comm link then pressed the button engaging the umbilical tube. The tube was a fifteen-foot long, eight-foot-wide steel tube that extended on pistons to meet the top of the ship below. Large ridges in the tube could be used as ladder rungs if needed, however in space, crew and technicians would just float from ship to ship.

After a minute, the tube was secure against the other ship and pressurized. A clanking let Nick know that the pressure between the Proclamation and the tube had equalized and the safeties on the hatch would now allow it to be opened.

Another button press caused the large hatch to swing up and out of the way. With a relegated sigh, Nick stepped over the edge into open space and with a gentle push against the railing, floated to the other ship's hatch.

Lord, please help Captain Miner be patient and listen to what I have to say. All I need is for him to listen, Lord. And not be armed. Nick prayed as he drifted down. When he reached the other hatch, he turned to face downward. *Jim Hooper not being armed would be nice too, Lord.* He added.

Nick pressed the button on the hatch which equalized the pressure between both ships. A high-pitched whistling filled the tube for almost ten seconds. Typically ships operated within a very small margin of each other pressure-wise. However, this time there was less air in the Ganges due to its hull breeches.

"So much for sneaking in," Nick said aloud as he turned the release level and pulled up on it. Once it was out of the way, he pressed the red flashing button. Black letters 'EQUALIZE PRESSURE BEFORE OPENING' across the large square button shouted a reminder. A green edge to the button finally let him know that the pressure was equal between the two ships.

Nick pushed the hatch downward then peeked his head in. When he saw no one, he entered the tube head first. Before he pivoted around to enter the other ship, he put the Ice Cube in the crook of his arm and put his hand on his holster. With a slight push he settled on the deck of the Ganges. Once he got there, Nick pressed a button on his space suit- he had removed the helmet but had left the rest on- making his boots slightly magnetic since for the moment, the ships still weren't experiencing enough gravity to make any sort of difference.

Feeling himself being pulled against the deck, he started toward the bridge, picking up the deliberate, high step gait that was required when walking with magnetized boots- keeping one's feet close to the deck when they were picked up caused them to be pulled back to the deck.

"Hey, Captain Miner?" Nick called, knowing that he really had no chance of surprise between the loud whistling and now the clanking of his boots against the metal deck. "Got a minute?"

The ship shuddered as it encountered the upper atmosphere.

Nick picked up his pace, wanting to be back on the Proclamation long before the ships were close to landing.

"Captain Miner?" Nick said again as he arrived at the door to the bridge. "You in there?"

"I'm in here," came the reply.

Nick used his firing hang to push open the hatch then stepped in. He was prepared to throw the Ice Cube at Miner to give him time to draw his weapon if he needed to.

Nick stepped over the hatchway. Thanks to the ever-increasing gravity from the planet and the magnetized boot, he stumbled as his foot snapped onto the floor. He looked quickly for Captain Miner- he was seated in the pilot's chair, looking ahead at the clouds and blue skies on the view screen. He looked to his left. Jim Hooper was seated at the Navigation Station. He was looking at the readouts on his screens instead of forward.

Nick waited for either of them to acknowledge him. When they didn't, he turned off his boots and moved slowly to where he could see the Captain's hands. They were on his lap, empty.

"Hey, Captain. I've got something for you." Nick said softly.

"Oh?" Captain Miner said. His eyes never left the view screen.

Nick sighed as he moved to the co-pilot seat. *Please give me patience Lord, and the right words to say.* "Mind if I sit?"

Captain Miner shrugged. He still hadn't looked at Nick. "Do what you want."

Nick eased himself into the seat, twisted sideways so that he could also keep an eye on Hooper- who didn't seem to have any interest in him at all. He looked forward at the passing clouds as well. "It's beautiful. I can see why this planet was picked."

"Yeah. It's the prettiest tomb around."

Nick looked at the man. "Tom…. Listen."

Tom shook his head. "It's too late for that. Nick."

"It's never too late to listen."

The pair watched as puffy white clouds passed by the ship's forward cameras. As they went, they started to get darker.

"Looks like rain," Nick said after a couple of minutes of silence.

Tom finally looked over. "You come here to talk about the weather?"

Nick smiled. "No; no, I didn't." He held up the cube. "I wanted you to have this."

"What's that?"

"It's all the plans we downloaded before we left Earth. Housing blueprints, engines, turbines, electrical schematics. The works."

Tom laughed. "That's most considerate of you. I would ask if that's why you came, but recent events tell me otherwise." He went back to looking at the clouds.

"We were worried…" Nick began. He frowned. "We thought you were going to come destroy the colony."

Tom looked at him again. "Of course, you did."

"Listen Tom, I didn't come here to argue. I wanted to give you this before we left."

"Before you left." Tom said. "Before you blow up the colony on your way out… because you were worried."

Nick stood. "It's got all the plans on it just like I said." He hesitated not sure if he should say more or let them discover all the contents on their own. "And there's more too."

"A virus to wipe out our ships' databases? Ground them forever?" Tom said. "Because you're worried?"

"No." Nick steadied himself as he pressed on. "It has a copy of the Bible as well as a bunch of services. Videos of services, that is. I really think you… You all should give them a look."

"Or else what?"

"Or else nothing. Nothing at all." Nick said. "Actually, that's not true. Or else you're going to miss out."

"All we're missing out on is the DMS." Tom snapped. "Are you done?"

"Yeah, I'm done." Nick sighed. He turned and put the Ice Block on the ledge at the front of the Navigation Station. "Jim." He said.

Jim looked at him. There was hatred in his eyes. "Murderer." He said.

"We'll be in touch to see if you change your minds." Nick said as he left the bridge.

"Oh, we'll be in touch all right." Tom said, knowing that once Glimmer returned it would be used to deal with Nick and his murderous fanatics. Even if he had to take Uhlein's advice and slam it into the planet at nine Cee. "Count on it."

"God is always willing to listen, Tom. He loves you and wants the best for you. You just have to make the choice and ask him." Nick said as he turned and left the cockpit.

"I can't believe that. The gall he has coming in here acting like we're in the wrong." Jim said. "He'll be in touch. What's that supposed to mean?" He hit the Ice Cube, knocking it to the deck. It rolled like a large six-sided die and stopped against the step to the flight deck.

"Take it easy with that," Tom said.

"Why? You actually think it has what he said was on it?" Jim got out of his chair. "You actually believe him?"

"No," Tom said although he wasn't truly sure. "But we can hook it up to an isolated system to see what's on it before downloading it."

"And what if it has what he said was on it?" Jim picked up the cube. "What then?" he tossed it up, letting it fall slowly back to his hands.

"Then we'll have plans we can use." Tom said.

"No, not that. The other stuff." He moved back to his seat.

Tom considered that. In his head, the word 'manifest' popped into his head. "Let's deal with one problem at a time." He gestured at the view screen- their camp was barely visible in the lower right corner of it. "Let's worry about getting this wreck back home first."

Chapter 42

Uhlein's weapon made a flat, triple beep sound- it was a sound a weapon made when it had its trigger pulled while it was loaded but still on safe.

Uhlein looked down at the rifle, realizing he had thumbed the safety off before boarding the landing ship then just now, turned it back to safe. He thumbed the safety back off then looked back up.

Orange fired one shot at Sergeant Uhlein. It hit him in the center of his chest. As he fell backward, Jean and Alyssa both pointed their weapons at Orange.

The Em-Squat to their left fired at them, hitting each of them with one shot.

Private Alystock dropped to one knee and aimed at Kevin, who was now standing alone.

Gunny fired at the Private, hitting him once in the shoulder, and another time in the chest.

Private Alystock fell back, dead before he hit the ground.

Kevin turned to look at his father. "Dad!"

"He was going to shoot you, Son."

Kevin let out a sigh. "I know. It's just..."

Gunny handed the rifle to Ivan as he went to his son. "I know. But they were never going to listen. Ever."

Kevin hugged his father. "Yeah."

Kent gestured at the ship. "Two things. First, we should do something with the bodies. Second, we need to see what is up with this ship. I've never seen one like this."

Pat tapped his communication link. "I need a medical transport unit to the end of Second street. And one excavation unit, a backhoe."

"Thanks, Pat," Kent said. "Kevin?"

Kevin let go of his father and looked at him, "Yeah?"

"I think we should give them a proper burial. They were... caught up in events they weren't in control of."

"Sure, sure." Kevin said, still shaken. He looked around. "I guess we need to decide where the cemetery will go all of a sudden, huh Dad."

"I guess so, Son." Gunny said soothingly. "We'll do it at the clearing out past the trees to the East."

"Yeah." Kevin said. "That sounds good."

"Okay then." Gunny tapped his link. "Austin, give me an all call."

"You're on, Granddad." Came the reply.

"Hey all, we've had a bit of excitement here on Second Street. It's all resolved now. Some folks from the DMS showed up looking for trouble. We're going to be holding services later on this afternoon. These people have no family here and were led astray. If you have the time to attend, we'll be doing it at sixteen hundred hours. Gunny out." He tapped the link to close it.

Kent stepped into the ship. "This is just an up and down deal."

Pat moved to the ship as well. "So where is it from? The DMS? I thought Gunny and the others were going to deal with them back on Beta Three."

"They were." Kent said. "Uh oh."

"We need to figure out where it came from," Ivan looked at the skies. "Just in case there's more of them up there."

"At least they don't have any Em-Squats," Pat said. He looked at Orange. "Send the new Em-Squats to the depot, Orange."

"Complying," the robot said. Without another word, it transmitted the pertinent information to the others of its kind, and they all marched off.

"We're full up on those things, I think." Pat said.

"Let me know what the final number is," Jeffrey said.

"You got it." Pat waved as he walked off.

"Kev?" Gunny said. "Why don't you take a break until sixteen hundred?"

"Okay." The still-shaken man said. "I'll see you there?"

"We'll all be there, I think." Gunny said with a smile.

With that, Kevin moved off to the landing ship he was living in with the rest of the extended-McCain family.

"Man, what a mess," Gunny said. "I'll take care of moving these folks if you figure out this ship."

"You got it." Jeffrey said. "It's a little thing. I wonder what's in orbit?"

"Only one way to find out, right?" Ivan smiled. "Let's go!" He stepped into the ship. "Coming, Chief?"

"Right behind you." Kent also stepped into the ship.

The two men turned and looked at Jeffrey.

Jeffrey considered it. "I suppose as long as it has the fuel, we can take a quick look around."

"No joy riding," Gunny said with a smirk.

"You got it." Jeffery touched his comm link. "We'll stay in..."

A loud squawk on every comm link made them all flinch.

"What the?" Kent said as he winced at the loud noise.

"Anyone on the surface. We're in orbit and running out of air!" A female voice said.

"Well, that answers that." Jeffrey said.

"Sounds like a trap." Gunny said. He tossed his rifle to Ivan. "For close encounters."

"You got it, Gunny." Ivan said as caught it. "Ready, Sir?"

"Chief." Gunny unbuckled his belt and held it out to Kent with the holster and weapon attached. "Just in case."

"I'll get this back to you, Gunny." Kent quickly stepped off the ship, took it and attached it around his waist. He turned and peeked inside the spacecraft. "This thing is pretty small. Three is all that should go in case we need to rescue a bunch of people." He nodded at Gunny. "We'll be in contact."

There was another squawk on the link then: "Anyone on the surface. We're in orbit and running out of air!"

"Alright, get aboard and answer her before that gets annoying." Gunny said with a smirk. He waved at the three men. "Stay safe." He stepped back so the ship could take off.

Rebecca walked up to him. "Tommy, what's going on? Who's shouting on the comms channel?"

Gunny pointed at the ship. "That's what they're going to find out."

She looked at the two dead men. "Oh no. Sergeant Uhlein and Alystock." She shook her head.

Gunny pointed at the women. "They had Jean Whiddon and Alyssa Whitburn along with them."

"Oh no." Rebecca's hand went to her mouth. "What did they want?"

"They wanted to kill us. They brought all those Em-Squats and had them programmed to kill us. Mister Bagley found the program in ours, remember. But I think when they landed and logged onto the local network, their Em-Squats grabbed the local time, latest software updates, and official orders and it overwrote the program Uhlein had put in them."

The pair stepped back even more as the ship gently lifted off.

They watched as it rose to a hundred feet before nosing upward and accelerated away.

"So, they came all the way here from Proxima Centauri just to kill us?" Rebecca asked.

"It seems so." Gunny said. "They were probably going to take a bunch of tech. And genetic material, I'd imagine."

"What stopped them?"

Gunny looked at Rebecca. "God did. Through Kevin." He took a deep breath. "God was here, Rebecca. Right here."

"God is everywhere, Tommy." Rebecca smiled at him. "He's always here with us."

"I know that. But God was here here. Personally, with Kevin. *Through* Kevin. I wish you could have seen it. He looked twelve feet tall standing in front of them." He looked around. "Then the wind picked up... and... and..." He raised his hands plaintively. "I just can't describe it."

Rebecca put her arm around him "Well, I'm glad that they didn't hurt anyone."

"Except themselves." Gunny pointed out. "They absolutely refused to believe." He frowned. "I mean, even if they didn't want to believe, fine. Fine by me. Live here in peace and we could all work together. Agree to disagree. Right?" He gestured at them. "Now look at them. Gone. And lost."

"There's nothing you could do, Tommy. They made their choice." Rebecca said. She patted his shoulder. "You want to go?"

He shook his head. "I can't just leave them here. I'll wait for the Em-Squats. You go."

"I'll wait with you." Rebecca said. "And we can pray that the Lord forgives them while we do."

"Deal."

The pair stood next to the four and prayed until the two Em-Squats arrived with Doctor Popovich. Then they moved them to the grassy clearing and buried them next to each other.

An hour later, at four o'clock, Kevin watched in amazement as everyone showed up for the service for the four dead crewmembers of the DMS. Including three of their shipmates.

Chapter 43

Everyone came out to watch as the Corvettes made a loop around the settlement.

Tom kept his hands on the controls. He had the retro rockets warmed up and ready to go even if the main engines were off line. He was sure he could control a free fall with them alone without alerting the Proclamation of his preparedness.

To his surprise, the double-stacked Corvettes gently touched down.

"Release when ready, Ganges," Lieutenant Wick said.

"Released." Jim pressed the button releasing the clamps on the Proclamation's landing gear.

"We're clear," Wick said as the Proclamation pulled up and away from the Ganges.

"Tom, think about what I said," Nick said. "We'll be in touch."

Without answering, Tom switched off the communications system. "Yeah, we'll be the ones in touch." He said as he stood. He looked at the Ice Cube for a long moment. "Grab that thing."

With a curse, Jim picked it up. "Let's go, Tom."

The pair of men stood at the top of the ramp as it lowered slowly.

When the ramp had lowered completely, they could see rest of the camp was standing at the bottom of it.

Ernie and Terry started up the ramp toward them.

Tom held up his hand. "I'll talk to everyone at once, okay?" He said as he started toward them.

The pair walked back down and joined the others.

When Tom got to the bottom of the ramp, he looked at the rest of the crew- it struck him that there were only two females among them; Violet Wilds and Terry Fishbourne. And even worse, there were only ten of them in all- him included. Regret filled him as he realized they were not going to survive past this one generation.

"Hey, where's Larry?" Ernie asked.

Tom took a deep breath, then another. "Larry's dead. And so is the DMS."

"What?" Ernie took a step forward. "What happened?"

"They were waiting for us to empty the ship."

"They?" This time it was Terry. "Who's they?"

"Chief, Wick, Stanstead." Tom thought back to listening in on their stupid banter. "Mellow… and I don't know who the other guy was."

"What happened?"

"They were waiting for us to empty the ship," Jim said. "And when it was down to just two of us, they attacked. Larry tried to hold them off while we got launched but they blew him up."

Tom looked at Jim, unsure if he was just remembering incorrectly thanks to the fog of battle, or outright lying.

"And then Chief disabled our ship. We begged him to bring us back down to the planet but he was going to just leave us to die out there." Jim said.

Tom took a step away from Jim.

"I told him it was his duty as an officer to help a disabled ship so he finally agreed." Jim said.

"What's on the cube?" Terry asked.

Jim looked at the cube. He had forgotten he was holding it. "Oh. It has plans and stuff on it we can use."

"Where'd you get that?" Terry asked. She reached out for it.

"What does it matter? We've got it now." Jim snapped.

Tom put his hand on Jim's shoulder. "Can we talk?"

Jim ignored him. "And once we get this thing downloaded and the Glimmer gets here, we can go destroy their colony on Murphrid! For what they did to us!" Jim held the cube over his head, waiting for applause.

No one made eye contact with him.

"But… where'd it come from?" Terry asked.

"Hauser gave it to us," Tom said, tired of Jim's lies. "To help get the colony up and running." He reached for the cube but Jim kept it out of his reach. "He wanted us to have the best chance possible, he said."

"I seriously doubt that," Jim said.

"You were there," Tom started. "I mean…"

"Does it have genetic material in it?" Doctor Cortez gestured around. "Because in case you're not up on current events, there sure aren't a lot of us left here."

"Those guys on the Glimmer will be back," Private Sierra said. "Don't forget them, right?"

"That's still not that many people; seven more doesn't a deep gene pool make." Cortez pointed out. "And that's if they make it back here."

"How could they not make it back?" Corporal Fields said. He pointed at Tom and Jim. "They said Space Ten and her Corvettes were here. They are completely outgunned on Murphrid. By the time Space Ten gets back there, it will be long after the Glimmer is on its way back here."

"The Glimmer didn't have any offensive capabilities, Fields," Tom said. "It's just it and a flimsy landing craft." He sighed. "And there were only two Corvettes here; that means the other ones are on Murphrid."

"But they've got Em-Squats with them," Fields said. "Uhlein's Em-Squats. Right?"

Once the Glimmer had left, a quick inventory showed that while all the nuclear weapons were aboard, a majority of the Em-Squats weren't.

"I suppose that's..." A thought occurred to Tom. "Oh no." He looked up. "We need to get back up there!"

"What? Why?" Fields asked.

"Ernie, get up there and try to get the last of the Em-Squats off the DMS before it deorbits!" He looked at the people before him. Once again, it was painfully obvious they were too few of them. "Take Fields and Sierra with you."

"Oh, okay." Ernie said. He looked up at the Ganges.

"This thing isn't flying anywhere! Take the Draco and get going!" Tom shouted. "If the DMS looks stable enough, try to get the nukes off loaded as well. But don't take any risks."

"Right. Let's go then!" Ernie said as he turned and ran toward the Corvette, Corporal Fields and Private Sierra close behind.

"Why didn't you go with them?" Jim asked.

Tom wheeled around on the man. "Because I've been in the dog fight of my life and I want to sit down for a minute!" He snatched the Ice Block from him. "Now get lost!"

"Come on Tom," Violet said. "I'll get you a drink and something to eat."

"Okay." Tom let out a long breath. "Okay then. Thanks Violet." He looked around. "Get stuff unloaded and set up camp. We're not going anywhere. Not for a long time."

Violet gestured at one of the landing crafts. "Let's go, Tom." She said as she started in that direction.

Tom moved quickly to catch up to her. "Thanks. It's been a rough day."

"Spending all day with Jim Hooper is more than rough; it's Hell." Violet said with a smirk.

Tom just nodded. He thought of the tall man he -and others- had seen in their dreams. *Hell,* he thought. "That's where we're going."

Violet looked at him. "Yeah; the Black Dance." She said, referring to the landing craft.

"What?"

"What?" Violet repeated. "You were asking about the ship we're going to."

"No, not exactly." Tom said as the pair approached the ship. He looked up at it. "Home sweet home?"

"Not exactly," now Violet said with a smile. "I was thinking of setting up the Black Dance as a central supply point. Put all the food and supplies in it. That way we can keep track of things better by having them all in one place."

"That's smart."

"We can sleep in the Corvettes and the other landing crafts. The PTEs aren't really laid out too well for camping."

Tom looked down at the cube. "We need to get a power source built and quick or we'll be sitting in all of them in the dark. Those batteries need the engines to charge them up, and those engines need fuel to let them keep doing that."

"If there's a plan for an electric motor on that thing, we can set it up in the river over the rise," Violet said. "Hydroelectric is the simplest way to get power."

"And solar panels."

"Once we can grow the crystals for them."

"True."

Violet gestured at the cube. "So Chief actually gave it to you to help us out? Seems weird he'd do that and still attack you."

The pair walked up the ramp of the ship. Several tables and chairs had been set up in one corner of large cargo area, creating an impromptu restaurant.

"He said he was worried we were going to attack Murphrid and wanted to stop us before we did."

"Smart guy. Guess he didn't know about the Glimmer either?"

Tom shook his head. "No, he didn't make out like he thought there was anything else but the DMS." He put the cube on a table then looked at Violet. "Can you keep a secret?"

Violet smirked. "I was running a One-Gen cell on Space Ten. What's more secret than that?"

Tom sat. "You'd be surprised." He put his hand on the cube. "Really surprised."

"I'll grab some drinks and some sandwiches. Chicken salad?"

"Sure." Tom shifted to put his head on the cube as if it were a pillow. "Anything's fine." Tom opened an eye and watched her walk off. He was sure that Ernie had resisted her advances and now she was trying to maneuver closer to him. Having someone to talk to seemed appealing, even if it was someone who wasn't genuinely interested in him. *Okay God, you got your sidekick to give me this thing. What am I supposed to do with it now? These people are liable to kill me if I go out there and preach at them. At least let Violet have an open mind while I figure this out, okay?* He sat quietly expecting an answer to pop into his head like it had on the DMS. After a minute, he started to doze off.

"Chicken-ish sandwiches, bar-b-cue chips, and some lemonade." Violet said as she put the tray on the table.

Tom jerked his head off the cube, startled.

"You fall asleep?" Violet said as she put a plate and a large paper cup in front of him.

"I've had a rough day," Tom admitted. He pushed the cube to the center of the table then took a sip of the drink. He scrunched up his face. "Wow, that's tart."

"Maybe we can find a citrus like plant out here and start making our own." Violet said as she picked up a chip and examined it. "And more of those potato things." She looked over it at Tom. "So what's the big secret?"

"There's more on the cube than just technical material."

"Oh! Chief put shows on it too?" Violet ate the chip. "He's not such a bad guy if he did that. I'd really miss Saturdays with Dad."

"No." Tom hesitated. "Not exactly." He looked around the empty cargo area suspiciously.

Violet laughed. "What; did he put the Bible on it for us to read?" She picked up another chip and ate it as she continued to laugh.

Tom stared at Violet, not sure what to say. Or even if he should say anything.

Violet noticed the man wasn't smiling. "Wait." She leaned forward, bringing her head low. "He put the Bible in that thing?" She whispered. "They'll kill you if you try and show it to them. Jim Hooper especially."

Tom exhaled loudly. "I know." He looked over his shoulder toward the ramp. "I know. But…"

"But what, Tom?" Violet smiled at him. "Are you being serious?"

"But what if they're right?"

"Who's right about what?" She picked up another chip. "You get the Space Madness up there in your Corvette?" She said, referring to another comedy show.

"Have you seen the tall man?"

Violet's smile faded. She put the chip back on her plate.

Now Tom leaned forward. "Have you seen the tall man? In your dreams?"

Violet sat back. She had dreamt of a tall man with dark eyes. Violent and violating dreams. "Who told you that?" She said, ashamed of them herself, even though they were just dreams.

"The tall man. Most all of us have dreamt about him." Tom put his hands on the table. "In my dream, I'm on a planet. This planet and Space Ten attacks us, destroying our town a couple of years from now. The tall man tells me that we have to kill Hauser and the rest of them to save ourselves. It's always the same thing; people around me are getting killed and the tall man is telling me it's because we didn't kill the others first."

"Oh." Violet said quietly.

"What are your dreams of him?"

Violet thought of her dreams where she was dominated and beaten by the tall man. In her dreams, she was often married to him and the violations became increasingly worse as time passed. Sometimes she would bear him children, who would also end up mistreating her. "They're…" Tears welled up in her eyes. "I don't want to talk about them. Ever."

"Violet." Tom reached out and took her hands in his.

Violet sat as tears streamed down her face. She thought of her time with Jeffery and his kindness and love. And how he would talk to her about God's love. And she would secretly disparage him for his beliefs. "It's just…"

"Violet, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you upset." Tom looked around, hoping no one else entered the cargo area.

Violet pulled her hands out of Tom's then she wiped her eyes with her napkin. "Forget it." She said. "Just forget it."

"I think we need to get the… extra stuff off this cube." Tom said. "And I want to watch it. And read it." He looked over his shoulder. "And maybe if they seem willing, I'll show it to them." He reached for her hands again. "And I'd like for you to watch it with me."

Tears welled up in Violet's eyes again as she thought of how she could have easily just remained with Jeffrey and been the one to marry him if she had made different life choices. A kind and compassionate man instead of being stranded on a dying planet. "Okay." She said softly.

"Okay." Tom repeated. "So let's eat, then we'll take the cube to…" He hesitated. "I don't even know where I'll be staying." He shook his head. "That's annoying."

"You can take one of the PTEs." Violet suggested.

"You said they weren't set up real well for camping."

"Yeah; they don't have portholes so unless you keep the power on all the time, they're dark inside." Violet said.

"How about the Ganges?" Tom said. "It's not going to be flying any time soon. Or ever, really. You know, we could cut some port holes in the lower cargo holds. We can make thin polymer all day long; it's just got to keep out rain, not the vacuum of space."

"We?" Violet asked.

Tom nodded. "Yeah. I mean… I'd like my own cabin, but at least that way we'd have a little privacy." He explained.

"Yeah," Violet said, relieved the man was not expecting more than someone to talk to. "That sounds good."

"Oh, there was something else." Tom said, remembering his discussion with Nick.

"There's more?" Violet picked up her sandwich.

"Chief said he would be in touch." Tom said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Tom shrugged. "I have no idea." He looked over his shoulder. "But if Chief's going to be in touch, and these other people aren't going to be interested in the extra stuff he sent, maybe we could…" His voice tailed off.

"You'd leave?" Violet put down her sandwich. "And go to Murphrid? With them?"

"This is a dead end here, Violet." Tom said. "A lonely dead end."

Violet nodded. "Not enough genetic material. I keep hearing that." She picked up her sandwich again.

"No, not just that kind of dead end. Even though this is a primitive-life to a dead end. I mean a permanent, eternal dead end."

Violet considered what the man had said, sandwich half way to her mouth. "I don't know. How can we just…" She started to lower her sandwich again.

Tom gestured at her sandwich. "If you put that sandwich down again, I'm just going to take it from you" He said with a smile.

Violet took a bite.

"Okay then. Let's eat, get the extra stuff off this Ice Block, and then get it to Doc Cortez. We can ask him to see about making some weather-proof sheets of polymer. Deal?"

"Deal." Violet said. She toasted him with her sandwich and took another bite.

Chapter 44

"Just look at that," Nick said. He was standing between the pilot and copilot seat on the Proclamation.

"That's a beautiful sight to see," Lori said as the Corvette banked over the village.

There were at least three dozen houses setup in a half-circle pattern around a large central building. They were not set up in a complete circle because of the large white sand beach about a half-mile from the town's center. Several long docks were in different stages of completion forming what would eventually be a marina. Another dozen houses were in various states of construction. Far from being crowded, the houses all sat on a large plot of land, giving each one almost a third of an acre. There were dozens of Em-Squats building the outer structures of the homes throughout the community.

"Did you see the farms on the North side of the colony?" Lieutenant Stanstead said from the Wildebeest.

"We saw it. Looks like the landing area is to the southeast," Lori said. "Let's put down closer to that big Quonset hut and the Galileo. Looks like that might be what they're using for maintenance bays."

"Copy." Stanstead said. "Heading down."

"Right behind you." Lori said. She looked over her shoulder. "Chief? Want to find a seat in case it gets bumpy? You know, we could set up a nice centrally-located one for you." She snorted.

Nick shook his head. "We're not getting a Captain's chair put in. I'm fine right over here." He pointed at the navigation station as he moved to it. "Besides; I'm retiring, remember?"

"That's the word on the street," Lori said. "Starting landing procedures."

The two ships banked in and landed one after the other beside the large metal hangar. It did not have doors on the front of it yet, but even so, allowed for work outside the elements and especially the sun. By the time the engines were shut down and the ramps started to lower, many of the colonists had walked over and were milling around the two ships.

Nick and Lori waited until the other ship's crewmembers exited before they also walked down into the crowd.

"Nick!" Rebecca said when she saw him. She had pushed past the other people greeting each other and was at the bottom of the ramp.

"Oh, Rebecca, are you a sight for sore eyes." Nick said as he started down the ramp, she met him halfway up and embraced him. "What a trip. Never again." He kissed her then pulled his head back so he could look her in the eyes. "Never again. If I go anywhere, you're coming with."

"Deal." Rebecca kissed him again. "I'm so glad you all made it safe and sound. The ships look like a disaster!"

"Thank God, it almost was." Nick shook his head. "I tried, Rebecca, I really tried. But they just didn't want to listen. I gave them the Ice Cube with all the data and the Bible, but I honestly don't think they will read it. I gave it to Tom Miner, but they're just so angry."

Gunny wrapped his arms around the two of them. "You going to keep him all to yourself?" He said.

"You know it, bub." Rebecca said with a smile. Her smile faltered. "Nick was telling me he tried to talk to the folks from the DMS and they weren't interested. We had the same thing here."

"They came here? Is that where the missing crewmembers were? In that little LINAC up there?"

"That little LINAC brought twenty-four EM-Squats with them Nick; they were planning on wiping us out."

"What happened?" Nick said. He turned and put his arms around Rebecca on one side and Gunny on the other and started down the ramp.

"God happened." Gunny said. "Right here, on the planet."

Nick smiled at him. "God is everywhere, buddy."

Gunny waved him off with his other hand. "Yeah, yeah; I know. God is everywhere. But while He was everywhere, He was here, personally. With Kevin."

"Kevin?" Nick smiled. "Wow!"

"You should have seen it, Nick." Gunny said. "He stood toe to toe with Sergeant Uhlein, rifle stuck in his chest and..."

"Whoa, what? Kevin had a rifle stuck in his chest?"

Gunny nodded, his eyes misting up. "And God spoke through him to them. He warned them they should leave. It was Psalm ninety-one. Powerful stuff."

"And I guess they didn't listen because their ship's still in orbit."

Gunny sighed. "They weren't interested in listening at all." He smiled wide. "Then it was just like in Acts. Acts two, when suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind. And I swear to you Nick, Kevin looked twelve feet tall standing there. The only thing missing was flames over his head."

"What happened?"

"Uhlein thumbed the safety on his gun but I guess he'd forgotten he had already turned it off earlier." Gunny said. "So, he turned it back on."

"So he turned it back on." Nick said in unison with Gunny. "That's a newbie mistake. I don't see how he'd do that."

"God saw to it." Gunny said. "Then, thanks to Orange..."

"Wait, Big Orange the poetry spouting robot?" Nick laughed. "It's still at it?"

"Yeah. We had turned it into a node, so it's talking to all the other Em-Squats when we need to. When Uhlein tried to shoot Kevin, Orange's program to defend the colony took over and he shot Uhlein."

"What about the other Em-Squats? Whose side were they on?"

"Once they got in town and onto the network -remember they're always looking for an authorized network to get updates on mission

parameters, firmware upgrades, and put in maintenance requests- once they got on the network, Orange pushed them all the latest updates. They downloaded the program to defend the colonists and because it was a newer order from an official source, it overrode their older programming."

"Wow." Nick said.

"And the other Em-Squats shot Alystock, Whiddon, and Whitburn." Rebecca said. She pointed beyond the maintenance hangar. "We started a graveyard in the field out there. We gave them a proper burial."

"I suppose that's the right thing to do." Nick said. "They were completely duped, weren't they?"

Samantha and Nikki ran up to them. "Dad!" Samantha said as she leapt into his arms. "I'm so glad you're home!"

"Sam! Nikki!" Nick said as he hugged her. "Just me?"

"The rest of the crew too, of course." Samantha said.

"Why are you messing with her already?" Nikki said. "Those two have already been smooching." He stuck out his tongue. "Gross is what I call it."

"Someday you'll understand," Samantha poked her brother.

Jeffrey Mellow approached the group. "Hey all." He said tentatively.

"Sister kisser," Nikki said. He gave Jeff a playful shove.

"That's me," Jeff said with a smile.

"I'm glad you're home safe and sound," Nikki said. "Maybe later you can tell me some of your war stories over some beers."

"I don't think that's going to be..." Samantha said.

"Wait, did you say over beers?" Nick said. He looked at Gunny. "Tommy, my dear old friend. Tell me it's true."

"Oh, it is, Nick. We have a fairly good brewery going on. We found some hops and barley substitutes a couple of months ago." He pointed at Rebecca. "And we think your enterprising wife found some high-

sugar, grape-equivalent fruits that we've got fermenting. Another month and we'll know how they work out."

"Oh, I could kiss you," Nick said. "I think I will." He grabbed Gunny's neck and pulled him close then kissed him on the cheek.

Gunny looked at Rebecca. "If you're expecting me to be shocked, you should know it's not the first time that's happened."

Rebecca laughed. "You poor dear."

"All that's missing is a boat and I'm ready to retire!"

"I'm here to help." Gunny said as he wiped his cheek. He winked at Rebecca. "Good thing I didn't mention the distillery."

"Distillery?"

Gunny nodded at him. "We've got some three month old Murphrid Scotch we can use to strip paint, de-ice wings, and even sip in the evening cool."

"Oh man, it's good to be home." Nick said.

"Catch up with you later, Dad?" Samantha said.

Nick looked from her to Jeffrey and back. "Get out of here you young people." He shooed them off with his hands that were still on Gunny and Rebecca's shoulders.

"See you later, Dad." Nikki said as he too left.

"Who's he in a hurry to see?" Nick asked.

"Private Ling Moon." Rebecca said with a smirk.

"No. Not Ling 'Angry at the World' Moon, Private Moon?" Nick said. "That Moon?"

"She's not so angry nowadays. It seems a Hauser can sooth the savage beast." Gunny said.

Nick laughed. "Now I've heard everything." Nick dropped his arms and clapped. "Well done, son of mine."

"They're practically inseparable, those two. Remember that Nikki wanted to get into animal husbandry?" Rebecca asked.

"Ranching," Nick said. "That's right." His eyebrows went up. "Oh, and Moon studying genetic engineering, wasn't she?"

"And Chemistry," Gunny said. "For every pot, there is a lid."

Nick smiled at his friend. "You're getting philosophical in your old age."

"I'm ready to let the youngsters take care of this place and I'll just give sage advice when they ask for it," Gunny said. "Adventuring is for the young."

"You, my friend need a boat." Nick winked at him. "Especially since it looks like a marina's going in."

Gunny laughed. "Those sound like work. Maybe once we get small motors worked out, I'll get a little speed boat."

The group continued across the hard-packed dirt to the edge of the town, chatting as they went.

"Man, look at those yards." Nick said as they stopped to look. All the houses were a single story with a mildly pitched roof but were either sprawling three- or four-bedroom affairs. And they still had plenty of green grass around them. "So how are things going in town? Town." He smiled. "We've got a town."

"Going good. With the extra robot help, we're really getting houses done quick. In a day we can get a four-bedroom two bath house inflated, two days to cure then we fill the walls with concrete we're making down at the quarry. Two days later, we're inflating a roof and putting in doors and windows. Then when the roof cures, we're filling it with expansion foam. We're putting in furniture in within two weeks."

"We've got people making furniture?" Nick asked.

"Not yet. Unfortunately we're flying extra beds, sofas, tables, and chairs down from Space Ten for now. So it's the same old furniture we've been looking at for months."

"Still, it could be worse. Step outside and you're walking on grass and breathing fresh air." Nick said. "Speaking of fresh air; how are you handling plumbing?"

"We've got an eight-foot main running down the middle of town that we tap to run lines to each house for fresh water in from one of the

water purification engines we had aboard. We're getting a thousand gallons a day straight from it and barely watching our water use, but once we get a reservoir built, we'll have all we need. We're running brown and grey downhill together." He pointed. "There's a central processing station with a fission powered reactor three miles away that's purifying the water and dumping it back into the river."

"Three miles?"

"I didn't want to have to move it when the town got bigger," Gunny said.

"Makes sense, but back into the river? I don't know. That sounds like we're making the same mistakes again."

"Oh, it's the spare purification system from the ship; we could safely drink that water just like on board. But dumping it in the river means we just need lines running one way and we can let gravity do all the work. I mean, we could run lines all the way back up, put four or five high pressure pumping stations on the line, but it's not worth the trouble, really."

Alex Tizon approached Nick. "Hey Chief."

"Ensign Tizon." Nick smiled at Tabitha. She gave a nervous smile back but didn't make eye contact. "I hope things are going well."

"I just wanted to thank you." Alex stuck out his hand. "For giving us a second chance like you did."

Nick shook the man's hand. "I'm just glad I was in the right place and time to help." He smiled at Tabitha. "And please understand that you are welcome here, no matter what you believe. Really."

"Thanks." She said simply before the pair moved off.

"Man! This is great. Folks getting along, houses getting built." Nick said. "And you said there's a brewery!"

Gunny laughed. "There will be drinks tonight at the feast. We've been doing pretty well hunting local game and finding edible vegetables."

"I saw the farms as we passed overhead; they look great."

Gunny nodded. "It's going to be a season before we get anything out of those, but yeah, they're going along nicely."

"Nice." Nick said. "Man, this really is...nice." He took in a deep breath and let it out. "Fresh air, fresh food, and a fresh start. Dear Lord, please give us the wisdom to not squander what you have given us."

"Amen." Gunny said along with Rebecca.

"So, do we have a place yet, or are we still living in a drop ship?" Nick asked.

"We've got a nice two-bedroom affair down close to the water."

"Only two bedrooms?" Nick asked.

"It's an old people special, Nick. Doc Sanderson's got one too. We don't need a bunch of rooms for kids."

"What if the grandkids visit?" Nick asked.

"What?" Rebecca pointed across the town. "From three streets down?"

"Well sure. If the grandkids want to spend the night with their Grand Pa-pa, we need a place for them to stay, right?" Nick drew out 'Pa-pa' as he said it.

"You are *not* going to be 'Grand Papa'," Rebecca said.

"You can be Grand Mamma. Sounds classy." Nick winked at her. "And Grand Tommy, of course."

"I accept the title." Gunny said. "Even though 'uncle' would be more appropriate."

"But not as classy sounding," Nick pointed out.

Rebecca raised an eyebrow at Nick.

"How about Old Grannie Becca?"

Rebecca hit Nick on the shoulder. Hard. "No. Now if you keep it up, I won't let you use the boat."

"We have a boat?" Nick said. "Oh man, this gets better all the time."

"I even named it already," Rebecca said matter-of-factly.

"Oh now, hold on. A boat's name is a particular thing, you know. You can't just put anything on the back of a boat."

"It's called the Relaxus Maximus." Rebecca said flatly.

Nick laughed. "I love it." He said then he got serious. "So, we've got a festival tonight. Then tomorrow? What's on the schedule, Gunny? What do I need to be in the know for?"

"Nothing really. Everything's on auto pilot. Building houses. Expanding infrastructure. We've got an expedition running out to Murphrid Two next week to set up some gas mining blimps for ship's fuel." Gunny thought for a moment. "Oh, we've run a couple of missions to the headwaters of this river as well as to the ocean. They've set up a several campsites there. Really they're shipping containers with beds, windows cut in them and a solar powered fan on the roof. So if you want to get away from it all, you can go there."

"Get away from this?" Nick spread his arms out wide. "Who'd want to do that?"

"Folks on their honeymoon." Gunny said. "Folks that want to try their hand at fishing… and camping outdoors."

"Man." Nick said. "Honeymoon?"

"We've had four marriages so far." Gunny said. "And from what I'm seeing both of the Hauser kids are going to be hitched pretty soon."

"Man." Nick said again. "That's great. Really great."

"We are going to have to splice some genes to introduce a little more variety into our families," Gunny said. "Doc Sanderson explained it to me. But it's nothing too crazy. We add fifty kids over the next ten years to the ones being born normally, and we won't have any issues at all."

"I had thought about that," Nick said.

"Are you two done talking shop?" Rebecca crossed her arms. "There's time for that later, you know."

"Right, sorry, Honey," Nick said as he patted Gunny on the shoulder. "We'll talk tomorrow. I really want to reach out to the crew on Beta Three again." Nick explained. "I told Tom Miner I would be in touch."

"If you think it's wise." Gunny said.

"Well, I gave them all the reference materials they'll need to be successful, but I would like to think we can still act like the adults and talk to each other."

"Adults with different beliefs tend to kill each other," Gunny pointed out. "History is full of examples."

"Still," Nick said, "I'd like to send one of our probes there with an Em-Squat hitching a ride. We can rig up a communication link like we had back home. It will be simpler than the comms system we used to talk around the solar system instantly, but it would still work, right?"

"Sure." Gunny said. "Doctor Sanderson could probably rig it up in an afternoon, knowing him."

"Yeah." Nick smiled. "That's true."

"Right, and…"

"Okay, enough shop talk for the day," Rebecca said. "You've been gone for almost eight months. Let's go home and relax until the festival starts. I mean it."

Nick extended the crook of his arm to her. "Lead the way, dear wife of mine." He looked around. "Because all of a sudden, the poor old Chief doesn't know where he lives. Murphrid's a big place, you know."

"You poor dear." Rebecca said as she ran her arm through his and patted his elbow. "Let's get you home."

"See you at the party, Tommy." Nick said

His friend smiled and waved as they walked off.

"Murphrid." Nick said with a sigh.

"Oh." Rebecca said. "I guess no one told you?" Rebecca said.

"Told me what?"

"Well, Murphrid is the system, and we all decided instead of this being Murphrid Four, we were going to call it Jordan. Our promised land."

"Perfect. That's perfect," Nick smiled as the pair walked off.

Chapter 45

Nick knocked on Doctor Sanderson's door. He stepped back and looked at the front porch the man had set up. There were several types of wildflowers growing beside the windows.

"Hey, neighbor," Brian said when he opened the door.

"Nice flowers, Doc." Nick smiled at him.

"The best way to deal with allergies is to eat honey made from local flowers." Brian winked at him. "I'm luring in the bees so I can set up a hive."

"There are bees here?" Nick asked. The planet did indeed have its own version of a blood-sucking insect similar to the Earth's mosquito that the colonists had discovered, as well as moth and butterfly type insects, but he hadn't noticed anything resembling a bee.

"There's got to be; there're fruit trees here. Pollination is pollination." Brian shrugged. "It's simple mechanics. Once I get them here, I'll follow them back to see where their nest is."

"I suppose so." Nick smiled. "Hey, have you got a minute?"

"Of course," Brian stepped back and gestured. "Welcome to my humble abode."

It had been a week since he had returned and while Nick had spoken in passing with Brian Sanderson, he had not actually been in his home yet. "Thanks, Doc. Sorry I haven't been by sooner."

"Quite all right." Brian moved to a sofa and pointed at it. "Have a seat? Want a drink?"

"Well, actually." Nick looked around the combined living-dining area, it looked for all intents and purposes like a cabin aboard Space Ten since it was all the same furniture, except the large windows were open letting in fresh air. "I was hoping you had put together a secret lab."

Brian tapped the side of his nose then pointed at Nick. "I know just what you're talking about." He turned and shuffled off toward one of the bedrooms.

As Nick followed behind his slow-moving and stooped friend, he was struck with how old he looked- as if the months of activity on the ship had finally caught up with him. "Are you… doing okay, Doc?"

"Me? Sure. Why do you ask?" Brian opened a door and stepped in. "My secret lair."

Nick laughed as he entered the room. "You need a combination lock on the door or a retina scanner or something to make it a true secret lab." He looked around the room. It was actually a well apportioned laboratory. "Wow; nice, Doc."

"It's just something to pass the time, really." Brian smiled at him as he sat on a metal stood. "What sort of secret project do you have in mind?"

Nick laughed again. "It's not nearly as exciting as that." He leaned against a table on the far wall. "When I was on that mission to PCB-3, I talked with Tom Miner and gave him that Ice Block with all the stuff we downloaded."

"Very neighborly of you." Brian said.

"And when I left, I told him that we'd be in touch."

"Oh, okay. You planning on going back there soon? They might not be too friendly after you blew up their ships."

"I figured I would want to try talking to them first." Nick said. "So, I was thinking…"

Brian snapped his finger. "You want to set up a communications link with them!"

"Yeah." Nick chuckled. "Yeah, Doc. That's it completely." He narrowed his eyes at the old man. "Can you do that? Set up a pair of twisted electrons?"

"Tangled. Tangled ions are what they are." Brian turned and looked over the table he was sitting in front of. "Sure, sure. Tangle a couple of beryllium and magnesium ions and we could send half of them there."

"Tangled. Okay. I was thinking would be a good way to talk to them." Nick said.

"I could set up a simple binary language decoder to get messages back and forth. A simple, intuitive interface…" Brian said. He pulled a keyboard closer to him. "Nothing fancy means less to build. Or break."

Nick moved to Brian and put his hand on his shoulder. "I was thinking we could use an Em-Squat as an interface, Doc. Make it a little more… durable in case they are in a 'shoot first, ask questions later' kind of mood."

"Huh?" Brian looked at Nick. "What's that?"

"Can you set it up so we could use an Em-Squat to talk to them?"

Brian considered that for a moment. "Sure, sure. If I'm going to build a binary interface, it could tie into the speech programs of an Em-Squat. Pretty simple really; it would be like typing out what you want it to say. Then we'd get a digital readout of what its sensors heard from them. Unless you want an Em-Squat on this end too."

"No, one is plenty." Nick said. "So, an Em-Squat emissary. And if I'm not mistaken, an Em-Squat is small enough to put on a Class Three probe."

Brian started typing on the keyboard. "You know, you could easily fit an Em-Squat on a Class Three probe."

Nick smiled at the man. "Yeah? That would work nicely. One of those could make it out there in an easy three or four months, right?"

Brian tilted his hand back and forth. "Maybe less. Definitely less since it doesn't need to worry about human passengers dying from acceleration or deceleration."

"Doc, if you can get the interface worked out, I'll get an Em-Squat stripped of ammo and weapons and have it sent over for you to fit it in there."

"You want to do this now?"

"Even if we sent it off tomorrow, that's still almost four months before it's there. There's no telling what's going on on the planet in the meanwhile."

"That is true. So sooner rather than later."

Nick nodded. "I think so. It's just a feeling." He smiled. "And if they're willing to talk or even come here, we can pick them up."

"Are you planning on being in the neighborhood or something?"

"I was wanting to fly out to Arcturus. There's a couple of friends there I wanted to talk to."

Brian snapped his fingers. "Hey, you know that probe is still flying around Arcturus, right?"

Nick shrugged. "I figured it would be for the next hundred years or so."

"Well, if you're going to go back, then you should set up some sleep induction. That probe's been compiling the language all this time. I'll bet you could easily be on a college graduate level this time instead of an eighth grader like before."

Nick patted the man's shoulder. "Hey, that's brilliant! I'll definitely get that set up."

Brian looked at him. "If you wouldn't mind, Nick, I'd like to go down there as well."

"I can't imagine anyone would give you any friction on that." Nick smiled at his friend. "Not at all."

"That's good. Well, I'll get this thing set up for you. Then once I've tested it out, we can fly out, right?"

"Now you're in a hurry?"

Brian held his hands out. "Look at me, Nick. I'm past the point of putting things off." He winked. "Here today, gone tomorrow is the saying, I believe."

"Brian, don't say things like that." Nick said seriously.

"It happens to us all, Nick. And like you said, if we left tomorrow, it's four months to Beta Three then another four to Arcturus; that's eight months all of a sudden. Not counting coming back here."

"Yeah, I suppose so. Then another three or four back and all of a sudden we're gone a year." Nick said. "Still Doc, it's only a year."

"More often than not, a person never knows when their last year is taking place." He held up a finger, "But you should console yourself that we will all see each other again, right?"

"Right, Doc." Nick smiled at him. "Right."

Brian pushed Nick away. "So scoot so I can get this rigged up. We can fire it off in a couple of days once I'm sure it's all working right. We'd only need to give it a week's head start then we could fly by Beta Three on our way to Arcturus."

"Oh, okay." Nick said. Suddenly things were moving faster than he had thought- leaving his children for a year as they were beginning budding relationships. He turned to leave. "I'll be back later on today to check up on you, okay?" He looked back- Brian was leaned over the keyboard typing. With a sigh, Nick let himself out of his friend's house.

Chapter 46

"How're we looking?" Nick asked. He was -begrudgingly- sitting in a chair bolted to the deck in the middle of the small bridge.

"Pushing into orbit nicely," Jeffrey said.

"Comms are online." Brian added from the sciences and communications station.

"Excellent." Nick said. "What's local time where they are?"

Rebecca looked at the readouts before her at the tactical station. "Mid-afternoon, Nick. Besides, they're expecting us even if it were the middle of the night."

"True. Open the channel to them." Nick said.

"You're on," Brian replied.

"This is the Glimmer, you folks around down there?"

There was a long pause then Brian spoke up. "We're here, Glimmer," he read from his screen. "When will you set down?"

"Twenty minutes before we're overhead," Lori said. "Another thirty to get down."

"Good." Tom relayed. "We will be waiting with Big Grey."

"See you in in less than an hour." Nick said. "Be ready to go."

Lori turned to look at Nick when the communication channel was closed. "I still don't like it, Chief. It still could be a trap."

"The last we heard; they were hiding out away from the main camp in a commandeered PTE. We've got to trust someone at some point." Nick said.

When the Em-Squat had approached the camp and started speaking for Nick, Jim Hooper had flown into a rage. Not wanting to discuss anything with Nick or anyone else, he had started firing at the obviously un-armed Em-Squat. In the process, he had killed Doctor Cortez when he tried to intervene.

Later that evening, Tom Miner, Violet, and Private Bitburger, took a PTE and flew a hundred miles upriver. After two weeks, they found the Em-Squat hiding in the forest and started speaking with Nick.

"You know, we might be going about this the wrong way." Lori said.

"How's that Commander?" Nick asked. He had followed through on his promise and had promoted Lori to Lieutenant Commander before they had set out from Murphrid. According to regulations, Jeffrey still had another six months before he could be promoted.

"I just think it's really a pretty big risk."

"I've been talking to Tom pretty regularly," Nick said. "And he sounds sincere."

"Even if I wanted to believe that, there are still those other crazies on the planet that have made it clear what their goals are." Lori said. "All we need in that flimsy landing craft is even a near-hit and we'd be out of luck. There's still Corvettes and PTEs down there, Chief."

"You want to ram them?" Nick said with a smirk.

Lori ran her hands through her hair. "I'm due, Chief. But I think we should just have them dock with us up here."

"We can't take that PBC. It would be battered to bits flying to Murphrid." Jeffery said.

"We detach our landing craft, attach theirs, offload them, dump the PTE, and then re-dock our landing craft. Then we sneak away before those crazies know we were even here."

Nick considered the plan. "That does sound less risky. And I suppose we could send that poor Em-Squat back to the other encampment to see if they're willing to talk this time."

"We can afford to lose an Em-Squat," Jeffrey said.

"It does sound like a better plan, Nick." Brian offered.

"Okay. Open comms again."

"Go, Chief." Brian said.

"Attention, colonists," Nick began. "Change of plans. Get in that PTE and rendezvous with us. We'll be ready to off-load you on our end. Copy?"

They waited for several minutes until Tom finally answered: "Okay Chief, I guess we can do that. Heading up now so send the telemetry."

"Roger that, Captain Miner," Nick said. "We'll be waiting." He drew his finger across his throat.

"Off," Brian said.

"Now all we have to worry about is it ramming us." Jeffrey said.

"A PTE would never survive ramming us. If they were in a Corvette however, it would be different. Now the only reason they would do it is if they were suicidal." Lori said.

"Thanks," Nick said. "I was trying to not think about that."

"While you're not thinking about it, I'll be praying about it." Brian said. "How's that?"

"Deal." Nick got out of the chair. "Man, this is stressful."

Jeffrey nodded. "When they get close, I'll track them to make sure they're on a nice slow approach."

"Or what? It's not like we can do anything about it," Lori pointed out. "This thing's just a smaller version of the pig that Space Ten is. Slow and straight is all we can fly."

"Did I mention I wanted to retire and fish?" Nick said.

"Numerous times, Chief," Jeffrey pointed out. "Just today, in fact." He got out of his seat. I'll go move that landing craft."

Nick nodded at him. "Keep an eye out."

"If anything looks off out there, I'll take care of it."

Lori pushed quickly out of the pilot seat and faced her husband. "Jeffrey Simpsons, I order you to not put yourself in any danger out there!"

"Who me?" Jeffrey said. "I'll just be enjoying the views." He gave a sloppy salute. "Commander." With that, he turned and exited the bridge.

"Oooh, that man!" Lori said as she pulled herself back into the seat. After a moment, she pushed herself back out, floating above it. "I'm going to talk to him for a second, Chief."

"Don't go hitting anyone; that Lieutenant Commander rank is still shiny. I'd like it to stay there long enough to get a little tarnished."

Brian laughed. "Here, here!"

Nick looked at the worry in her face. "Oh, go talk to your man. I'll take the stick." He pushed off his chair. "It'll be good to be left seat again."

Without another word, Lori pushed toward the hatch leading to the back of the ship.

"Those two." Nick said once she was gone.

"Are really in love," Rebecca finished. "He's willing to ram that ship for her, and she would do the same."

"Let's hope… I mean pray it doesn't come to that." Nick said.

Chapter 47

"So, are you coming down too?" Nick asked.

The Glimmer was within an hour of establishing an orbit around Arcturus.

Tom shook his head. "I don't think so, Nick."

One of the first things Tom had done when they had come aboard was to tell Nick he was relinquishing his commission as a Captain. And he started calling him 'Nick' instead of 'Chief' to show he was set on the decision.

"Come on, Tom; you'd really like those folks down there. You're not going to get another chance, I don't think."

Tom took a sip of his coffee. "This is your last visit?"

Nick nodded. "Yeah; I don't think we need to be corrupting their natural development."

"Do you think God will tell you that down there?" Tom asked.

"That would be wonderful." Nick admitted. "It really would." Nick was aware that the four of them were reading the Bible. Whether it was with an open mind or not, he wasn't sure.

"See? I don't think I could go down there and visit personally with God. Not after what…" His voice trailed off as he put his coffee down and picked up his sandwich. "I just couldn't." He took a bite of it.

"No, listen; I don't expect God to talk to me personally like he does to the folks living down there. They have a different relationship with God than we do. It's a different Covenant since they never strayed from God." Nick explained. "What I expect is that Tolen is going to tell me that God said to stop coming by."

"Why? You're all believers." Tom said- while he had wanted to get off PBC-3, he still had not really accepted what the Bible said. He just

felt that his chances for a productive life were better on Murphrid. "You're all one big happy family."

"Well, yes." Nick said. "But it's not like we can comingle. They are after all, a post Iron-Age society and we're a Faster-than-Light one. If history has taught us anything it's that when a less advanced indigenous society meets a more advanced one, they don't make out too well."

"I suppose that's true."

"I mean, the real reason I'm going down is to say, 'thanks' to Tolen and Paramus."

"For leading you to God." Tom said with a smirk.

"I suppose you could say that." Nick raised his hands plaintively. "Come down, Tom. Have a look around. Honestly, I don't think we'll be down there more than the day. And I'm sure you'll get a great meal out of the deal as well."

Tom laughed. "Wow, a dozen light year, year-long mission for a one-day visit."

"It's important." Nick pointed at the man. "Just like swinging by and getting you and the others off Beta Three was."

"Yeah, sure; three more genetic material samples." Tom smirked.

"No, three more members of our crew, people to add to our growing colony. You know as well as I do that with the number of people on Murphrid, you three aren't the tipping point for survival."

"Thanks again for coming for us."

"You're welcome again." Nick picked up the rest of his sandwich. "How about you un-renounce your commission so I can order you to come down? That way you can say you didn't have a choice." He put the rest of his sandwich in his mouth then smiled as he chewed.

"No deal, *Nick*."

Nick swallowed then his voice softened. "Okay. How about if I invite you down as a friend?"

Tom exhaled loudly. "Fine, fine. I'll go. Otherwise I'd never hear the end of it." He took another bite. "Okay?"

"Okay." Nick finished his coffee and stood. "We're about forty-five out."

"That's not near enough time to convince Bitburger."

Nick smirked. "Bitburger'll decide to come; you'll see, *Mister* doubting Miner." He rinsed the cup in the enclosed sink then put it on the counter- the small magnet in the bottom kept it in place. "Finish your sandwich and I'll see you at the drop ship. Don't get lost."

"In this little thing?" Tom put the last of his sandwich in his mouth- it was a very large piece.

"When you see the whirlwind, you'll be glad you came." Nick said.

Tom looked at him wide-eyed; his mouth too full to speak. All he could do was chew up the rest of his sandwich as he watched Nick walk to the bridge and close the hatch behind him.

Chapter 48

Nick sat at the back of the cramped landing craft. There were only three open seats- after Private Bitburger found out everyone else was going, he had agreed to come down as well instead of waiting in the Glimmer alone. "How we looking, El Tee?" Nick asked

"Everything's in the numbers, Chief. Nice and easy. We'll set down closer to town than we did last time. You want me to buzz the town before setting down?"

"No, just set her down." Nick smirked. He looked at Tom seated beside and slapped his shoulder. "I'm sure they already know we're coming."

Tom just shook his head.

"Got a nice little rise north of town I'll set down on." Jeffrey said. "See it?" he asked Lori.

"Yup. Looks mostly clear."

"Mostly?" Nick asked.

"There's locals wandering all around Chief. If you want a completely clear landing site, we're going to walk a few miles." Jeffrey said.

"Pilot's prerogative," Nick said. "But I'd prefer not to show up all sweaty."

The small landing craft flew in a broad arc then settled on the small hill outside of the town of Reudens.

By the time the crew got to the rear ramp and lowered it, there were a dozen Arcturians waiting there.

Nick elbowed Tom. "Told you." He looked out at the group- none of them were smiling. Nick walked down the ramp and took several steps closer to them. "Hello, brothers," Nick said in Sivulliik. "Please do not be alarmed."

The rest of the crew filed out and stood around Nick.

Of the people aboard the Glimmer, only Violet and Bitburger hadn't done any of the sleep-induction lessons. Tom had begrudgingly done two months of it -everyone else had done a full four months of it and were fluent.

"Greetings, Brothers," the closest Arcturian now smiled. "We were told you were coming."

Nick elbowed Tom. "Told you."

This time, Tom didn't scoff.

"We were hoping to speak to the Mayor and the High Priest," Nick said, switching back to their language.

"I do not think that is what you want to do."

Nick startled. "Oh… I… Well… we have traveled a long distance and were hoping to see them. Are they unavailable?"

The Arcturian smiled wider. "Ahh; you misunderstand me. Although you speak much better now that you did before." He cocked his head to the side. "And you seem much more…hospitable."

Nick laughed. "Well Brother, we have seen the light."

The alien looked at the sky. "The light?"

"The light, the truth, and the way," Doctor Sanderson said.

"What?"

"Doc, they don't have the Bible here," Nick said to him in English. "You can't go quoting scripture to them; their Bible is completely different. There was no great exodus of slaves, no Jericho. And no New Testament."

"Huh." Brian said. "That makes sense."

Nick turned back to the man. "I meant we also believe in the Father."

"How could you not? Come with us, Brothers and Sisters," the Arcturian said as he placed his hand on his heart and bowed slightly. "There is a feast planned for tonight in your honor. Tolen asked for you to stay with him until then."

"Tolen! Yes." Nick said. "That's who we wanted to see."

"I do not know how things are on your world, but we do not elect mayors." He smirked. "Or high priests for life." He gestured toward the town. "Come."

"Come on. How did these people know we were even coming?" Tom asked Nick as the group started followed the Arcturian.

"Oh, I have no idea how people who walk around talking with the God of the Universe on a daily basis would know we were coming."

"Just stop."

Nick laughed. "Okay, okay." He looked across the plain. There was indeed a very large whirlwind moving across the landscape parallel to them. Nick pointed. "What's that, Tom?"

Tom as well as the others turned to look, but as they did, the whirlwind dissipated.

"What? The grassy plain? Yeah, that's nice." Tom said.

Nick smirked. "Okay, sorry."

"Okay what?"

Nick patted Tom's shoulder. "I wasn't talking to you."

The Arcturian had watched them as they spoke, waiting. "Ready?" He asked.

"Yes, please lead the way." Jeffrey said, glad he was able to use his language training this time.

The group followed the Arcturian into the town- there wasn't a wall or a gate, the town's roads just started at the first of the houses.

"That's not much protection," Private Bitburger said.

"From what?" Jeffrey asked. "Remember there isn't even a police force here. Because there's no crime."

The Private considered that. "What if a wild animal wandered into town?"

"Did you see the longbows those guys were holding when we landed? Sure, there's no crime but there's plenty of hunting. They'd just end up shooting, cooking, and eating something if it came into town."

Bitburger nodded. "Well, as someone who has gotten a taste for real cooked meat, I can go along with that."

"Just wait until the feast." Jeffrey said. "The last festival going on when we got here was a planet-wide one. These people know how to party."

Nick took a couple of quick steps to catch up with the Arcturian leading them. "My name is Nicklaus."

"Pakkard," he said back. "I have heard you say that you now believe?"

"We do, Pakkard. We do indeed. And I want to apologize for the way we acted before."

"A wild animal acts like it does without consideration."

"Wow, you guys are rough."

"I do not understand," Pakkard said.

Nick laughed. "I was making a joke." He patted him on the shoulder. "I am sorry."

"You do not need to apologize because your joke wasn't funny, Nicklaus."

Nick put his arm around Pakkard and laughed out loud. "Oh, I wish we could visit more than just this once."

Pakkard looked up at him. "You won't visit again after this?" He put his hand on Nick's shoulder- he was too short for anything more.

"No." Nick said. "It is difficult to explain." He thought for a moment. "Even though we both are brothers in God, we are different people. And I would not want to affect your people by having us stay here too long."

"Because you fly in the air and have mechanical beasts of burden and we do not."

"Yes. One day your people will have those too. But if you get them before you are ready, it could be difficult. Do you understand?"

"One does not learn to glaze until one can make a pot."

"Exactly! Exactly right, Pakkard. One day when you have made ships of your own, we would welcome you on our world to visit."

"How would we find you? The night skies are large."

Nick smiled. "We could leave directions for you. In the night sky."

"On the scepter that flies above us?"

"The scepter? Oh, yes, on the scepter." Nick said, realizing he meant the probe that had been in orbit for almost two years.

Pakkard looked back toward the landing craft. "I would think it will be a very, very long time before that happens."

"You would be surprised." Nick said. "When we first learned to fly through the air on a very simple machine, it took less than a hundred of our years before we flew to our moon. We literally had people in our world that were born when there was nothing at all flying in the skies, to seeing a ship land on our moon. It was a much simpler ship that we use now of course, but still, in less than one hundred years we did it. It was actually only sixty-eight years."

Pakkard smiled. "What you say is exiting to hear."

"Then perhaps I have said too…"

"Nick!" A voice shouted from down the street. "Niiiick!"

Nick turned and looked in the direction of the shouting.

Tolen had gathered up his long garment above his knees and was running toward him at a full sprint.

"Tolen!" Nick let go of Pakkard. "Excuse me." He ran toward Tolen.

Pakkard laughed at the sight- the two men running at each other from over a hundred yards away. And thanks to their age, they weren't closing the distance as fast as he knew he could have. He looked at Rebecca. "Your Nicklaus is very funny but not when he tries to be."

"You have no idea," Rebecca said as she laughed as well.

"Tolen!" Nick dropped to a knee and embraced him. "It is so great to see you again!"

"Nick, I am glad as well! The Father said you would be visiting."

"I wanted to see you, to tell you thank you." Nick released his hug and held him at arm's length. He smiled wide. "Thank you."

"You are most welcome." Tolen put his hand on his heart and gave a short bow. "Most welcome, indeed."

Nick looked over his shoulder at the others. They were walking toward them.

"They are not as excited to see me, ehh?" Tolen said. "I see Jeffrey has come back. The others I do not know."

"The one on the far right is my wife, Rebecca."

"A good name," Tolen said. "And I assume the one close to Jeffrey is his?"

"Yes. Lori is his wife. The others are from our ship…" He hesitated. "They are not all believers. Yet."

Tolen patted Nick's shoulder. "Yet is such a powerful word, my Brother."

"It really is." Nick stood. "So, I hear you are no longer mayor."

"I am not. The task now belongs to someone else."

"And the same with Paramus?"

Tolen nodded. "Yes, Paramus is no longer High Priest. But it is good; it allows us time to enjoy each other's company more."

"That is what I am going to do as well. Leave the work to the young." He gestured at the group as they got closer. "These and the others."

"Make sure you still provide council, Nick. That is an important job you should never stop doing."

"Man, I wish I could stay here longer." Nick said.

"You must at least stay for the feast tonight." Pakkard said.

"We definitely will." Nick replied.

"Tolen!" Jeffrey said as he came near. "Hello again."

"Jeffrey," Tolen extended his hand.

Jeffrey grasped his forearm as he had seen them do when he was last on the planet. "It is good to see you again." He turned to Lori. "This is my wife, Lori."

"Hello," Lori said she started to self-consciously scrunch down because she was much taller than the man.

Tolen laughed. "There is no need, Sister. As we have learned, the Father has different children on different worlds. But they are all His." He moved closer. "You are as light as our brothers to the North. There are red headed ones there too."

"They're dangerous, the ones with red hair, Tolen. In case you didn't know." Jeffrey said with a smile.

"Hah!" Tolen laughed. "Spirited is the word, I would use."

"I agree." Lori squinted at Jeffrey. "Spirited is the perfect word."

"Ho, ho!" Someone shouted from down the street. A crowd was starting to gather around Nick, Tolen, and the others.

Tolen looked. "Oh dear, our esteemed former High Priest approaches." He smirked at Lori. "This will be interesting; I am sure of it."

"What?"

"Paramus!" Nick shouted. He held is arms out wide.

"Do not encourage him too much," Tolen warned.

"These people are crazy." Tom said in English. "Are they always like this?"

"Full of joy and good natured?" Jeffrey responded. "Yeah, I would have to say they are."

"And why shouldn't they be?" Brian added.

"They're fun to watch." Violet said. "I wish I had taken some of the language lessons."

"So now they're people instead of aliens?" Nick said to Tom. "There's hope for you yet."

"It's just an expression."

Paramus hugged Nick. "Nick! It is good to see you again." He looked at Jeffrey. "And you, my young man are looking fine as well." He hugged Jeffrey as well. "You've been doing some reading, I take it?" He waggled a finger at him.

Jeffrey nodded. "Yes. Yes, we have."

"And your home?" Paramus said, getting serious. "Did you find any others?"

"No, we did not. There are about one-hundred fifty of us." Nick said. "But we are learning and growing." He gestured at Brian Sanderson. "Thanks to our own wise men."

"Are you their High Priest?" Paramus asked. He extended a hand.

Brian shook it as Paramus looked down at their clasped hands with delight. "Oh, I am sorry." Brian said as he realized his mistake.

Paramus waved a hand. "For what; greeting me?" He turned to look at his old friend. "Tolen, tell me your plan is not to entertain our brothers from far away out here in the center of the street?"

Pakkard laughed.

"I am sure I said not to encourage him," Tolen scolded the young man. He pointed down the street. "We will go and relax until the festival this evening. Come." Without waiting, he started down the street toward his house.

"Will you join us?" Paramus asked Pakkard.

"I surely will!" He started toward the leaving Tolen.

"And so, we go." Paramus extended an elbow to Nick.

Nick hooked his wrist through it since he was too tall to get his elbow that low and still walk. "It would be our pleasure."

Paramus started walking as well. "Our host leaves us in the street." He said loudly.

"Your host is wondering why you haven't started walking!" Tolen called back.

Lori laughed as she started walking as well - the others followed suit.

"So, my fire-headed Sister," Paramus looked up at Lori. "Have you been told of our fair-skinned brothers to the north?"

Lori laughed again. "Yes, Sir."

"Then you will be pleased to meet Tolen's wife." He waggled his eyebrows at her. "She is similarly… endowed."

"Two together at once?" Jeffrey said. "Are you sure that is a good idea, Paramus?"

"The Father protects those that need it." Paramus said.

"I do believe I have been insulted." Lori said in English. "By an alien, no less."

"Apparently, red hair is another one of those universal constants." Jeffrey observed.

"Like the elevator never already being on the floor you're on when you want it." Nick said.

"I'm going to like this place," Brian said.

The group moved down the street- people in shops as well as homes came out to watch them as they passed.

Nick and the others would offer a greeting and often a promise to meet with them at the festival that evening.

Much to Lori's chagrin -and Jeffrey's delight- her red hair was also a topic of many discussions. It seemed that the people to the North did not come south very often.

After a few minutes, the group arrived at Tolen's home.

"I welcome you as guests to my home," Tolen said with a short bow.

"Thank you." Nick said, unaware of the traditional response.

"We are honored to enter," Paramus said as he gestured at the door. "Nick, if you please."

Nick reached for the door latch and pulled it open. "Thank you." He said again as he started to enter the home. While the home was designed for the local inhabitants who averaged only five feet tall, the ceilings were high to aid in cooling, so Nick was almost able to stand upright in the large foyer. A large square basin full of water sat beside the front door. There were a dozen sandals and leather work shoes neatly arranged on the other side, where there was also a long wood bench with several folded towels on it. Nick immediately realized he was supposed to take off his shoes and wash his feet before entering. He tried backing out of the doorway but ran into Rebecca who was trying to enter behind him.

"Nick?" she said.

"Is there a problem, Nick?" Tolen said as he watched Rebecca step back.

Nick turned and smiled at him. "No. Not at all. It's just that." He chuckled. "It would be easier if we all removed our shoes out here or it might turn into a wrestling match in there."

"Hah!" Paramus laughed. He held his hand over his head, close to the height of Nick. "I understand why."

Tolen also laughed. "Well then. Shall we sit?"

Nick sat on the hard-packed dirt of the courtyard in front of the door. "Yes." He gestured to the others. "Take your shoes off out here. There's a place inside to rinse your feet," He explained in Sivulliik.

"What?" Violet asked. When she saw the others sit and start taking off their boots, she did so as well.

After only a minute, Nick and the others had their boots of and had tucked their socks into them. Nick wiggled his toes when he stood. "I'm really becoming a fan or being barefoot." He said.

"As long as one does not walk in the thistles," Paramus said.

"Ever wise is our former High Priest," Tolen said. He gestured at the door again. "I once again welcome you as guests to my home. We eat on the roof, Nick."

"We are honored to enter," Nick said as he winked at Paramus.

"Hah!" was Paramus' reply.

Again, Nick entered the home, stooped over. He dipped his feet into the basin, then dried them off with one of the towels. He put the towel back in place, hoping that was culturally appropriate, then went up the stairs.

As Nick's head appeared through the hatch in the roof, Parton, Tolen's youngest hopped out of his seat at the table. "They are here!" He said as he moved toward Nick.

Nick continued up the ladder gingerly, hoping it would hold his athletic two hundred fifty-two pounds or even worse- Brian Sanderson's weight which thanks to his age and belly, had to be closer to three hundred twenty. "Careful on this ladder." He called down in case its creaking wasn't enough warning.

"Why?" Jeffrey called from three people back.

"Because it was built to hold a four-foot-six, ninety pound Arcturian instead of a seven-foot-three, two-hundred fifty pound human."

"Two-fifty?" Brian said. "I can't even remember when I weighed that." He looked at Lori. "How about you?"

Lori narrowed her eyes at him. "I'm a slim two twenty-one. But I still might manage tossing you up there, Doc."

Brian laughed loudly. Then he looked up the ladder "Hmm." He said. "It may come to that."

"What is the trouble?" Paramus asked- he was between Brian and Lori.

"We were just discussing what the person who built this ladder was thinking." Brian said.

"Oh?"

"Yes. We were wondering if he was thinking of someone as large as me," he patted his ample belly, "climbing up it."

"Oh!" Paramus said with a chuckle. "Tolen?"

"Yes, friend?" Tolen called back. "We are starving back here so whatever you are doing to delay progress, please stop doing it until we are all on the roof."

"Nicely done." Paramus said. "But no; I am not the issue. Do you by chance have a spare ladder or preferably two about the house?"

"Smart," Brian said to him.

"Yes, there is one on the other side of the roof, and one to the children's bedroom."

Paramus winked at Brian. "We are in need of them both to ensure our… larger-than-us guests make it safely to the roof."

"Ah. Of course." Tolen said. With that, he went to gather the other ladders.

"You know, it's really not that high," Jeffrey said. "Want me to just boost you up?" He asked his wife.

"Once I'm out of the way," Nick said. He kept his feet at the outer edges of the rungs as he continued up the ladder. He looked up- Parton was standing beside the hatch. "Hello," he said with a smile as he continued up the ladder.

As Nick's head and shoulders cleared the roof, Parton took a step back. When his torso cleared, he took another. When Nick's hips finally cleared the roof and he stepped onto it, Parton stumbled back and fell onto his butt.

Nick laughed. "Are you okay?"

"You are a *giant*!" Parton exclaimed.

Nick laughed as he moved to the other side of the boy, clearing the area around the hatch. "I suppose I am." He took to one knee, looked down at the boy he still towered over then just sat cross-legged. "Is that better?"

Parton nodded. "Yes, Sir."

"My name is Nicklaus. But everyone calls me Nick." He extended his hand.

Parton looked at the massive hand- it was twice the size of his head. He reached out and grasped Nick's wrist.

Nick folded his fingers around the boy's arm above the elbow. "Thank you for your hospitality."

"Yes." The boy looked at Nick's hand.

Nick let him for a long moment then asked- "What's your name?"

"Oh! I'm Parton." The boy finally looked at Nick's face then smiled. "It is nice to meet you, Nick."

Jeffrey gave Lori a boost to the rooftop. She grasped the edge of the hatch with both hands and pulled herself up as Jeffrey pushed on her feet. She swiveled her arms around and pushed upward until her arms were fully extended below her. Without losing her momentum, she tilted to the side slightly and put a foot on the roof. From there she merely stood. "That worked. You going to try the good Doctor next?" She called down. She turned and looked at Nick and the boy. "Hello," she said.

"You are all giants!" Parton said. "Are you from the North as well?"

Lori ran her hands through her mass of red hair. "I am indeed." She moved her hands to her hips. "I'm Lori."

"This young man is Parton," Nick said. "Are you the youngest?"

Parton sighed. "I am."

Lori moved to them and sat cross-legged as well. "I know how you feel, Parton; I am the youngest in my family too. Always the first sent to bed, always last to be allowed to do anything exciting."

"Yes! Exactly!" Parton moved closer and sat beside her knee. "It is a hard life."

Lori laughed. "Well I'm going to sit beside you when we eat because we both understand each other." She gestured to the hatch. "My husband is the oldest in his family. Three younger brothers." She stuck out her tongue. "But he's still okay."

"So is my brother, Argus. He does take me to do things, but he said I am too young to go on a hunt."

"Well, hunts can be dangerous," Nick said. "And your father is one of the wisest people I know."

"Wow." Parton said. "More wise than Paramus?"

"Sure." Nick said without thinking.

Private Bitburger pulled himself onto the roof like Lori had. He was only an inch shorter than Lori and two shorter than Jeffrey, but even so, he still towered over the group sitting on the roof. "Hello." He said simply.

"Hello!" Parton said, obviously enjoying the new guests. He leaned toward Nick. "Argus was hoping you would all be orange or green when we heard you looked different than us. But this is good too."

Violet's head poked up out of the hatch. "A hand please?"

Bitburger moved to her quickly and took her hands in his. He pulled upward until she got a foot on the roof.

"Thanks." She said.

"I am going to check on my wife," Nick said. "Excuse me, Parton."

"Sure!"

Nick moved to the hatch. "Who will be tossing my dear wife up?" He called down.

Rebecca started up the ladder- there were now three of them stacked together. "No one is tossing me anywhere." She dusted her hands off when she got on the roof. "No one."

"Yes, dear." Nick said.

Paramus came up the ladder next. He was followed by Loren. She had a tray balanced on her head.

Paramus turned and retrieved the tray when it was waist high to him, moving it to the table.

By the time he got back, he took the tray off Pakkard's head.

Jeffrey came up next, holding a large tray over his head with one hand as if he were a waiter.

Tolen came up next- he had two very large jugs in his hands, walking up the ladder using only his feet. "Argus and Creta will be home later," he said, "so we shall eat without them."

"Where is Loren?" Paramus asked. "I was hoping…"

Loren's head poked up out of the hatch. "I am here, dear Paramus. Your hopes are fulfilled."

Paramus laughed. "Yes, they are indeed." He gestured at Lori. "I would like to introduce your long-lost kin, Lori."

Lori smirked. "Hello."

"You will have to forgive poor Paramus. He believes he is funny." Loren said as she stepped onto the roof. "We tend to just humor him." She ran her hands through her hair. It was almost as bright red as Lori's.

"What a coincidence." Lori laughed. "That's how my poor husband is."

"You two don't sit together." Jeffrey said.

"Everyone to the table, Parton," Tolen said. "We shall have a light meal before the festival tonight. It will start once it begins to get dark." He said to Nick.

Everyone moved to the table- the Humans sat gingerly on the benches, which to their surprise didn't even squeak or wobble.

"Dear friend Paramus, would you honor us with a prayer?" Tolen said.

"It is the greatest honor for me," he said seriously. He reached out and took the hands of the two seated beside him then closed his eyes and sang a long prayer. When he was done, he opened his eyes.

Both Argus and Creta were standing by the hatch. Their eyes were glued to the Humans.

"We told our friends we would eat with them another day," Argus said.

Creta just nodded as she stared.

Rebecca patted the empty spot beside her. "There's plenty of space." She said in Sivulliik.

Creta's eyes got even larger.

"Ahh, I remember the artist," Nick said. "Sit by me."

Neither child moved.

"Come join us for a light meal before the festival, children" Tolen said. "Don't stand there dumbfounded."

With that, the two joined the others at the table, the boy beside Nick, the girl with Rebecca.

As the food and drink was passed around, conversations sprang up: discussions about food, wooly creatures, art, and even the weather. Violet ate in silence, regretting she had not taken the time -which since it was through sleep-induction really wasn't any time- to learn the language.

Paramus caught her eye. He smiled at her.

Violet smiled back and nodded politely to him because that was all she could do.

Paramus gave her a wink then held a finger to his lips.

Violet did not understand what he was trying to say so she just nodded again and returned to eating. After a moment, she realized she could understand all the conversations at the table. She looked at Paramus again, eyes wide and wet with emotion.

Paramus once again held a finger to his lips. He then swiveled his eyes to the far right, toward the edge of town.

Violet followed his gaze. There on the rolling green hills beyond the town, a massive whirlwind pushed along the grasses. She looked back at Paramus.

Paramus patted Nick's arm as he glanced at Violet. "Nick, would you like to hear about the wonders and love of our Father shows us every day?"

Nick took another bite of the sweet purple fruit he had. "Absolutely, Paramus."

Violet casually got out of her seat and moved to the wall behind Paramus. She sat looking out at the countryside, letting her feet dangle over the edge as she listened to him talk. She dared not say anything, worried it would spoil the gift.

As the sun started to set, the group moved to the hatch and one by one, climbed down.

Violet hung back to hand down plates and trays, ensuring she would be the last one down.

As did Paramus.

When they were alone, Violet whispered in the only language she knew- English. "How is this possible?"

Paramus took a step back to appraise her better and answered in the only language he knew- "My dear sister, with God *all* things are possible."

Violet smiled at him, in total understanding.

Chapter 49

Nick and the others walked toward the center of town- it was nearly nightfall

"Tolen, we appreciate your hospitality," Nick began.

Tolen smiled at him. "But?"

Nick laughed. "Is there nothing you don't know already?"

Tolen waved a hand dismissively. "Of course, there is. What do you have on your mind, Nicklaus?"

Nick looked at the crowd of people gathered around the temple. There were two large pits with fires blazing. Each had its own massive animal turning on a spit above them. "You will never know how sorry I am to have to say this, but we won't be coming back."

"I expected as much."

Nick looked down at him. "Did the Father tell you?"

Tolen shrugged. "Not completely. I realized on my own that having you here could cause… issues with our town. Our planet."

"Don't learn to glaze until you can make a pot."

Tolen laughed. "Yes, that is the phrase." Tolen laughed. "So, let us enjoy each other's company this evening then we will part ways."

Nick sighed- sorry to be losing what was probably their best ally in the galaxy. "Okay." He looked at the others. "Hey all," he said in English. "Remember to keep your conversations low-key. We don't want to mess up their development." It caught his attention that Paramus was speaking to Violet and he was fairly certain she was the only who hadn't done any sleep induction sessions. When everyone nodded, he looked back at Tolen. "That meat smells wonderful."

"It has been cooking since early this morning." Tolen said. "Come, we have a table near the front for you." He gestured as he started walking to the front of the temple.

Nick walked slower letting the others pass him. When Violet and Paramus passed, he stepped in behind them and listened. To his surprise, they were indeed having a conversation. Him in Sivulliik and her in English.

"So, what are you two talking about?" Nick asked in Sivulliik.

"Just passing the time," Paramus said nonchalantly. "Everyday things."

"And you?" Nick continued to speak Sivulliik, "Miss Wilds?"

Violet looked back at him. "What?"

"I didn't know you hooked up for the sleep inductions," he said, again in Sivulliik.

Violet stared at him. "Huh?"

"Ahhh… The Father's ways are sometimes mysterious, Nick. It is better to just accept what one does not understand."

Nick looked at Paramus. "Okay then." He patted Violet's shoulder. "Carry on," he said in English.

The festival continued through the night until the skies started to develop a reddish tint.

Nick moved around the area, letting the others know about his intention leave. Spotting them among the locals was easy. Getting them to end their conversations proved more difficult.

It was nearly seven in the morning with the sun completely visible behind the far-off mountains before they all had made their way to the landing craft.

"I sure hate leaving," Brian said. "I'm half tempted to just stay here."

"That's not an option, Doc." Nick smiled. "Believe me; I've thought of it too. But we can't risk it."

"Agreed." Brian said. He turned to the two priests he had been speaking with for the better part of the evening. "It has truly been a pleasure." He gave a short bow, hand on his heart.

The priests reciprocated. "And ours."

"Everyone got everything?" Nick asked, still speaking Sivulliik.

Paramus stepped up to Nick. "I wish you a long and fruitful life, Nick. You and all your people."

"We won't let you down, Paramus," Nick said with a smile. He got down on one knee. "There is no way to express how thankful we… I am that we got to know you. I am just sad that we will never see you again."

"Hah!" Paramus pointed at Nick. "That is funny."

"What?" Nick said, confused.

"Well, I suppose it is understandable since you are just learning about the Father." Paramus said, taking a serious tone. "Nick, what you… all of you need to keep in mind is that the Father is the father of everything. Do you really believe that around this planet there is a limit where our heaven ends? And another heaven around the planet you are on? Each of us living inside the shell of an egg?"

"Well… yes." Nick hesitated. "No? I guess I never thought about it too much."

"Well there isn't. Nick, when we all go to be with the Father, we *all* go to be with the Father. You. Me. Everyone." He patted Nick's shoulder. "So, we will indeed see each other again, there in Heaven."

"In my Father's house are many rooms." Brian offered. "If it were not so, would I have told you I was going to prepare a place for you?"

"Very wise," Paramus said to him.

"Until then, brother," Nick said.

"Oh." Paramus waggled a finger. "I did not say we would not meet again until we were with the Father. I just said that we would all be with the father together one day. Those are different things entirely."

Nick chuckled. "I see. Well, until we meet again then."

Paramus leaned forward and hugged Nick. "Yes, always remember that the Father is good, all the time. And we are glad that you have all come to know His love. It does my heart well to know that you are all truly part of His flock again." He let go then looked around conspiratorially as Nick stood.

"What's wrong?" Nick looked around too.

"It is just…if you can pardon an old man's curiosity. Have you by chance, brought along an extra one of those exquisite black blades?"

Nick laughed out loud. "I thought you'd never ask." He reached into his calf pocket and pulled out a black knife in a brown nylon sheath. "Until next time." He held it out with both hands.

"Until next time," Paramus took the knife and slid it into one of his pockets. It stuck out almost half way. He put his hand on it to ensure it didn't fall out.

"Let's go, folks." Nick started up the ramp. They hadn't even bothered to close it when they had walked away the day before. "We're heading home."

Violet quickly moved beside Nick while he was still on the ramp. "Thanks for insisting I go down, Nick."

"Sure, sure." Nick replied. "Do you want to explain your new-found linguistic ability?"

Violet thought back to watching the whirlwind churn out on the plain with listening to Paramus talk. The locals would chase it and ride through it as it bucked and turned, completely ignoring the prevailing winds. It was several minutes before she realized they were all playing a game of tag. "No, I don't think so. Not right now anyway." She said as she entered the ship. "Let's go home, Nick."

"Right." Nick moved to the side as everyone filed past him. Once they were all inside, he turned and looked out at the crowd. "Goodbye," he said as he pressed the button raising the ramp. "For now." He added more quietly.

Chapter 50

The Glimmer eased into orbit. It had been exactly three and a half months since they had left Arcturus and thirteen since they had left Murphrid.

"All in the green. This thing is a sweet little ship," Jeffrey said. "We need to build a couple more of these things when we can." He flipped several switches, turning off unnecessary systems. "Everything's off but life support and thruster control. We can find a place to park it later on in the week."

"Confirmed," Lori said. "Powering up the landing craft now."

"Good." Nick said. "Let's get down there." He shook his head. "A whole year away. Man; those kids probably went and got married without us."

Rebecca laughed. "If they did, I'm sure Tommy got it recorded."

"Recorded?" Nick said, "A recorded ceremony is what I get?"

"You know," Jeffrey said, "if they got married a month or so after we left, you could be going down there to a grandkid. Or grandkids-sss." He added, emphasizing the 's'.

"Hey now!" Nick bounced to the door in the microgravity. Thanks to the ship's orbit, it was technically in a constant freefall. "Keep it up and I'll leave you up here."

Lori laughed as she also moved toward the hatch. "Will it be Grandpa Nick?"

Nick opened the hatch and stepped through. He looked back. "Oh, no; it's Grand Papa. We're fancy that way. Right Grand Mamma?"

"It is *not* Grand Mamma," Rebecca said.

"Gramps?" Violet tried. Since leaving Arcturus, she and Nick had gotten close, often having long discussions on the Bible as they read it together, as well as her discussions with Paramus. She and Robert had

also become close since he had accepted the fact that his parents were gone. "Grampy Nick?"

Robert laughed.

Lori snorted.

Nick looked at Violet. "You are not helping, young lady." He pushed hard off the bulkhead and floated through the entire dining area to the rear hatch that led to the landing craft.

"More like Grumpy Nick." Rebecca said.

"I'm just going to stay out of it," Tom said.

"Leaving Nick is more like it," he called over his shoulder. "So far, only Tom and Robert are allowed to come over!"

"He's in a hurry all of a sudden." Jeffery said. "Come on Doctor." He took Doctor Sanderson by the arm.

"Have I mentioned that I don't like zero-Gee?"

"Yeah, you have. Twice just today." Jeffrey said. "From now on, you can just hang out on the planet."

"That sounds good to me," Brian said as he allowed Jeffrey to maneuver him through the hatch and into the living area.

By the time they got there, Nick was already seated in the landing craft, in one of the rear seats. "Someone come fly this thing!"

"We're coming, Chief." Jeffrey said.

"I'll spot you," Tom said. He pushed off the wall and stopping himself when he got to the rear hatch. "Ready when you are, Doctor."

Jeffrey pushed Brian toward the hatch. "Just keep your hands out in front of you, Doc." He pushed off once the older man was safely far enough away.

"You coming Herman?" Violet asked Private Bitburger. The two of them had become very close during the journey. He was still looking at the view screens even though they were all turned off. She put her hand on his shoulder. "Herman?"

"Yeah." Herman sighed. "I guess I'm ready." He turned smiled at her. "I'm just… I don't know. Worried."

"Worried about what?"

"This." He covered her hand on his shoulder with his. "I know how those onboard romances go. Once you get to where you're going, everyone just goes their separate ways. And now that we're back down on the planet with everyone else…" His voice trailed off.

"There isn't anyone else I would want to be with, Herman." She pulled closer and kissed him. "No one."

He smiled at her. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Hey you two!" Nick shouted from the landing craft. "Quit smooching and get over here!"

Herman took Violet's hand in his. "Let's go before he demotes me."

"You're already a private; what can he demote you to?"

"That's true." Herman said.

"We're coming, Nick!" Violet called.

The pair floated through the ship to the landing craft and closed the hatch behind them. Once they were seated, Jeffrey detached from the Glimmer and angled the landing craft downward. "On our way."

The landing craft did a circuit around the settlement as it approached the landing area- there were three times as many houses as there were when they had left. There were also two other hangars in the maintenance area.

"Hey, look at that," Jeffrey said as he banked toward the landing area.

"With a landing pad on the roof, that's got to be a hospital." Tom said.

"Wow." Nick said, looking at the building that was nearly as big as the centrally located church. "Seems Gunny is still building with future expansion in mind."

"That must be a school then." Rebecca said, pointing to another large building situated on the opposite side of the town as the hospital.

"And those have to be machine shops by the maintenance hangars." Tom said. "Nice layout."

Jeffrey said. "Initiating landing sequence." He pressed several buttons and lowered the landing gear.

"Landing gear all green," Lori said.

"An honest to goodness town," Nick said. He reached out and took Rebecca's hand. "Man, that's great."

Jeffrey maneuvered the ship in front of one of the maintenance Quonsets. "Setting down."

The ship settled down on its landing gear gently.

"Another find landing, El… Hey, aren't you due for a promotion?"

"I think I am overdue." Jeffrey said. He looked at Lori. "You want to pin me?"

Lori smiled at him. "I would love to."

"We'll get that on the schedule then." Nick said. He gently kicked the back of Private Bitburger's seat. "Promotions all around."

"I might just get out if it's okay with you, Chief." Herman said. "Settle down, you know?"

"Oh yeah; I know."

"Pressure equalized. Let's get out of this can and into some fresh air." Jeffrey unhooked his harness.

"Amen to that." Nick said.

As the rear hatch opened, several people stepped back out of its way.

"Clear the hatch!" Nick called out. "You people forget all your safety rules?"

Once the hatch was down, Nick and Rebecca -being at the rear of the cramped landing craft, got off first with the others following.

Gunny reached out and shook Nick's hand. "Good to have you back, Chief!" He looked over his friend's shoulder. "I see you have extra passengers." He hugged Rebecca. "Hey, hey; glad you're back too."

Rebecca hugged him back. "Not everyone was willing to leave the other planet."

Gunny sighed as he let go of her. "And they never will. We got some intermittent transmissions from that Em-Squat for a few weeks. Even some weapons fire. Then nothing. It searched for folks for eight months, then it's batteries gave out."

"Dad!" Nikki ran up and hugged his father. "I'm glad you're back!"

"I'm glad too, son." Nick said, embracing his son. "Real glad." He looked over his shoulder. "Where's Private Moon? I mean Ling."

"She's with the kids." Nikki said matter-of-factly.

Nick let go of his son and held him at arm's length. "Kid-sss?" Now he emphasized the 's'.

Jeffrey slapped Nick's back. "Congrats, Grampa Nick."

"What?" Nikki said.

"Son, come on now." Nick said seriously. "Don't do this to me."

"Oh!" Nikki laughed. "Dad, relax; she's teaching kids at the school."

Nick hugged his son again. "You scared me to death."

"We're not going to have kids until we're married, Dad."

Nick let go of his son. "That's good to hear."

"We can put it on the schedule too," Jeffery said. "Right, Chief?"

Nikki smirked. "I'm not the one you should be worried about."

Nick didn't hear his son. "Right. Definitely absolutely right. I wouldn't miss it for the world." A thought occurred to Nick. "What's Ling teaching?"

"Biology."

"Makes sense." Nick nodded. "That's great, son. Just…" He was interrupted by his daughter leaping on him.

"Daddy!" Samantha exclaimed as she wrapped her arms and legs around him.

"Here we go." Nikki said.

"Sam." Nick said. "It's good to see you too." He peered over her shoulder. "Where's…"

"He's teaching at the school; basic electronics to the eighth graders." She dropped back to the ground then giggled. "All two of them."

Nick laughed. "Well, classes will get bigger here in a while, I think." He looked at Gunny. "From how many houses we saw from the air, Gunny is expecting a population boom."

"We've got five pregnancies going on right now." Gunny said.

"You've got a hospital to take care of them, I see." Jeffery said.

"We do indeed."

"So how are the houses… allocated?" Violet asked tentatively.

Gunny smiled at her. "Welcome back, Miss Wilds."

"It's good to be here." She answered. "Right?"

"Definitely. We've got a few vacant homes set up," Gunny said. "You can take your pick of several." He nodded at Tom Miner. "Same goes for you, Cap'."

"Thanks." Tom said. He figured he would discuss quitting the service later with Gunny.

"That's good to hear." Violet said.

Gunny looked down to see she was holding Herman's hand. "You can have your pick of a three or even four bedroom. And if you ever need more space, we can always inflate another room or two. We've got that down pretty good."

"First things first, Gunny." Herman said.

"Getting you promoted?" Gunny said with a smirk. "I think you're the last Private on the planet."

"Getting married."

"So that's two on the agenda…" Nick looked at Samantha. "Or three, right?"

"Two." Samantha corrected.

"Two?" Nick said. "Oh, I'm sorry. What happened? I thought…"

"Dad! Nothing happened; we've been married six months now."

"Man." Nick said, let down. "I was hoping for a ceremony before something happened."

Samantha said as she put her hand on her belly. "In seven months, you can be at the christening."

"So something did happen," Rebecca smirked.

"Gramps!" Violet said.

"How about Paw-Paw?" Lori said. Then she snorted.

Nick squinted his eyes at Lori. "What?"

Lori snorted again, unable to stop herself.

"And then the soon-to-be-promoted lieutenant took his wife by the arm and led her away." Jeffrey said as he did just that.

Gunny laughed.

Rebecca put her arm around Nick. "You okay?"

Nick wiped his eyes. "Okay? I'm great." He smiled at Samantha. "Just great." Now he pointed a finger at her. "So, no alcohol during the party for you."

Samantha rolled her eyes. "I know, Dad."

"Then let's get going." Nick looked over his shoulder. Doctor Sanderson was sitting on the edge of the ramp, head lowered. Robert Garvin was sitting next to him. "Doc? You okay?" He asked, worried.

Brian looked over at his friend. "Me? Of course. I was just saying a little prayer of thanks."

"Amen to that." Nick said

Brian put his arm around the young man. "Oh; we've decided Robert's going to move in with me for a while."

"Sounds like a good plan." Nick held out a hand. "Let's get you home, Doc."

"We've been watering your flowers." Gunny said. "They're looking great."

"Thank you."

"And the hives are coming along nicely." Nikki said.

"I knew it!" Brian pushed himself up. He gave a wink. "You know, local honey is a great homeopathic way to deal with allergies."

"Yes Sir," Nikki said. "And it was your flowers that brought them in."

"Bees?" Nick asked.

"Sort of. They have four wings and a sting will swell up the size of your fist but they aren't fatal." Nikki said. Now he winked at the doctor. "Guess who was clever enough to figure *that* out."

"Hah!" Brian clapped his hands. "Well, you know all the great scientists suffered for their work."

"No kidding." Nikki said. "Hey, I'll show you them, if you want. They're set up just outside of town, near the farms and orchards."

"You need to rest, Doc?" Nick asked. He looked at his son. "Take it easy with him."

Brian shook his head. "I'll rest later on. First, I want to enjoy a little real gravity." He offered a hand to Robert, pulling him to his feet. "Lead the way, Nikki."

"Take it easy, Nikki." Nick said again, worried.

"We'll take a four by four, Dad." Nikki pointed toward the hanger. There were three small vehicles the size of golf carts but with large balloon tires parked just inside in the shade. Two even had canopies on them.

"Perfect." Nick said. "I'll come over later to talk more, Nikki."

With a wave, Nikki led Doctor Sanderson and Robert toward the hangar.

"Don't forget the party, Nick," Gunny pointed out. "We've got a real celebration going on tonight."

"Yeah?"

"Oh yeah, Nick." Gunny said. "Not only are we celebrating your return and the new members to town, we've got a new harvest in." He smiled. "It's good news all around."

"Excellent." Nick said. "What time?"

"Eighteen hundred." He looked at his watch. "It's thirteen eleven local right now."

Nick looked at his watch and reset the time. "Thirteen eleven. Got it." He extended the crook of his arm. "Dear wife of mine, shall we retire to our home while we wait?"

"I had some fresh supplies dropped off right after you radioed in," Gunny said. "Everyone's houses, that is." He looked toward town, then to the new arrivals. "I didn't know where you folks were staying. But I can get some supplies there too."

"You're going to make a great mayor, Tommy." Nick said. "A great mayor."

Violet smiled at him. "You got my vote."

"Mine too," Tom said.

Gunny shook his head. "I'm through being in charge; you younger folk need to start pulling your weight." He pointed toward town. "Let me show you to a couple of vacant houses then I'll get someone to drop off some supplies."

Herman nodded. "That sounds great, Gunny." He looked at Violet. "How about a real home-cooked meal?"

Violet beamed. "Really? That would be great!" She took his hand again. "Lead the way, Gunny."

"Please just call me Tommy. It's what my friends call me." Gunny gave a nod to Nick and Rebecca. "See you folks tonight." He started toward town, Herman, Violet, and Tom with him.

Nick and Rebecca watched the four of them go.

"I'm going to like this place, I think." Nick said finally. He started walking toward their home. "Home?"

"Let's."

That evening, the festival ran until late in the night with food, music, and dancing.

The next morning, Nick pivoted out of bed and let his feet hang down- they just barely hovered above the floor. A feeling of déjà vu washed over him and he was transported back a little over three years, back to his apartment in Topeka. Thinking of his wife, he looked over his shoulder. With a smile he saw that Rebecca was sound asleep.

Nick eased himself out of the bed, and as he would do for decades to come, he quietly washed up and snuck out of the house to walk the streets in the pre-dawn hours while talking to God, before returning home to make breakfast for his wife.

End

About the Author



Robert continues to live in the Central Florida area, wandering around the local tourist attractions as well as beaches. When they're open.

Sometimes, at the request of his wife he will spend eight months growing a full beard that will only be used for one night's activities. Then he shaves it off the very next day. Robert is dedicated that way.