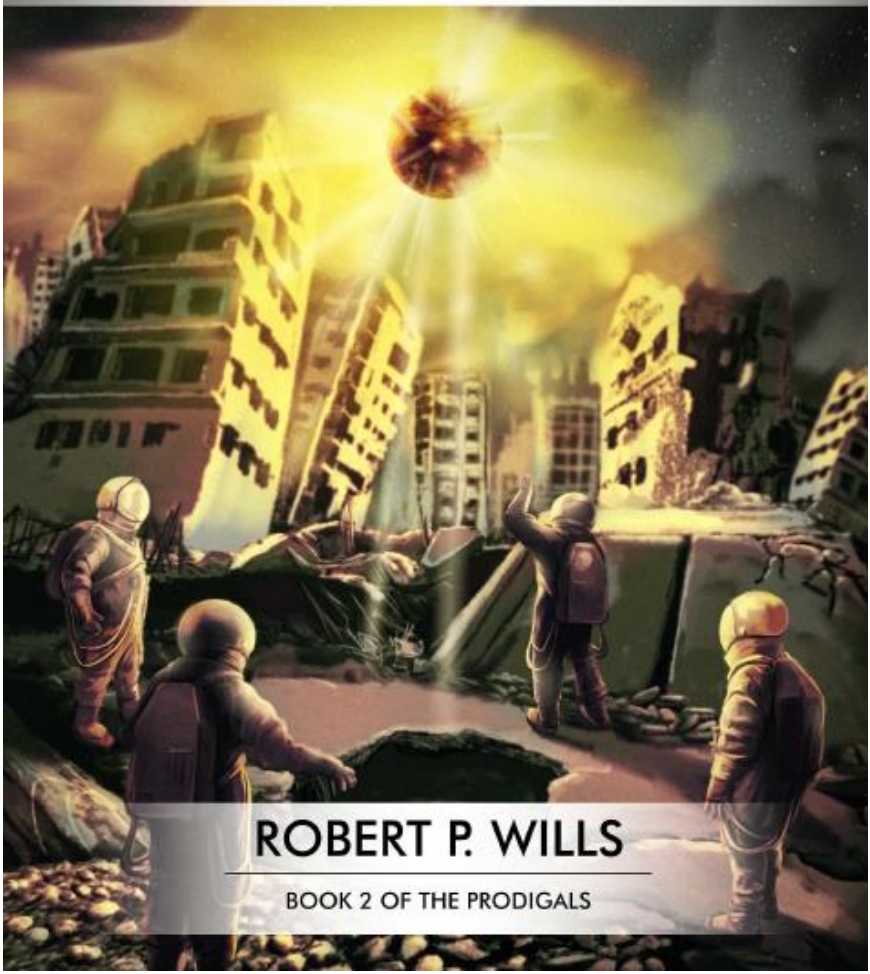
REMNANTS OF SOL

SPACE TEN RACES TO EARTH SEARCHING FOR SURVIVORS



ROBERT P. WILLS

BOOK 2 OF THE PRODIGALS

Remnants of Sol

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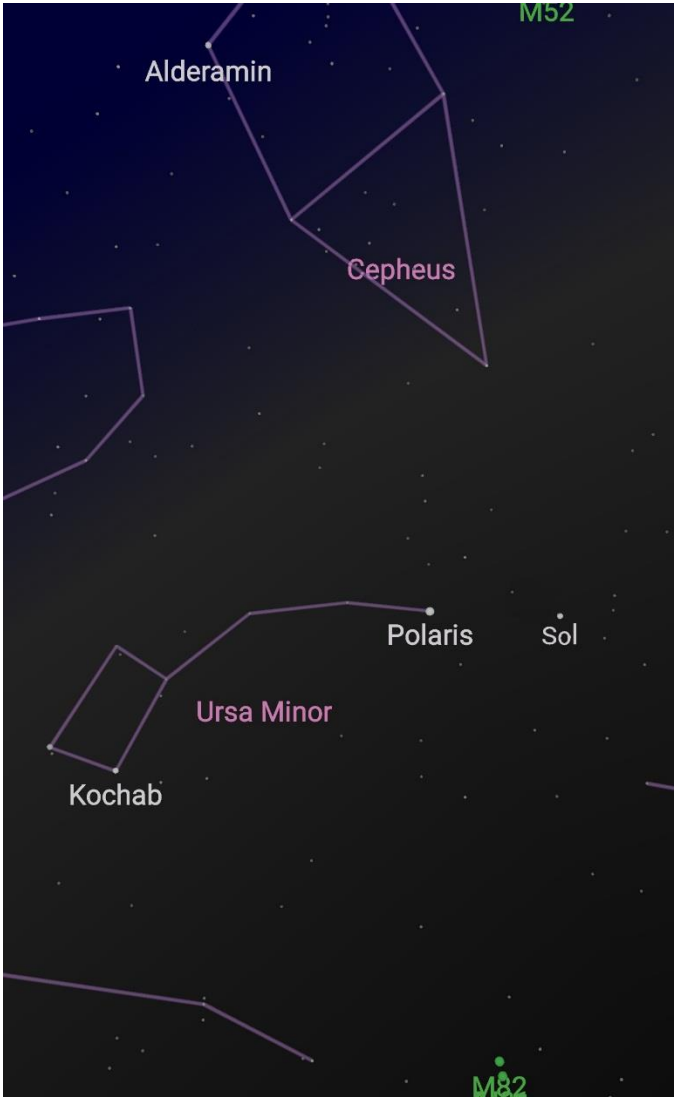

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. - Isaiah 43:2 (NIV)

1

Paramus moved beside his friend. "Tolen, what has happened?"

Tolen looked up. "I believe that the Father has washed their home world away like the great tides of winter." He gestured toward the departing group. "Because of their ways."

"What will they do now?" Paramus asked.

"I believe they are going to go back to their home to see it for themselves."

"But you told them what the Father said." Paramus looked at the departing Earthlings. "I do not understand these brothers of ours."

"Neither do I, Paramus. But I feel that is what they will do."

The pair looked at the night sky in silence for a long moment.

Tolen looked at Paramus. He narrowed his eyes. "I believe I have something I must do."

"Something? What sort of something?"

"I… need to speak to someone."

Paramus' eyes got large. "Oh, I do not believe that is a wise thing to do, old friend. One does not purposely walk into the lair of the Clindam. Especially so, once they have been riled up."

"I will be fine. When I return, I will tell you what happened."

"And if Loren asks where you have gone?"

"Tell her I said I would be careful."

"To be fair, I have not heard you say that, dear Tolen." Paramus raised an eyebrow. "We now know what these brothers are capable of. You taking care would not change their ways."

"I will be careful." Tolen said flatly. "There, I have said it. Satisfied?"

"Not even remotely," admitted Paramus.

"Well I am sure you will be when you relay the message to Loren."

"I do not think that is the case; I would feel better if I went with you."

"So you do not have to explain it to her?"

"Only partially." He looked towards the corner as well. "And really, that is the smaller part. These brothers trouble me."

"And how are you going to help?"

Now both of Paramus' eyebrows raised. "Tolen, it is written that wherever two are gathered in His name, He is there. Therefore, we two shall go together with the Father."

Tolen exhaled slowly. "If you insist, then who am I to argue with my oldest friend?" He smiled "And High Priest."

"No one; that is who." He looked toward the stables beside the temple. "I think we should ride to meet them. Otherwise they may be gone when we arrive on foot."

"Ride?"

"Do you propose to run after them to speak your mind? All sweaty and out of breath?"

"Perhaps not," Tolen said. "But not young mounts. Not like last time."

Paramus put his hand on Tolen's shoulder. "We will get two appropriate mounts from the temple so we can easily catch up with our... brothers."

Tolen nodded. "I know that it is hard to call them brothers after hearing what has happened but I feel that I must speak with them." He hesitated for a moment. "We should not part ways with words unspoken. Let us get the mounts."

Paramus nodded in return. "We shall." He put his arm around his friend and moved toward the temple stables.

Tolen looked around, hoping to see someone he recognized. With a sigh of relief, he spotted a neighbor. "Corden!" He called as he gestured at the man. "I am in need of help with an unpleasant task."

"Oh?" Corden said as he moved quickly to the pair. "What do you need, Tolen?"

"Can you get word to Loren that I have gone to speak with our brothers and will not be able to accompany her home from the festival? She is in the Temple with the women priests."

"Oh, that is a most unpleasant task indeed," Paramus said with a smile. "Be brave and quick about it, Corden. That is my advice to you."

"What?" Corden said.

"It is nothing," Tolen assured his neighbor. "Just let her know I will meet her at home later this evening." He gave the man a pat on his shoulder. "We must ride out to speak to them before they leave."

"They are leaving?" Corden said.

"The time escapes us," Paramus said. "Shall I get the mounts while you explain it?"

"Perhaps so," Tolen said.

With a nod, Paramus shuffled off toward the stables.

2

Paramus trotted his Odivers toward where he had left Tolen, another in tow. He looked left and right for his friend as he approached. When he saw him, he was kneeling, head bent in prayer. While still a good distance away, Paramus dismounted and led both animals to Tolen. When he was within a dozen paces, he stopped and waited.

After just a moment, Tolen raised his head. A smile came to his face when he saw Paramus. "I am ready, Paramus."

"Fine then; let us go before they leave." He moved closer to Tolen, pulling the two Odivers. "I have brought two of the fastest mounts that were available."

"Fast mounts you say? Do you not think we could catch them on some older, more stable mounts?"

Paramus laughed. "We can always walk them back once you have spoken what you must say." He jostled his friend. "Perhaps we will pass by an old nag that has been released back into the wilds to live out her last days that would work for the ride back."

"It is times like these that I am glad you are my friend; most wouldn't understand my concern with animals that gallop and would poke fun at me because of it."

"Well you can rest assured that you will never get anything but support from me." Paramus stifled a chuckle.

"Oh, I am resting assured. I assure you. I wonder; should I bring up the incident with the tiny spider and the High Priest that caused such a ruckus while camping?"

"No, I do not think that is appropriate," replied Paramus as he shuddered. "Not in the least."

Tolen laughed at his friend. "Then I suppose I won't… probably." He moved to the closer of the two mounts and grasped its long mane. "No saddles?"

"That would have taken considerably more time to saddle two mounts and no one was around to help me. We will just ride them bare."

"In that case if you would give me a leg up, we can be on our way." He bent his leg at the knee.

Paramus bent down and grasped his friend's shin. As he straightened, he lifted his friend so that he could swing his other leg over the mount. "Set?" He asked.

"Yes." Tolen looked around. "And how are you going to get on yours?"

Paramus scooted to the other side of the animal. "There is this wonderful invention," he said while out of view. "That will revolutionize mounting Odivers, or all mounts, in fact." He peeked over the top of it. "Before you ask, I cannot take credit for this invention."

"I would have thought something that changed everything had come from our esteemed High Priest," said Tolen. "It didn't?"

Paramus moved around the animal. He lifted a small stool over his head. "Alas, this was invented long before I was around."

Tolen laughed loudly.

Paramus placed the three-legged stool beside the animal, stepped onto it, and mounted it easily.

"But now you do not have it to remount later on."

Paramus looked at the now out of reach stool. "Well now. It seems some modifications are in order. A length of rope perhaps."

"My sentiments exactly," said Tolen. He gestured. "After you, user of wondrous inventions."

Paramus heeled his mount on the sides. "Aye- Ahh!" He said as it moved to a gallop within a matter of a few strides. Within a couple more, he leaned hard as the animal took the corner the Humans had gone around twenty minutes before.

"Oh, how I dislike galloping," said Tolen. He kicked his mount on the side, albeit not as hard as his friend did. He was rewarded with a moderately quick trot. When he turned the corner, he looked left and right for his

friend. Not seeing him, he went in the direction the visiting brothers had gone.

Paramus galloped down the middle of the street with yet another cheer. The feel of a full gallop always invigorated him. "How would you feel about flying? I am sure I could arrange...Tolen?" He looked over his shoulder. "Tolen?" His friend was nowhere in sight. "Easy," he said to his mount as he pulled back on the beast's mane. "Easy." The animal obliged by dropping to a walk.

After a few moments, Tolen trotted up to his friend. "Well, I see we are both heading in the right direction." He trotted past his friend. "You are being left behind, High Priest."

Paramus coaxed his mount gently to catch up with Tolen. "Tolen, we will need to ride faster if we are to catch them before they leave. It has already been a good bit of time since they left." He pointed. "They are on the plains and if they have means of moving quickly with those mechanical beasts they have brought, we will not find ourselves with them."

Tolen took a deep breath. "Fine then, Paramus. You lead the way and I will follow."

"Close behind?"

"Close behind."

"Then we ride, brave Tolen." He kicked his beast in the sides. "Aye- Ahh!" Paramus said as he leaned forward. Once again, his beast bolted to a gallop.

Tolen clenched his teeth and kicked his animal as well. "Off with you then!" He said as he grabbed two handfuls of mane. When the animal moved to a gallop, he concentrated on the back end of the High Priest's mount instead of any passing scenery- it made the speed they were going a little more bearable.

After twenty minutes of galloping, much to Tolen's relief, they caught up with the departing brothers as they milled around their large craft.

"Toward that large group," said Paramus as he reigned his animal to a walk. "We should be able to find the Chief there, I would imagine."

Tolen took several deep breaths to calm himself. "Lead the way and thank you Paramus for getting us here in time."

His friend nodded in return as he angled toward the group.

3

"Hey, Chief, we've got company," said Lieutenant Simpsons. He gestured behind the man. "Just what we need, right?"

Nick turned to see the leader of the town and their high priest riding toward them. "Yeah. If a smug word comes out of their mouths, this town'll be in the market for a new high priest *and* a mayor." He rested his hand on his rifle. "I'll go see what they want if you can help Gunny make sure we don't leave behind a bunch of miltech. The last thing we need is these people jumping ahead technologically and coming after us in a few years."

"Can-do, Chief. If he's good I'll just board up." The Lieutenant turned and walked toward the Gunnery Sergeant- who was shouting at a group of Marines about an impending inspection.

Nick approached the pair of aliens. "What do you want? Haven't you done enough?" He asked in Sivulliik.

"We have done nothing to you, Chief," said Paramus.

When Tolen put his hand on Paramus' shoulder, he nodded and gestured for his friend to lead the conversation.

"Done nothing?" Nick put his hands on his hips. "*Done nothing*? I have a lot to do, so what do you want?"

"Just a moment of your time, Chief."

"Go." He snapped.

"Go where?" Tolen looked around.

Nick shook his head. "No, that is just an expression that I guess does not translate." His tone softened. "What is it you need to say, Tolen?"

"I do not want us to part in this manner." Tolen said. "I do not know what the Father gave me to give you..."

"He gave it? Personally?" Nick interrupted.

"No, not personally. No one looks upon the face of the Father, of course." Paramus said. "Not while they are on Sivulliik. Once you join the Father, then that is different."

Tolen put his hand on his friend's. "It appeared to us in the temple and we were told to retrieve it."

Nick looked up at the sky again.

"And then we were told to bring it to you." Tolen finished.

"And you can't read it?"

"The symbols are foreign to us," said Paramus. He looked at his friend who nodded at him so he continued: "I understand that it is writing because of the patterns I see, but it is not how we write at all. They look like the scribbles of a child," he added with a smirk.

Tolen leaned back on his mount. "In any case, Chief..."

"My name is Nick," said Nick. "Nick Hauser. It sounds strange for someone who is not in the..." He hesitated because he did not know the Arcturian word for military. "... work that I am in, to call me Chief."

Tolen looked at his friend for guidance. Paramus only shrugged. "We do not understand; a Chief is a Chief no matter what their trade is."

Nick exhaled. "What is was that you wanted, Tolen?"

"I am sorry, Nick, to delay you." Tolen put his right hand on his heart and gave a slight bow. "It is just that you are brothers of ours and I... we can see that you are troubled. And we would like to help you if it is within our abilities."

Nick put his hand on the satchel. "Well, Tolen, I appreciate the offer but I am not sure what you can do." He gestured at the night sky. "Our whole world has disappeared and yet there is no possible way for that to have happened."

"Because of how light travels." Tolen offered.

"Yes. It is impossible for it..."

"Hah!" Paramus exclaimed.

Both men looked at him.

"Hah!" Paramus said again. He clapped his hands once then pointed at Nick. "I just realized something. I believe I now understand the problem, Nick." When Tolen looked at him, he waved him off.

"And what would that be?" Nick snapped.

"What I believe the problem is, is that you do not believe in the Father or His abilities to do the impossible."

Nick stared at the man for a long moment. "You are correct, High Priest. I do not believe."

Paramus smirked. "Well, there is something you need to understand that you apparently do not."

Tolen raised an eyebrow at his friend- he knew the tone he was using and hoped the brother from afar would appreciate the High Priest's humor mixed with council.

"Just because *you* do not believe in the Father, does not mean that the *Father* does not believe in you." Paramus laughed. "It is silly to even think so." He pointed a finger at Nick. "Birds that fly have no belief or faith in your ability to hunt them. They have no knowledge of your abilities at all, yet you are able to hunt them, correct?"

"I suppose so," said Nick. "But I don't..."

"Nick, your lack of faith in Him has absolutely nothing..." He leaned forward. "Nothing to do with *His* faith in *you*. Or love."

Nick was taken aback. He held the satchel up. "So what am I supposed to do?"

"Read the words on those pages." Paramus said, suddenly serious. "Truly *read* them and learn from them. And we," he continued as he gestured at Tolen and himself, "will help you in the best way possible."

"And what is that?" Nick let the satchel fall to his hip.

"We will pray for your people. Both those with you here and back on your home world," Tolen said, picking up where his friend left off. "For mercy from the Father. And for you we will pray specifically for understanding and patience."

"Yeah, well, those are two things I already have a lot of."

"From what I have seen, I do not believe that is the case," Tolen said matter-of-factly. "Paramus?"

"I have not seen that either," admitted Paramus. "Perhaps you are mistaking the words in your tongue for something else in our tongue?"

"Nice." Nick started to turn. "Well, I have things to do before we leave."

"Nick, I want you to remember one thing," Paramus called after him.

Nick stopped and looked over his shoulder. "Just one thing?"

"Anything can be accomplished with prayer."

"Even saving a world that is already gone?"

A smile spread across Paramus' face. "Of course! The Father holds entire *worlds* in the palm of His hand." He gestured at the night sky. "All that you can see in the night sky, He has made. All of it. Your world is no different." He pointed at Nick's ship. "Go, and while you travel to your world, read the words given to you, Chief Nick Hauser. And apply them to yourself and your people."

"And of course, we will pray for you," added Tolen with a nod.

"Yes; for understanding and especially a speedy journey," Paramus said.

Nick shook his head and he started to walk again. "Yeah, prayer; that's the key to this whole thing."

4

As Nick walked back towards transport, he noticed several soldiers off by themselves. One raised his rifle to his shoulder and tracked something in the distance.

Nick flipped down his visor and blinked several times at the icon that increased magnification. He looked in the direction the soldier was pointing his weapon. Almost five miles away, another group of aliens was walking along the grasslands, apparently oblivious to the Humans nearby. Nick tapped his comms link furiously.

"Chief?"

"All call, now!" He shouted to whoever was manning the communications station. He picked up a run toward the four soldiers. "All call!"

"On, Chief! You're on!" The communications tech said quickly. He was not sure what the emergency was, but to activate every communication link meant that something serious was happening. Or was going to happen.

"Stand down!" Nick shouted as he ran. "Cease all fire on all targets." The soldier with the rifle dipped the barrel slightly but did not remove it from his shoulder. "The locals are not to be engaged! No wildlife of any kind on the planet is to be engaged." He was within twenty yards of the group of soldiers when one turned to look at Nick running in their direction. He tapped the one who was still aiming on the shoulder then gestured toward Nick. "Until further notice all weapons will be status Green. Green!"

The soldier lowered his rifle and they all watched as Nick ran to them.

"What the hell?" Nick said when he reached them.

"Chief," said the one that had tapped his buddy. "We were under the impression that we were clearing this planet for immediate habitation."

"Right, Chief," said the other as he lowered his rifle. "When did that change?"

"Half an hour ago, Devil Dogs." Nick replied. He took a moment to catch his breath from his sprint. "Nothing gets shot at. Don't even step on any bugs if you can help it."

"But… how are we going to colonize this place?" Asked a third soldier. "If we're not going to get rid of the local populace, Sir?" He scrunched up his face. "Not cohabitation?"

"We're not cohabitating or colonizing or anything; we're departing. And we're not going to…"

Gunnery Sergeant McCain skidded to a halt beside Nick. "Sorry, Chief; I should'a put out an all call when I heard the news." He glanced at the young man with his rifle unslung. "Guess we've got some proactive grunts here."

"Gunny, we didn't know," the young man said. He dropped the barrel of the rifle alongside his leg. "We were just going to take some pot shots until the OP got going is all. Get ahead of the game." The young man gave a large smile. "Proactive is better than reactive every day of the week."

Nick knew him and the saying from the Jiu Jitsu training he ran- Corporal Jaszczak. He was in fact, a nationally ranked fighter in several martial arts who ran the combatives program on the ship. In training sessions, he was always aloof and cracking smiles- even when delivering an ear-ringing jab. At competitions when he invariably beat an opponent, he never failed to give them a smile while he helped them up.

"Well, Corporal Jaszczak, now the operation is to return to the ship in as peaceful a manner as possible," Nick said. He smiled. "You're good to go, troop." He looked at his senior noncommissioned officer. "Gunny, I'm heading to the drop ship, want to walk with?"

Gunnery Sergeant McCain nodded. "Sure thing, Chief." He looked at the Marines. "See you all on board."

"Roger that, Gunny," said Corporal Jaszczak. He lifted the rifle up across his stomach and removed the magazine. "Going green as ordered." He then pulled back the bolt on the rifle, pulling the tiny round that was in the chamber out. As it flipped in the air, he deftly caught it with the hand holding the magazine. "I'll stow this round then we're right behind you."

"Sounds like a plan." Nick said. As he turned, three of the soldiers rendered a salute. Jaszczak had his rifle in one hand and the magazine and loose bullet in the other. He smiled wide. "Get you next time, Chief?"

"Sure thing, Sensei." Nick winked at the Gunny as he walked off, pleased he had thrown some fuel onto Gunny's angry persona. Truth be told, Gunnery Sergeant McCain was pleasant and lighthearted when he was not pretending to be gruff with his Marines. It was his love for his troops that drove him to ensure they did not slack off on their duties and did anything that got them injured or killed. The letters that he wrote to family when he lost a soldier were a grueling task that made him weep as he wrote. Of course, the letters also made him want to kill whoever or whatever had taken the life of one of his troops. He often accomplished this task with overwhelming firepower and once in Buenos Aires, with a tactical nuclear missile when a squad of his had been betrayed and killed.

Gunnery Sergeant McCain hesitated behind Nick. "*Get you next time*?" He glowered at the young man. "That's what the Corps teaches now, *Devil Dog*?"

The young man flashed a toothy grin. He was as tall as Gunny but outweighed him by almost twenty pounds of lean muscle. "That's what they taught me at Parris, Gunny." He flexed his arms as he slung his rifle, "I'm sure of it."

"Really?" Gunny crossed his arms. "Enlighten me on this new training they didn't give almost forty years ago when I was a BOOT. Or when I ran the place twenty-five years later."

The young man snapped the round back into the magazine and gave a curt not. "Make a decision and stick with it."

Another Marine nodded. "That's true, Gunny. I got the same training; good or bad- make a decision and stick with it. Indecision will get you killed in combat."

"And what about the rest of that block of instruction?" Gunny asked. "And adjust as required, is I believe, the second part."

"Well, if you make it that far, I suppose so. Applies to Jiu Jitsu as well. And Brazilian street fighting." The Corporal flashed his smile again. "And picking up girls now that I think about it."

"You're not going to make it that far, troop." Gunny pointed at him. "That flashy smile and your Jiu muscles on top of Jitsu muscles might work on the ladies but I'm not impressed."

The Corporal's smile faltered. "But Gunny, what was I supposed to do? Drop my rifle? In front of my Gunny *and* Chief?"

Gunny smirked as he gestured at the young man's hands. "Learn your left from right and snap the magazine in your *right* hand back on your harness would have been a better plan. Or rendered arms with your rifle even." With a headshake, Gunny went to catch up with Chief, confident the young man's compatriots' teasing would be more effective than any punishment he could devise. In fact, the laughter that he heard confirmed it. "Sorry about that, Chief." Gunny said when he caught up with Nick. "Some of these young kids are…you know."

"Young?" Nick offered. "We've got a lot of that going around." He sighed. "But I suppose if we're the last of the Human race, having young men and women to start over is a good way to begin."

"Well I'm hoping this is all some sort of misunderstanding and once we get close, we'll see that Sol is right where it's supposed to be; pushing heat and light at Earth. And all the colonies as well." He frowned. "Hell, Chief; there weren't a lot of us left to begin with. What maybe two, two and a half million counting all the colonies?"

"Maybe two and a half," agreed Nick. He looked at the night sky. "We've got more than a misunderstanding going on, Gunny. I really think this is it for us."

The two stopped at the front of the transport, the huge bay door was swung up creating a covered area. "What are you saying, Chief; you giving up?"

"No, that's not it." Nick rubbed his face with both hands. "It's just that…" He looked at the large ship then at Gunny. "It's just that I've gone from being in charge of this little mission with just over a hundred troops and support personnel... You know I've had entire *brigades* with a thousand troops and support and ships for operations. Now I've got…"

"Barely over a company," observed Gunny.

"Right, a little company for a minor mission that wasn't even supposed to need a hundred troops but they rounded up anyway. It was a one-way 'ease out of your career and retire' mission and all of a sudden I'm

in charge of the entirety of the Human race." He gestured with both hands at the ship. "All in this one ship. That's a lot of…"

Gunny smirked. "Want us to start calling you King Hauser?"

"It's not funny, Gunny," Nick said. "I'm being serious here. What the hell are we… am I supposed to do?"

"Do what you always do, Chief; finish the mission, bring home as many of your troops and ships as you can. Take care of your family."

"Ships, huh?"

"Well, there are two drop ships, four Corvettes, one missile cruiser, and what- six or seven Pee Tees Effs?" Gunny smiled. "And Space Ten, so that's fourteen, so that makes ship-ss. Hell; that's practically a fleet. How about we call you Commodore?"

"I'm serious Tommy."

"Yeah, I know you are, Nick. And if there's anyone that I think can get us out of this mess, it's you." He smiled again. "Of course, you also have the best Head Shed there is to offer."

"Really?"

"Sure. In fact, I'm pretty sure your Senior Noncommissioned Officer is the best there is anywhere. Oh, and don't forget you've got your kids with you, so it's a good thing you brought them along."

"Theresa's dead." Nick said flatly.

"You don't know that."

The pair looked up but only saw the large bulkhead above them.

"I know it, Gunny."

"Well... you have Doctor Hawking."

Nick sighed. "Yeah." He thought about the times he had spent with Rebecca Hawking. And the other women as well. An unusual pang of guilt ran through him. "I suppose."

The two were silent as they watched troops file onto the drop ship.

"Well, get aboard, Chief. I'll make sure we don't leave any stragglers and then see you in a bit."

With a nod, Nick got on the transport. Lieutenant Simpsons was already seated so he moved to the jump seat beside him.

"Chief." Said the Lieutenant. "Everything good?"

"As good as its going to get I suppose."

"Well, at least there's a baseline to wrap yourself around."

"Yeah, exactly."

"So what're we going to call the return Op?"

"What?"

"Well, Operation Arcturus got us here." He gestured out the hatch. "And now we're leaving so we need a new name, right?" He hesitated for a moment. "Earth Two?"

"No." Nick shook his head. "Operations need to name themselves. I hate those computer picked names. That's how you end up with Operation Proposed Endeavor or Operation Plucked Chicken."

"I don't think that second one is a real thing."

"It could be." Nick said. "So we're just returning home, we don't need a name for the mission." He held up a finger. "And when we get to a new planet, it won't be Earth Two, or New Kansas, or New New York, or whatever other absurd name gets bandied around the crew."

"I kind of like New New York, now that you mention it."

"I didn't even like the first New York. Dirty, full of crime, high taxes."

"New Des Moines?"

"Stop it, El Tee. Let the Op name itself. You'll see; it'll just happen."

"So what are we going to do about this?" Jeffrey gestured outside again. "I mean…we need a plan."

Nick considered that for a moment. "Yeah; we need to get some big brain stems wrapped around this." Nick tapped the pin on his lapel. "Comms," he said.

"Comms here," replied a female voice.

"Who's on my principles?" Nick asked. To aid with communications, section heads and other leaders would often set up a designated group they could contact all at once. As the mission had proceeded, Nick had removed some people and added others as the needs of the mission changed.

There was a pause as the female brought up the list. "Lieutenant Simpsons, Gunny, Chief Bagley, Doctor Popovich, Doctor Sanderson, Sergeant Mello, Doctor Valencia and Doctor Hawking, Master Sergeant Tompkins."

"Well patch in the principles plus the Master Sergeant Carnes, and Staff Sergeant Campagna."

The female opened the channel to the appropriate individuals as well as two of her own compatriots. "Go, Chief."

"Attention all. I would like to have a staff meeting to discuss current events and future plans. Plus, I want to get ahead of the rumor mill. Please come to the head table at twenty-four hundred hours or send a representative. Brian, I'd like to meet you early to set up a read-ahead packet."

"I can meet you as soon as you dock, Chief," Brian piped in. "I was listening in on several audio feeds and I really want a look at that satchel."

"Docking plus thirty in my quarters," replied Nick. "If no one has anything, see you all there. Twenty-four hundred, so you all have almost five hours." Nick paused and when no one said anything, he tapped his lapel again to close the channel. "El Tee, what the hell is going on?" He rubbed his eyes. "What is going on here?" He looked out at the landscape. "This was the perfect planet. I mean we were set up nice here. I was going to retire and fish my days away."

The lieutenant was silent for a moment. "I have this uncle…"

Nick kept looking at the grassy hills. "Just look at all that grass out there. You ever lie down on grass before? It's a hell of a thing to do. You have an uncle. How does that help?"

"He's…" the man hesitated. "He held services"

"Services? Like with plants? He works in horticulture?"

"No, *services*, services. Religious services."

Nick stared at him. "How'd you get into the military, much less flight school with a subversive as a relative?"

"He's not a subversive, Chief," Simpsons said tersely.

"He's a pastor," Nick said flatly. "That's a subversive and a one-way ticket to lock-down"

It began when the Muslims had declared a Caliphate. Emboldened by advances into Central and Southern Africa, India and China as well as North and South America, the Muslim community declared themselves a global caliphate in 2094. The global caliphate, that also happened to be a nuclear power, immediately declared war on the non-Muslim world. With several tactical nuclear first-strikes, a dozen vehicular fission bombs, and all-out urban warfare that spread from major metropolitan areas to the remotest parts of the planet.

In the early part of the 22nd century, the ultimate defeat of the Caliphate led world leaders to ban Islam. Emboldened, the world leaders banned other religions as well. The Vatican being the last holdout when in 2145 it was dissolved and incorporated into the peninsula-spanning, mega-metropolis that was Rome. The leveling of Saint Peter's square was seen as the beginning of a new enlightened age with no religions to cause wars. While the move did reduce the number of openly religious people, it did not wipe them out- churches and other places of worship moved into hiding, often masquerading as social clubs or businesses. When one was found out, the facilities were destroyed and the members were imprisoned as an example to others.

The move was touted as the end of conflict on Earth. And it was- for almost two years until landlocked Paraguay attacked Brazil over its damming of the Paraná River. This began what was called the Six-Day Plata Basin Water War. Before the State and District of Colombia could step in

to ensure the peace between the two neighbor-states, Paraguay was dealt a blow as devastating as their previous war with Brazil in the mid-19th Century. Who, by this time had its own arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons in its National Guard inventory.

"Not all of them were subversives."

Nick looked at Simpsons. "What kind of pastor?"

"He was actually a rabbi," Simpsons said testily. "It's not the same thing at all."

Nick turned in his seat to look at Simpsons directly. The last of the soldiers had boarded and the engines were whining to life so it was becoming difficult to hear. "A rabbi?" He shouted over the din.

Several nearby soldiers turned to look at the pair.

"Keep it down, Chief," Simpsons said.

Nick leaned over to the man's ear. "Did you go to his services?"

Simpsons considered the question. Answering 'yes' made him a criminal and open to detention. A 'no' seemed like a betrayal of his uncle.

Nick put his hand on the Lieutenant's shoulder. "Listen Jeffrey," he said seriously, "In case you haven't been keeping up with current events, we're in retreat-mode here. I need all the advice and viewpoints I can get. I'm flying blind right now." He panned his hand across the hold. "And I've got a lot of folks looking to me to guide them."

"I did," Simpsons finally said. He felt as if a weight lifted off his chest. "I have, Chief."

Nick sighed. "Well, when we get docked, you are going to meet with Brian Sanderson and I." He patted the satchel. "We need to get ahead of… whatever is going on."

Lieutenant Simpsons nodded at his superior. "Whatever I can do to help, Chief."

The ship lifted off, pressing everyone in their seats. Like the others, Nick and Simpsons put their heads back into their headrests.

Unlike anyone else on the ship, when Simpsons closed his eyes, he prayed for guidance like he had done at his uncle's services.

5

The jump ship docked smoothly with Space Ten. Nick opened his eyes and nudged his lieutenant. "Up and at 'em Ground Zero; nap time is over."

Simpsons opened his eyes then rubbed them.

"Good nap?"

Simpsons smiled at Chief Hauser. "Yeah, that was some good quiet time."

"Quiet?" Nick stood. "With half the ship snoring and the engines roaring?"

Simpson stretched as he stood as well. "Didn't notice."

Nick eyed him. "Don't go getting all fanatical on me El Tee. I need my principles with clear heads."

"You always get that from me." Simpson pointed at the hatch. "I'm going to hit the head then meet you at your quarters."

"I told Brian docking plus thirty so you've got some time." Nick slung the satchel over his shoulder. "Meet you there." He strode to the opening hatch, Simpsons right behind.

When Nick turned down the corridor toward his quarters, Simpsons waited in front of a public toilet pretending it was occupied until Nick was out of sight. Then he hurried to his quarters.

Lieutenant Simpsons entered his quarters then made sure the door was locked behind him. Reflexively he looked to the communication panel on the far wall- it was dark.

Moving to his bed, he flipped it up revealing the handy storage space beneath in. It was filled with two suitcases and several boxes. He removed a battered box- a birthday present from his father. In it, his

uncle had put a snow globe of the Saint Louis Arch. It was a gag gift from his always joking uncle- the 'snow' was tinted ash-grey and the plaque had been changed with a crooked plaque covering "city" with "fallout" so it now read: "See the fallout from 630 Feet." Simpsons turned the globe over and opened the recessed panel that held the battery to light it up. It was hard to see but a microchip was glued alongside the battery housing. It held thousands of songs, movies, family photos and various books. Only one in particular interested him at the moment. He carried the globe to his desk and picked up his tablet. He held the snow globe up to the scanner on the back of the tablet until a digital readout of the chip's contents scrolled across the screen.

"Uncle Ephraim," he said. The scrolling sped up to a blur then stopped with the appropriate folder centered on the left. Simpsons tapped the folder so the contents would display. After tapping through several innocuous folders and having his fingerprint read twice, he found the file he wanted. "In Case of Emergency" was its title. With a swipe, he transferred it to his device. "It's definitely an emergency, Uncle Ephraim. One you'd appreciate," he said aloud. Thinking of his uncle, he smiled. His uncle was always upbeat and never passed up a chance to bring a laugh to those around him. Even when he was being led away in shackles, he joked with the guards who seemed uncomfortable taking the amicable, energetic man to the spaceport for transfer to the asteroid penitentiary of Vesta.

It was an ironic twist of fate that the massive asteroid which was named after the virgin goddess from Roman mythology for home and hearth would become one of the most inhospitable and cruel penal colonies in the solar system. Thanks to minimal shielding, monthly lifespans for prisoners sent there tended to be counted on one hand. Uncle Ephraim had managed to live all of eight months- a veritable ancient. With a sigh, Simpsons shook the snow globe then put it on his desk to allow the 'ash' to swirl about the dimly lit arch. "I don't know what I am doing Uncle Ephraim. Not at all." He choked back tears as he watched the ash settle. After five minutes, the globe was clear again. Rubbing his eyes, he left his quarters with his data pad held firmly in both hands, as if passersby could see what was stored on it.

6

Nick kept his head down as he half walked- half floated to his quarters, sorely missing the vertical orientation the ship had while out in space. In its low geosynchronous orbit, the microgravity it experienced allowed the crew to bound along the normally vertical corridor. And thanks to the news of the aborted mission, the entire ship was bustling. And full of questions for their Chief as he passed by.

After the fourth delay, he had tapped his communication tab.

"Chief?" The same female had said.

"Patch me ship wide." Nick answered.

"You're hot in ten." The comms Tech said, giving Nick time to compose himself. The only thing worse than a ship-wide system crackling to life then offering only dead air was a stammering officer or other leader.

"Thanks. Give me the three, two, one." Nick went over what he wanted to say quickly. As he went through it a second time, the female brought him out of his rehearsal with: "Three, two, one. You're hot."

"This is Chief Hauser. I know rumors are running wild about now. I want everyone to stick to their tasks and prep for de-orbit." He took a breath- he had decided not to mention the return flight to Earth until after the meeting. "I'm pulling heads of departments in as well as other leaders to discuss… recent events. Our meeting is at twenty-four hundred. Rest assured that by midnight thirty hours, you will be updated by your respective section head. Keep up the solid work and prep for leaving the system. Chief out."

It was more than he had planned to say, but he was painfully aware that the rumors started while on the jump ship were growing more elaborate with each passing minute. A thought occurred to him- with extra participants, the head table in the mess hall was now woefully inadequate. "Comms," he said as he started bounding toward his cabin again.

"Chief?"

"I've got an alibi; patch in principles and others as before."

"You're hot," said the female. Once again, she added four other individuals to the channel.

Nick smiled. When a male comms tech said that to him, it never struck him as amusing. "Bring section heads as you see fit. We're meeting in the Astrophysics Lab so there's room for everyone. Nick out." He pushed off the ceiling as he arced back toward the deck, and his cabin- and what he hoped would be the beginning of understanding his situation. To help him get there without any further interruptions, he lowered his head and bounded as fast as he could in the microgravity.

When he reached his door and opened it, both Nick junior and Samantha forced their way in before he could close it.

"What now?" Nick said. He looked at the satchel- he now had a mere ten minutes before his meeting with Jeffrey and Brian. "Listen, I'm really busy here, kids."

"Did the aliens really kick all those soldiers off the planet?" Samantha asked as he moved to a chair.

"Yeah; how'd they do that?" Nick junior said as he too sat. "I heard it was some kind of ancient tech."

"Nikki, Sam, I've got a lot going on right now and a meeting in less than ten minutes, then a full-blown staff meeting just around the corner."

"So what's the next move? Are you going to send down the Em-Squats to just wipe them out?" Nikki asked, ignoring his father. "I've talked to some Marines that were gearing up to go down there. That's what they said."

"We're leaving is what I heard," said Samantha.

"Those guys are loaded up and ready to go take care of business, not go on another long ride through space."

"Who's loaded up?" Nick asked.

Nikki shrugged. "I don't know. Some Marines. They were at a table eating. Eight or nine of them. They seemed pretty serious."

Nick tapped his collar.

"Chief?" Said a Male.

"Sergeant Mellow?"

"Roger, Chief," answered Sergeant Mellow. "Just swapped headsets."

"I need all landing craft locked down. Let Gunnery Sergeant McCain know that we have Marines planning an unauthorized operation to engage the locals."

"That's not the plan?"

"No! No one is to go planet side. Where have you heard otherwise?"

"Just scuttlebutt, Chief. I'll stop it when I hear it now. And I'll pass the word."

"Thanks. Stay on top of that, Sergeant." He paused for a moment to consider what to say next. He decided to start his own rumor: "I'd hate to have anyone stranded planet-side for good. They need us back home A-SAP so we're pushing out of orbit on the first window back to Earth."

"Oh. Oh, alright," Sergeant Mellow said, "I'll put out the word and get those ships locked down as well, Chief."

"While you're at it," said Nick, "lock all hatches as well. We don't need to lose any troops who are heavy on gung-ho and light on information with an unauthorized COJ."

"Roger that, Chief." Mellow said.

"Thanks. Chief out." Nick tapped his communications link. "We are not going to do anything with this planet, kids" he took the satchel off his shoulder. Nick exhaled slowly. "Listen, I've got a lot going on here so I need some time to regroup."

"But Dad..." Began Nikki.

"I have an all hands meeting in no time at all, Nikki; I need to get ready for it. I'll meet you both in the galley once it's done and give you who's who in the zoo."

Nikki smiled at his father's phrase. "Nice to hear you use it correctly once and a while."

"Well, sometimes it works that way." Nick smiled back. "So I'll see you then, okay?"

Samantha nodded. "Fine Dad, see you then.... When is then, exactly?"

"The meeting is at twenty-three hundred hours so by midnight thirty at the absolute latest."

"You know that's not a time, right Dad?" Samantha said.

Nikki nodded. "Sounds good, Dad. See you at midnight thirty."

"I don't know if you heard or not, but that's not a time."

"Sure it is," Nikki said as he turned. He took Sam's hand. "It's right after quarter past midnight of course." He finished as he pulled his sister out of the room.

"See you then," Nick called after them, relieved to have some alone time.

7

Nick watched his door close behind his children then he moved quickly to his table, hoping to have as much time as possible to look through the stack of paper before the others arrived.

With a long sigh, Nick sat at his table and opened the satchel. "Finally some time alone." He pulled out the large stack of parchments and flipped through the several hundred pages. The papers were arranged in chapters with convenient numbers at the bottom of each to ensure they remained in order.

"Genesis," he said aloud- it was a word he knew. He flipped through the pages, reaching another chapter. "Folks are leaving. I know what that's like. Leviti-what-kis?"

Nick continued to flip though the large stack of papers- coming across more chapter titles that he had never heard of and meant nothing to him. The latter half of the book had more familiar names than the earlier portion. "Romans," he said aloud- recognizing another name. He was familiar with the Roman Empire's conquests throughout what would become the European Union; fifty-seven countries in all now, spanning from Iceland on its western border to Belorussia in the east.

A knock on his door made him stop reading a letter someone had written to a church in Corinth. Apparently bickering there had drawn the attention of a leader named Paul. "Come in," he said to the door. "Send them all to Vesta, Paul. Show them you mean business." He continued as he looked down at the page.

"Send who to Vesta?" Brian asked.

"Bunch of rabble rousers in Corinth."

"I'm not familiar with that colony. Is it near Vesta? Or do you mean the place in Greece?"

Nick shrugged. "I suppose the one in Greece."

Brian patted the stack. "I believe that's near where Christianity started. I think."

"Well it seems someone named Paul was dealing with troublesome troops of his." He gestured for his friend to sit.

Brian looked at the two very uneven stacks of parchment. "So you're moving through this pretty quickly?"

"Scanning is more like it. Flipping, reading here and there. Don't got time for much else right now."

Brian laughed. "Seditious, Chief. They might send *you* to Vesta if you're not careful."

"I don't think there's any 'they' left. Or even Vesta for that matter." Nick smiled at his friend. "Lucky me, right?"

Brian looked down at the papers. He flipped the smaller stack onto the larger. He casually banged the combined stack on the table, straightening them. "No, I don't suppose there are. Corinthians, huh? I've heard of the city of course; never been there though. There's issues there?"

"Apparently. Most of the chapters seem to be people. Some of places. Are you familiar with this…" He wasn't sure what to call it. "Book?"

Brian flopped the stack back onto the table. "Unlike probably thousands of other ones, I can't say that I am actually familiar with this particular book. It's called the Bible, by the way. Not that I've ever even seen one, much less read it" He gave his characteristic wink. "And I've read an *awful* number of books." He put his hand on the stack. "But I think I can get this thing digitized in short order so that we can read it online or even set it up for a sleep session." He measured the stack with his hand. "Two probably."

"The Bible. Digitized would be helpful. I think I want it set up for general access."

Brian looked at his friend wide-eyed. "Everyone on board? You don't want leadership to have first access?"

Nick began to flip the pages again. "Well, the High Priest and that Mayor said we all needed to read it."

Brian laughed. "You're going to listen to the advice of a couple of 'digenous mouth-breathers?"

"Brian, listen. They said..."

Brian stood "I'm not listening. Not to a couple of primitives."

A knock on the door made both men turn and look.

"You expecting someone?"

"Relax, Brian. Vesta is gone, remember?" Nick gestured at the door even though whoever was on the other side couldn't see him. "Come in El Tee," he said in a loud voice.

Lieutenant Simpsons pulled open the door then looked both ways in the corridor then stepped into the room.

"Would everyone just stop acting paranoid? Sit down, El Tee!"

"You can have my seat," Brian said flatly. "I've got someplace to be."

The young man looked back and forth between the two older men. "Well. I..."

Nick pointed. "Go ahead. It seems the good Doctor has better things to do with his time."

"Sure thing." Jeffrey moved around the table as the Doctor circled around the other way. "Everything okay?"

"Same as always." The Doctor winked. "I refuse to take advice from life forms lower on the evolutionary ladder than myself."

"Now Brian," began Nick, "if you'd just listen to..." His voice trailed off as the Doctor walked out of the room. "Well then." Nick turned to the young man and gestured at the tablet. "You going to take notes?"

The Lieutenant looked down at the electronic tablet in his hand.

"What?"

"You going to take notes on this Bible to compare it your yours?" He gestured at the door. "That might convince Doc."

"My uncle didn't give me the Bible."

"What? On the drop ship you said…"

Jeffrey pushed the tablet toward Nick. "I said that my uncle was a *Rabbi*. So this is the Torah."

Nick balled his fists. "Lieutenant Jeffrey Ground Zero Simpsons, I am going to put you in an airlock personally if you don't start using words that I understand. What is a Torah and why isn't it a Bible and why does it make a difference if your uncle was a Rabbi or a Pastor?"

"Well, they're different religions. Actually, Christianity's roots are based on Judaism."

"Judaism." He thought for a moment. "From what I've seen on the news about trials, that means he was a Jew?"

Jeffrey nodded.

"So your uncle's from Israel then?"

Jeffery smiled. "Well, sort of. My uncle was from Loveland, Colorado but his family, going back a dozen generations, did live in Israel."

"Israel." Nick put his elbows on the table. "Huh."

"It's part of the Pan-Asia Confederacy," Jeffery said. "It's actually a very prosperous and powerful state on the far west of it."

"Never been there, sorry. Why's it important?"

Jeffery smiled at his superior. "Neither have I, Chief. But I heard it was a paradise in the desert." He turned the tablet and scrolled through several folders to get to the one he wanted. "My uncle was a Messianic Jew, so I am familiar with the entire Bible; I heard him preach on various books. Israel is where it all started."

Nick whistled. "Living on the edge, El Tee."

"And," Jeffrey continued, "the Torah is the first ten books of the Bible. So mine should match the beginning of that." He gestured at the stack of papers. He shrugged. "If it's the same version, that is."

"Version?" Nick put his hands on the table. "You're killing me El Tee. What the hell do you mean same version? Every book I've read is the book,

not a version of the book." A thought occurred to him. "They abridge the thing? Take out the boring parts?"

The young man laughed. "No, Chief. It depends on how it was translated. The one that my uncle used was translated into Modern Standard English. I know there is a version written in Old English called a King James Bible. I never read one written in that."

"So what've we got here?" Nick turned the stack of papers around so that it faced the young man.

Nick sat patiently as the Lieutenant read the first page. When he then flipped the page and started to read the next page, Nick leaned forward.

When the Lieutenant flipped that page as well, Nick shoved him. "Well? You going to have to read the whole thing, or what?"

The Lieutenant looked from the papers to Nick and back again. "Sorry Chief, it's been a while since I read it."

"And?"

"It's the same version my uncle used. Funny, I didn't expect aliens to also speak MSE." He shrugged. "I always felt that was easier to understand anyway. Except for the Hebrew version, of course."

Nick exhaled slowly. "Okay then. Okay, so we've got two of the same versions of a book from over thirty light-years apart with no contact between the two."

"Weird." The young man leaned back. "Or maybe..."

"What?" Nick asked.

"Aliens. Those damned Greys on the Procyon Binaries."

"What?"

"They visited Brazil you know," Jeffrey said with a smile, "That's why their star is on their flag. Obviously."

"You're as bad as the Doctor." Nick pushed his chair back.

"Sorry, Chief; I couldn't help myself." Jeffery became serious. "Really, there is only one explanation for how that book got there."

Nick let out a long sigh. "Yeah, yeah; I know, I just don't want to..." His communication tab chirped, interrupting him. He tapped it. "Chief here."

"Nick," Doctor Hawking said. "You got a minute? Are you alone?"

"I'm with Lieutenant Simpsons." He looked down at the stack of papers. "Discussing current events. What do you need?"

"I need you here... It's important."

"How important?"

"It's about our return flight. It would be better in person. Can you come to the Astrophysics Lab?"

Nick stood. "El Tee, head up to the flight deck and get the bridge hot for the return trip. I'll meet you there as soon as I can."

Jeffrey stood as well. "Sure thing. Got it under control, Chief." He tapped his tablet, turning it off. "I'll be ready to take navigation figures in twenty," he said in a louder voice so the doctor could hear him. "Okay, Doctor?"

"Thanks Lieutenant," Hawking said.

"Let's get going then." Nick gestured at the door for the lieutenant to go first. "I imagine no one's done anything to get the bridge ready for a return trip so soon."

Jeffrey pushed open the door. There was a Marine blocking his way as he tried to step into the corridor. "Uh, hello?"

Nick bumped into the Lieutenant, pushing him into the passageway and into the Marine. Thanks to the low gravity, they both bounced forward. "What're you doing, El Tee? We're short on time and..." His voice trailed off.

"Chief." The muscular -and armed- soldier said. He brought his rifle up across his chest. "Been waiting for you."

Nick skidded to a stop as well as the door brushed his back then latched behind him. "Sergeant." He tried stalling for time: "Waiting for me?" He reached back for the latch on his door, knowing there was no way he could make it back into his quarters. "What for Sergeant...?" He tried to think of the personnel records- with only a hundred on the mission, he had

taken the time to reach each one in detail. The particular Marine in front of him was enthusiastic and highly decorated who had fast-tracked to sergeant after several successful skirmishes. He hoped that between himself and the Lieutenant, they could overpower the Marine if they had to. "Sergeant Huckabee?" He finished.

"Yes, Sir." The sergeant gave a curt nod. "I'm your escort, Chief."

"Escort?" Nick didn't take his hand off the latch. "I've got an escort?"

"Standard protocol when ex-filling a hostile planet." He gave Nick a curious look. "You know; in case of stowaways, Chief."

"I'm not sure I could call Arcturus hostile." Nick let go of the latch. "I think they're the exact opposite, in fact." He smiled. "Who initiated the protocol?"

"Doctor Sanderson"

"Figures."

"Is there a problem, Chief?"

"No." Nick exhaled loudly. "Well, who am I to argue with protocol?" He gestured down the corridor. "Lead the way... Sergeant Huckabee. I'll meet up with you on the bridge, El Tee." Nick figured that if the Marine wanted them dead, they would have been killed in his quarters. As it stood, the Lieutenant was now going in another direction to a secure part of the ship; if Nick turned up dead, there would at least be a witness.

"That's me, Chief." Sergeant Huckabee said. "El Tee." He pivoted the rifle in his hands as he snapped it to a vertical position, rendered a salute to the lieutenant.

"See you there." Lieutenant Simpsons returned the salute then bounded toward the bridge.

"So… where we off to first, Chief?"

"Astrophysics lab." Nick pointed even though he didn't need to.

"After you, Sir." The Marine gestured.

"It's always nice to be someone's cover," Nick remarked as he bounded away.

8

There were almost a dozen people in the room. They were all having conversations at once.

"Quiet down," Violet said.

Everyone continued to speak.

Violet frowned. "Hey!" she shouted. "Shut it!"

Everyone turned to look at her.

"We don't have time for stupidness." Violet said. "Now quiet down so we can get on the same page. It's dangerous enough to be all in one place as it is."

"Why are we leaving?" A Marine in the front row asked.

"I heard they used some ancient tech to force the Chief to leave." Replied another Marine. "Who was down there?" He looked around.

Several people started talking at once.

"Shut up!" Violet shouted. "All of you!"

She pointed at the first Marine. "We are heading back to Earth."

"What? Why?"

A hard stare made the Marine look down.

"We are heading back to Earth. I haven't been able to talk to Lieutenant Simpsons to find out what happened on the surface but it *wasn't* some ancient tech." She rolled her eyes. "Ancient tech. This isn't some crappy science fiction movie." She looked around the room. "Who was planet-side?"

A Marine by the wall raised her hand. "I was there. I heard some of what happened. The high priest gave the Chief a satchel then the mayor pulled the Chief off to the side, they looked up at the sky,

talked a little, then we left. We were in the center of the town all of fifteen minutes."

The chatter started up again.

"I'll find out what was in the satchel, Private Bitburger." Violet said loudly, "But for now we need to stick to the plan."

Bitburger nodded at her. "Yes, Ma'am."

A science technician on the other side of the room raised his hand. "There's a plan still? I thought the plan was not to colonize this planet. That's a success, right?"

"Sort of, John" Violet said. "That part is done for us and until I find out what is going on, we all need to go about our regular duties. I'll find out what's going on from my contact and will push out updates as normal once a week. Until we have a firm grip on what's going on, we're just going to keep our heads down and take the ride back home."

"I'm on escort duty," a female sergeant said. "I'm on one of the principles, not sure which but I'll see what I can find out."

"Good. Thanks for that Sergeant Taylor." Violet said. "Until we know more, we need to just go about our regular duties."

"Chief needs to die for what he did to Scribbs and Peter!" Another technician- this one from the weapons division- shouted from the front row. "He killed them in cold blood."

His friend next to him nodded. "Pat's right; we can't just sit back and let Hauser get away with that."

"Well, in his defense, they were trying to blow up the reactor," a Marine said. He had been brought to the meeting by his girlfriend and was still not sure if he agreed with everything OneGen said. "You have to expect some sort of push-back when you..."

"Whose side are you on?" The weapons tech said. "You can't just blow people out airlocks."

"But," the Marine turned to look at the tech. "they shot a couple of Marines and were going to blow up the ship."

"Who brought him here?" the weapons tech said as she stood. "Who are you?"

"He's seen every one of us too!" Another Marine said. "You're toast, Devil Dog." He stood as well.

"Everyone sit down!" Violet said. She looked at the Marine. "Listen..."

"Private Sierra." The Marine said as he stood as well. "Listen, I'm not going to tell anyone about the meeting." He looked at his girlfriend who was looking at the floor. "Carmen brought me here because we believe a lot of the same things."

"A lot? Not everything?" The weapons tech said. "That's not good enough!"

Private Sierra looked at Violet. "Miss Wilds, you don't have to worry about me saying anything. You don't." He raised his hands plaintively. "It's just that you have to expect some sort of reaction from the leadership when you're trying to scatter the ship across two parsecs."

"We understand that," Violet said, "and..." She realized the three were still standing. "Would you all please sit down?" When everyone sat, she continued: "The problem I think that the others in the room have, is that you seem to be making excuses for the Chief."

"It's not an excuse; it's human nature." Sierra said. "You kill one... or two of theirs', you should expect them to kill two of ours. That's all I am saying."

"I understand what you're saying, Private Sierra." Violet smiled, appreciating that the young man referred to the OneGen ranks as 'ours'. "What division do you work in?"

"Life Support and Recycling, and Heat Exchange."

Inwardly, Violet was elated- that was a division they had no representatives in. "Well, I appreciate your candor, Private Sierra." She smiled at his girlfriend. "And thanks for bringing him." She looked around the room. "We only have ourselves to count on now and in case you haven't noticed, there aren't a lot of us; thirteen in all. If you have a significant other, friend, or associate that you think would be understanding of our mission, I think it would be worthwhile to have them perhaps join us in our next meeting."

Private Sierra's communications link chirped. He startled as it did. "That's weird," he remarked.

In series, over half the commutators in the room chirped as well- the ones of civilian passengers did not.

"What the hell?" Private Sierra tapped his link. "Private Sierra here."

"Sierra, get down to LSR," a voice said. "I need you on watch while I go to the staff meeting. What's your ETA?"

Private Sierra stood. "I can be there in fifteen, Sergeant." He gave a nod to Violet as he started for the door. "Moving that way now."

When he tapped the link to turn it off, Violet spoke up. "Okay then, unless something comes up, we'll do this again in two weeks. Thanks everyone." She gave a wave as the others in the room stood and moved to the door- the military ones while they spoke into their communications links.

After the room was empty, Violet flipped up her bunk and stored the folding chairs out of view. One or two would be easy to explain- eight folding chairs would have been a little more difficult.

9

Nick and the young Marine bounded along in the microgravity in silence for a couple of minutes.

"You volunteer for the job?"

"No, Chief. Wrong place, wrong time." He shook his head solemnly. "Made eye contact, even."

Nick looked over his shoulder at the Sergeant. "Oh?"

"Nothing personal, Chief." The Sergeant replied. "I'm just not looking forward to having 'escort' on my E-A-R." The man said with a smirk. "Victoriously engaged locals in battle has a better ring to it."

"Don't have any of them around. How about if I make it to the briefing on time and in one piece, I'll make sure you get fives for escort on your Enlisted Assessment Report." Now Nick smirked. "I can even write a letter of input if you like."

"That's not necessary." The Sergeant said. "At all." He gestured to the left. "Got you here safe and sound. Mission accomplished."

"You're the best escort I've had in a long time," Nick said as he turned the latch to the Astrophysics Laboratory.

"Let's just keep that between us." The Sergeant rendered a snappy salute. When Nick returned it, he hesitated. "You know I'm your escort until the ship's been cleared, right, Sir?"

"I know." Nick said. "Since you're here, you're more than welcome to listen in instead of standing in the gangway."

"Thanks, Chief. It's always better to get the straight scoop. It's important to know who's who in the zoo."

Chief eyed the young man playfully. "Have you been hanging out with my daughter?"

The Sergeant's eyes got large. "What? Who, me? No... No Chief. She's kinda young for me and besides she's on the no fly..." His voice trailed off. "Maybe I'll just guard the door" He added.

"You're good to go, Sergeant." Nick opened the door. "Get in there and draw any fire."

The Sergeant shook his head as he moved into the lab. "Man, and I was short too." He muttered. "Quick mission and then my End of Service on our new home world." He looked left and right in the large laboratory. "No one's shooting in here, Sir. Seems my luck's not changing."

Nick patted his shoulder as he entered. "Look on the bright side, now you'll have more money saved up after your E-O-S."

The Sergeant smirked. "Suppose so. Not much to spend money on out here, that's for sure."

"That's the spirit," Nick said. He looked around the room. Rebecca Hawking was sitting at a large console on the far side. "Let's go see what the good Doctor has to say." He pushed off the wall and made it to her in two bounds.

"Enjoying the light gravity, Nick?" Rebecca said with a smile. "Maybe later we can try it out..." Her voice trailed off as the young Marine approached. "Yes, Sergeant?" She asked him tersely. "What do you need?"

"Nothing Ma'am." The young man took up a position beside Nick. "I'm good."

Rebecca raised her eyebrows at Nick.

"It's protocol," Nick said. "Armed escort for me and probably Gunny now that I think about it." He rubbed his chin. "Who's watching the El Tee, Sergeant Huckabee?"

"Not sure, but he's got one too, Sir. I left when I got my assignment; didn't hear who else went where."

"What about me?" Rebecca asked.

"The Lab'll get someone at the door." Sergeant Huckabee said.

"Anyway, Doctor," Nick said. "What's the problem?"

Rebecca gestured at the six-foot monitor above the console with a frown. "Nothing. It's smooth sailing."

"But you said..."

"That's what's wrong, Nick." Rebecca glanced at the Sergeant, "Err... Chief."

Sergeant Huckabee chuckled. "Ma'am, this is a real small contingent and scuttlebutt is practically a professional sport nowadays. No need to keep up pretenses at this point."

"Nice." Nick said. A thought occurred to him. "And if someone were hanging around my daughter, you'd know who it was?" Nick asked casually.

"Sergeant Mellow." Sergeant Huckabee said. As soon as he did, his eyes got large. "But... you didn't get that from me. Oh hell."

"What?" Nick turned to face the Sergeant. "Since when?"

"Oh, Nick; calm down. He's pretty young." Rebecca smirked. "And cute."

"All I can attest to is that he's eighteen," Sergeant Huckabee said. "One of the youngest sergeants onboard, in fact."

"He's cute too, right?"

The Sergeant stared at her. "I suppose in a rugged, well-trained, killing machine Marine kind of way."

"Still at the wrong place at the wrong time, I see," Nick said. He looked at Rebecca. "What do you mean nothing's wrong which is what's wrong? What the hell does that even mean?"

Rebecca stood and leaned over the console and tapped on the monitor at the far left. "We're here. Arcturus." She panned her hand to the right, "And Earth is...Never mind, look at it this way." She laid her hand on the monitor then balled it in a fist. The image on the monitor crumpled up into it. Pivoting, she acted as if she were throwing toward the large open area of the room. Suddenly, the image appeared in the middle of the room, then expanded until it was twelve feet across. "This will make more sense." She walked to the middle of the floating image.

"Okay, what've we got?" Nick said as he also moved into the image. "Love these visual problems."

Sergeant Huckabee sat in the chair in front of the console and watched from there.

Rebecca pointed over her head at the swirling spots of lights. "Highlight Arcturus. Blue pulse."

One of the thousands of stars high over her head began to glow blue, pulsating slowing. "We're here. Arcturus."

"So far so good." Nick smiled. "Or bad, it seems."

"Run current algorithms." Rebecca said. "Six-month journey. Ten second loop."

Dutifully, all the objects within the sphere began to move. Objects that moved outside the projected sphere disappeared as other objects came into view.

"Very pretty. I always like these projections. I'd love one in my room at night." Nick said. "So what's wrong?"

"Highlight Earth. Red pulse."

Across the sphere, at about knee level another bright dot began to pulsate. "Do you see it?"

"See what?" Nick said.

"Just look." Rebecca looked up at the swirling pinpricks of light.

Nick looked up at the lights as they moved.

The pair looked at the moving pinpricks for several moments.

"See it?" Rebecca put her hands on her hips. "Nick! It's right there."

"The suspense is terrible," Sergeant Huckabee said, "I hope it will last."

"Right?" Nick moved to where Earth pulsated. "Just tell us Rebecca; we aren't seeing what you're seeing." He shrugged. "We're not astrophysicists." He looked at Sergeant Huckabee. "Are you?"

Sergeant Huckabee shook his head. "Steely-eyed killer with a minor in theoretical mathematics and quantum physics just for fun."

Nick shook his head. "Kids these days."

"Highlight routes to Earth from present location," Rebecca said. "Green solid."

A green light appeared between Arcturus and Earth, forming a majestic arc across the sphere.

"See?"

"I see the way home." Nick pointed at the green arc. "A nice and easy path even."

After ten seconds, the stars all jumped to their original location and the routine started again.

Rebecca exhaled loudly. "Highlight routes from present location to Alpha Centauri using current algorithms. Blue pulse and route."

A blue light arced from Earth to another pinprick of light. Once it connected, it began to pulsate. After a moment, the line jumped to avoid several other points of light as they moved. It then jumped again. After another moment, it zigzagged another route between Arcturus and Alpha Centauri. When the loop reset, the pulsating line did the same three jumps.

"Well, the galaxy is a busy place," Nick said. "Lots of stuff to avoid. Stands to reason you've got to expect to make some course..." He glanced at the solid blue line between Arcturus and Earth. It still had not moved. "What the hell?"

"Now you see it, don't you." Rebecca said. "*Nothing's* in our way. We can push out *now*, full thrust straight there."

"How long?"

"Just under four months."

"Wow, two months shaved off." Nick whistled. "That's hard to believe."

"My math is good." Rebecca crossed her arms.

Nick looked at the Sergeant. "Yeah?"

"Chief, you might run the boat, but when it comes to numbers, Doctor Hawking's the top gun." He looked at the hologram. "I mean, statistically speaking, with thirty-six lightyears of distance, something *something* would have to get in the way of our rhumb line. At those distances, the odds of that not being the case are astronomical… on the verge of theoretical."

"Exactly, Sergeant," Rebecca said. "But it's been holding steady since the landing party came back aboard. Solid as a rock."

"Fine by me. Push the numbers to the El Tee so we get underway." He smiled at the woman. "Nice work."

"What work?" Rebecca gestured at the still-moving image. "A *cadet* could plot that course. There's absolutely no way for that to happen."

Nick thought back to his conversation on the planet with Tolen and Paramus. 'We will pray for a quick journey', they had said. "Well, beggars can't be choosers. Send the numbers to the El Tee; he's warming up the bridge." He frowned. "Hell, if we're pushing out immediately, that staff meeting needs pushed up." He tapped his communication link.

"Chief?" Sergeant Mellow said.

"Patch me in to..." He thought for a moment. "Everyone my last transmission was to."

"Hot in three?"

"Three's good." Inwardly, Nick counted to himself. Finally, he said, "Hello again all. I promise this won't be a regular occurrence. Thanks to recent developments, we're pushing out of orbit immediately which means we need to have our meeting even more immediately. So laddie daddie everybody in the Astrophysics Lab in twenty. Be as prepared as you can be and bring along subordinates as you see fit. Chief out." He tapped his link to close it. "Well, that's going to go well with everyone." He looked at Rebecca. "At least, I'm already here, right?"

"I suppose so." Rebecca glanced at the Sergeant then back at Nick. "With your escort."

"Well, a man shouldn't be without his escort when protocol requires it." Nick gave a wide smile. "Kinda sexy, isn't it, having an armed Marine guarding me?"

"Well, maybe a little." Rebecca smirked.

"Right? I am pretty sure I can get him to flex with me if I ask him right." He glanced at the Marine. "He's game, I'm sure."

"Yeah?"

"I think I'm going to wait outside," Sergeant Huckabee said.

Nick poked the man in the ribs. "Calm down, Sergeant; that's called playful banter. Adults do it."

"If you say so, Chief." Sergeant Huckabee said, unconvinced.

"Speaking of flexing, you two can set up the table for the meeting." Rebecca rolled her eyes. "Which is apparently going to be even more immediate than immediately."

"That's a good and proper military term." Nick nodded at the Sergeant. "Sergeant, I'm sure you can sling that rifle long enough to help me get the table from the wall."

Sergeant Huckabee slung his rifle over his shoulder, "Sure thing, Chief." He looked around. "Wall, you say?"

Nick walked over to a section of the wall and pressed a catch. "Get out there and the top end'll fall down to you."

Thanks to the light gravity, the top of the ten-foot table floated down to the waiting Sergeant.

By the time the pair had pushed chairs around the table, people had started showing up for the meeting.

"Visitors in the back, principles at the table." Nick said as he pointed. He patted Sergeant Huckabee's shoulder. "Don't let anyone shoot me in the back."

With a nod, the Sergeant moved to the wall behind Nick and unslung his rifle.

As people filed in, Nick moved around the room engaging them in conversation. After twenty minutes, he moved to the large table.

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"We got everyone?" Nick said as he sat.

"We're missing recycling." Said Doctor Sanderson. "She should be here..."

The door opened and a young captain jogged in. "Sorry, sorry," she said. "Getting things locked down. We weren't expecting to be back up and running so soon." She slowed to a walk. "Or at all, really. Sorry I'm late, Chief."

"We haven't started yet," Nick said. "No worries, Captain Dasani." He gestured at one of the empty seats for her.

"So." Nick smiled. "Thanks all for coming at such a late hour." He gestured around the table. "As the good Captain said, I wasn't expecting to be back up and running so soon either. But things are what they are. We'll go around the horn in a second, first I want to give a quick update on our situation." He leaned back in his chair. "As you all know, we're heading back to Earth to deal with a situation there, and I realize it isn't what any of us were planning on. But, that's the plan so what I need is a status report on your sections and any issues this quick turn-around is going to cause. As usual, recommendations are always welcome." He looked to his immediate left. "Around the horn of good hope, then. What say you, Mister Sanderson?"

"That's a treacherous passage, Nick," Brian Sanderson said with his customary wink. "And appropriate." He held up a finger, "As far as security is concerned, as you well know, I have initiated exfil protocols so principles and divisions are now under armed guard until we can be sure we have no stowaways aboard."

"Arcturus was the opposite of hostile, Doc, but I appreciate the attention to detail."

"We should have the ship swept in 30 hours and then the protocol will be cancelled," Brian continued, nonplussed. "As far as any other onboard hostiles, I don't have to remind you that OneGen is

still interested in the destruction of the ship, so everyone needs to be vigilant." He held up another finger. "As far as sciences, I was hoping to get some samples from the planet so that when we get to where we're going we have additional food stocks to add to our inventories."

"Food stocks? You want to bring aboard some critters?" Captain Dasani said. "We'll have to set up another section to deal with animal byproducts but we can do that."

Brian glanced around the room. "Well, we can discuss that off-line. For now, I was looking at harvesting eggs and sperm from local fauna that we can use to create a whole new batch of animals at our new home. From all our reports, there is a good variety of large, mostly docile animals that would work well for meat. If I could get ten or so samples of male and female, we can splice them to create a genetically diverse, self-sustaining population wherever we end up."

"That's a good suggestion Doc," Nick said. "I'm looking forward to non-recycled food." He smiled at Captain Dasani. "No offence, Captain. But we're not going planet-side. We've been officially uninvited from the planet surface."

She frowned. "Nuts."

"And that's all I have, Chief." Doctor Sanderson said. He looked to his left.

"Astrophysics?" Nick asked. "Doctor Hawking?"

"We're a straight shot to Earth from here. Three months, three weeks, four days." She said flatly.

Nick sat back. "Right, right."

"That's it?" Gunny said. "A straight shot at four months?"

"Pretty much. We've got a course with not even near misses that's practically a straight line." She pointed at the young woman beside her. "My deputy has the rest."

"Great. What's new in the zoo, Doc Osborn?" Nick asked with a smile. Many of the officers on Space Ten were scientists who had been direct-commissioned as captains or majors.

"Like you asked Doctor Hawking, we've sent our course to navigation and we are ready to push out of orbit as soon as the word is given."

"Nice."

"And..." Captain Osborn hesitated.

"And?" Nick smiled. "You want the word now? Can we get around the table first, just in case?"

Several around the table laughed.

"No, Chief. I'm telemetry; I have an update from there."

"It's monkey pushes button." He glanced at Doctor Hawking.

"For Earth." The Captain said. When no one said anything for a moment, she continued: "Telemetry and long-range telescopes confirm where Sol should be. There's no way anyone could see it with the naked eye."

"Sol is still there?" Brian asked. "Well, that's good news."

"Why can't we see it then?" Nick asked.

"Well, it's there; it's practically a grey giant. Barely puts out enough radiation to get any readings."

"How can that be?"

The Captain shrugged. "Well, from my experience with other grey giants, there are a couple of possible scenarios that can cause one. A massive collision blasted the corona into space. A massive iron planet doused the fission reaction." She shrugged "All the material of the sun has been used up, but that's unlikely however, since we know the age of the sun. Actually, that one is impossible. We in telemetry are going with collision." She raised her hands plaintively. "It's the only thing we can think of to cause what we're seeing."

"So that explains what happened," said Chief Bagley. "That's good news."

"That explains it? That?" Nick said. "Sol had a collision of epic proportions? What it hit? Jupiter?"

Captain Dasani nodded. "Something about that size would do it. Just not a gas giant like Jupiter; it doesn't have nearly enough mass, of course. There are several exo-planets that orbit through our system every few thousand years that we've discovered that would fit the bill. Galileo One and Two for starters. Cassini and Hawking are rogue gas giants. Hawking has three moons of its own. We are pretty sure it used to be four until one wiped out the dinosaurs. The Galileos orbit through every twenty-five thousand years. Galileo Two is due sooner than One but they're both on their way back." She smiled. "Cosmically speaking, that is."

"But that still doesn't explain the difference in space-time. This is an instantaneous event witnessed thirty-six light years away. That *you're* seeing around thirty-six light years in the past."

"Twisted pairs of electrons experience the same effects no matter the distance. Faster than light even," said Doctor Sanderson. "It's common knowledge."

"Well, twisted pairs and a sun are two different things." Nick shot back. "That is absurd."

"Well..." Brian smiled. "Grey giants do happen so they are a thing." He pointed at Captain Osborn. "And I don't know if I need to tell you, Nick but in scientific circles, Captain Osborn has been the expert on solar phenomenon for a good thirty years."

"That is true," Captain Osborn said. "That grey giants do happen," she added with another smile.

Nick took a deep breath. "I don't want to hear any more absurd explanations for any of this. Bottom line that means the Earth is still there?"

The young captain hesitated as she shuffled the papers in her hands.

"Well?"

"The color spectrum for the area where our solar system is, isn't right."

"What's not right?"

"The color spectrum."

Nick clenched his fists. "Are you doing this on purpose? What's not right with the color spectrum?"

"The… Our solar system should give off a certain color spectrum because of the type of sun we have, the type and number of planets in orbit around it, and how they affect the sun's radiation and the overall gravity and solar wind pushing out in all directions. The red-shift should look a certain way."

"And?"

"And it isn't right."

"What would make it not be right?"

"Definitely an exoplanet slamming into Sol, blasting away the corona. That would also explain the gravitational equilibrium for the solar system seems to be off. The sun has picked up a wobble. But the color change indicated that perhaps two or three planets are missing."

"Missing?"

The Captain nodded. "Well, the planets and Sol create a delicate balance that keeps everything in line. Well, not really in line; the entire system has a wobble, but we know what that is. Something has gone awry and now the gravitational signature has a different wobble to it."

"Now?"

"Well... yes."

"And the missing planets? Can you tell which ones?"

She shook her head. "Not at this distance. But another theory is that one of the exoplanets that have sufficient mass to disrupt Sol's corona also has sufficient mass to disrupt the orbit of our system's larger planets. Right now, Neptune, Uranus, and Saturn are aligned so if an exoplanet hit Neptune, at the right angle, it could have disrupted the outer planets in the system and send one of them or perhaps two toward the sun."

"And you've run models to confirm this?"

"Well not on the computers, but it works out in my head," admitted the Captain. "I'll get something set up and run different

scenarios once we're underway. The probability is very low but it's all we've got to go on."

"But you're looking at it *thirty-six years ago*. I was on the Earth then and if something crashed into a couple of planets, I am sure someone at the M-O-D would have mentioned it at one point during a meeting. They'd probably even write a memo about it."

"I can't really explain it, Chief. The light we are getting from Sol isn't what the light from Sol should look like." She wrung her hands. "We won't know more until we get there… or at least get a whole lot closer, anyway."

Nick frowned. "Fine then." He pointed at her. "Get those models running, Captain. As we get closer, if you get something concrete, push it out to section heads."

"Got it, Chief," Captain Osborn said, relieved the conversation would move to the next person at the table.

Nick leaned back in his chair. "Alright, no more on Earth." Nick leaned back in his chair. "Quartermaster to point." He nodded at the older man next in line around the table. "What're we looking for rations-wise Master Sergeant Tompkins?"

"Got some bad news, Chief. Lots of it. Ships stores are fine for a trip to Earth," said Tompkins, "but we'll be short getting anywhere after that. We won't make it two months out of the solar system before we start eating the Lieutenants."

Most of the people in the room laughed. Nick frowned.

"What?"

"Well Chief, remember we were supposed to be... dealing with the indigenous population and following up with immediate colonization. The plan was to leave infrastructure in place and use what was here as we rebuilt to suit our needs. Most everyone was going to stay on the planet while a skeleton crew of fifteen to twenty ran the ship back to Earth for the next run. As it stands now, we're going back with a full compliment." The man sat back. "I'm sure Mister Bagley will tell you we have enough fuel stores for the trip there and back again, but not foodstuffs. I suppose if we can scrounge up supplies from Earth, then we'll be fine." Calhoun looked down at his notebook. "We'll be about twenty percent stores when we get there."

Nick frowned. "There's one issue with your scrounging plans, Master," Nick said to the man. "There might not be anything to scrounge when we get there. And with the system a mess like Doc Osborn described, we'll be a long way from anywhere."

Tompkins straightened his top as he sat back. "Even with severely reduced, everyone-angry rations, Chief, we won't make it from here to Earth and back to here." He paused slightly. "Or one of the other habitable planets for that matter. There's only so much molecular engineering I can do, Chief. Molecular degradation puts a limit on recycling that we currently cannot overcome. I need viable molecules to keep the mess hall running. We either get more food, or… we skip Earth and head straight for one of the other planets, refit and restock there then head to Earth."

"Hell." Nick said. He closed his eyes for a moment. "How's our window, Captain Osborne?"

"It's wide open for nine hours before the other moon gets in our way. Then we'll need to wait another two before it opens again for about five more hours. After that, the planet gets in our way for a full eighteen. Then the cycle repeats."

"Nine hours." Nick rubbed the stubble on his chin. "Nine then two, huh?"

"I know what you're thinking, Chief." Gunny asked. "And we both know we were told to leave here."

"What? *Here*, here or just here?" Nick smirked. "We need supplies. There are no if's and's or but's about it." He looked at Brian. "What have you in your files for indigenous edibles?"

"The place is lousy with them, Nick." He gave a wink. "There's not a poisonous plant to be found. The worst they have is stuff that doesn't taste good. Same with the fauna." He looked at the ceiling for a moment. "If memory serves me, there's a massive migration of large quadrupeds moving across the northern plains just a few dozen miles from where you put down. The grasses they're moving across are also edible. A lot like what we used to have on Earth, actually. Really, the harder question is what *can't* you eat down there."

"Alright then. Here's the dilemma, folks: In case you haven't heard, we've been told to leave here by not only the local officials, but apparently by God..."

Several of the people at the table snickered.

"It's no laughing matter," Nick continued, tersely. "In case you haven't noticed, we are *leaving* this planet instead of *colonizing* it. This Iron-Age civilization that we should be able to just roll over in a week's time. We have been asked... No, we have been told to leave." He slapped his hand on the table. "That's not even right; we've been threatened that if we don't leave, the fate of the Earth will happen to us as well." He gestured at Captain Osborn, "And according to our experts, Earth's fate is pretty dire."

"The same fate as the Earth?" Doctor Popovich asked. "What are you talking about, Chief?"

"That's what the mayor of the town down there told me."

"What? He told you Earth was gone?"

"He pointed at it right when Sol disappeared from the sky, Doc" Nick shrugged. "Wiped away by the wrath of God."

"Don't be absurd, Chief," said Doctor Popovich. "Are we supposed to believe in fairy tales now?"

"How'd that primitive know?" Chief Bagley asked.

"That's going to have to be a separate staff meeting, I think." Nick said. "Right now, we need to worry about ship functions and activities."

"That's not possible, Nick," said Doctor Sanderson. "I know you've tried to explain..."

"I get it, Doc. *I get it*," Nick interrupted. "But that doesn't change the fact that while Tolen had me look up at the night sky, Sol winked out. Gone. Not there anymore. And we were told to leave or the same thing would happen to us."

"Well if that's the case, then how can we stick around to gather supplies?" Chief Bagley asked.

Nick looked at Gunny. "Well, I am hoping that there is some sort of understanding that we can't just leave without supplies because we wouldn't survive and if we were just supposed to die, we'd have just gone the way of the Earth. Right?"

"Are you saying that God is going to allow us to stay here to gather supplies because He knows we are short on stuff?" The Master Sergeant laughed. "Seriously?"

"That's what I'm going to go with. So, we are going to send a party to gather supplies. Only the supplies we need. And the troops down there won't interact with any of the indigenous population while they do it. Not at all. Not even so much as a friendly wave." Nick leaned back. "Hopefully that will be enough to keep us safe."

"Now you're bargaining with God?"

"There really isn't any other explanation, Mister Bagley," Nick said to the Warrant Officer. "Unless you have something to explain what Lieutenant Simpsons and I witnessed *personally* down on the planet."

After a long pause, the Warrant spoke: "An asteroid passed between us here and Sol, creating an eclipse. Or some other body in between us and Sol moved into our path. There's a lot of space between us and Earth right now." He shrugged. "It happens all the time, right Captain Osborne?"

The Captain nodded at the man. "That is true. A view from any particular point in space is always subject to objects moving between the observer and the observed. But that doesn't change the spectral autograph of a particular system like ours has changed." She looked at Nick. "So, it does happen; just not in this case."

"And keep in mind, Mister Bagley," Nick said. "When we see it happen, we know ahead of time because of our long-range telemetry and computer simulations of known bodies around us. We have the technology to predict it." He gestured at the floor as he raised his voice, "Tell me how those primitives down there that have just started grinding reflective telescopes are able to predict an eclipse *one light year*, much less thirty-six light years away? And," he continued as his voice rose even more, "how the hell are they able to orchestrate our arrival so that I am standing right beside that man just as it happened!"

"He's not a man, Nick. He's an alien. They're stinking *aliens*."

Nick recalled how the two he had met continuously called him their brother. "If you don't have anything useful to say, *Mister Bagley*, you are more than welcome to be *elsewhere* on the ship at this very moment!"

No one said anything for a long moment.

"I think what we need to do," said Captain Osborne, "is to plan an away party to gather what food we need without disturbing the locals, and leave orbit in that first window to get back to Earth as soon as we possibly can."

"I'm glad someone is still acting like a staff officer and you're right, Captain." Nick pointed at her, "Doc, go over those numbers again to make sure we're on time to push out of here. And, if you can come up other various scenarios that explain the disappearance of the Earth. That would also be helpful."

"Got it, Chief."

"Master Sergeant Tompkins, if you and Mister Bagley could come up with a hard number of supplies we would need for a trip to Earth that then would allow us to visit at least two of the other three viable planets. And work with Doctor Sanderson to come up with how many local animals that equates to..."

"We're on it, Chief. We can have those figures within thirty minutes. All I need to do is run the numbers of expended supplies coming here…" Master Sergeant Tompkins started.

Chief Bagley nodded at his cohort and continued: "And run that against what we have and the amount of viable meat on the animals…"

"I need answers not the details that'll lead to answers gentlemen," Nick snapped. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. "Sorry, folks. Kent, Drew; thank you both. And keep in mind we also need to have some resources set aside while we get settled on one of those other planets until Doctor Sanderson's department of animal husbandry gets up and running."

"We got it, Chief."

Nick nodded at the Master Sergeant.

"Nick," Doctor Sanderson said. "Remember that I'd like several different animals while we're here." He gave a smile. "Genetics is a lot like business; diversity is the key to success."

"Right, Doc. Grab the main meat producer and whatever other samples you can. *Without* disturbing the locals in any way at all."

"I'll get a group of nine of us and a couple of EMSQUATS for the hunting party," the Gunnery Sergeant said. "When do you want us down there?"

"Don't think we should be out there hunting at night," Nick said.

"I agree," Gunny said.

"When's sunrise?" Nick asked.

"Six hours, ship's time, Chief," Captain Osborne said.

"Nice." Nick rubbed his hands together. "So we get everything planned out and first light we drop down on the planet and grab a bunch of animals and get out before anyone notices. Nice and quiet like."

"Sounds like the best plan we can have," Gunny said. "I'll grab Marines that are already in their racks so they'll be rested in the morning. I just need a shopping list and how long we have to fill it."

"I'll work with the Master Sergeant to make sure the reactor's up and running when they need it to prepare the supplies," said Mister Bagley.

"I'll get my cooks looking up recipe variations." The Master Sergeant said, finishing his superior's thoughts. "Whatever else that's close to what we already have will get disassembled and added to the current stores for the processors to use. We can smoke a lot of it too."

Nick nodded at the man. "Thanks Gentlemen. Once we're done here, we can get the details hammered out. We'll meet in my quarters at oh-three hundred hours. That will still give you three to iron out any wrinkles before heading planetside at oh six hundred hours." He looked at the next person at the table. "So what say ship's operations, Doctor Cortez?"

Doctor Cortez paused to look down at his notes. Among the scientists he was the oldest at nearly a hundred twenty years old. Having over three quarters of a century of experience with deep space travel got him on the Arcturus mission even at his advanced age. "Main shield is at sixty-seven percent. That is the upper limits of expected parameters." He looked at Nick. "I was expecting anywhere from sixty-five to sixty-nine remaining based on previous experience." He looked down at his notes again. "Rear shield is at a very

comfortable eighty-eight percent." He turned the page. "Considering we only have a four-month trip ahead of us, we should be just fine staying with our current configuration. Radiation levels are well below any red flags. I expect us to arrive with over fifty two percent of the main shield, seventy-four of the secondary. We can reverse the LINACS for the trip from Earth to wherever we're going next. By that point the radiation seepage into the main shield will be close to what's not considered hospitable. Especially if we're going to be expected to make a bunch of babies. We can keep the secondary shield however to save time."

"I agree wholeheartedly, Doc."

"Quite," the man continued. "That will require us to stop at the Shield Field to grab just one asteroid and mount it." He nodded to his left at Chief Bagley and Master Sergeant Tompkins, "Which will equate to just one week of supplies used instead of two."

"That does sound reasonable." Nick said. "But shouldn't we swap the smaller shield while in our system so that we don't have to try and hunt for one later on?"

The doctor shrugged. "Solar systems are messy places; we can easily find replacement asteroids when we get there." He closed his eyes. "Now, taking into account the distances to Earth from where the Shield Field should be when we arrive in four months… yes. It should allow you to use a drop ship to go to Earth while the main asteroid is fitted."

"If it's even there." Nick said.

"If it's even there." Agreed Doctor Cortez. "If a large mass did pass through the system towards Sol, it could have easily smashed through the field sending them flying like billiard balls. Then of course, we would use more time getting one that is just free-floating around the system." He flipped the paper back over and put his hands on it. "But if any rescue missions are going to be conducted, we might as well take the time to refit our shield if we have the opportunity. To adequately search for survivors, I would think we would need a week to do it. We might as well refit the shield if the ship's just going to be sitting still for a few days."

"A week?"

The doctor nodded at Nick. "Well, if we check military locations. Hardened sites, there are several around the planet. If we need to check the colonies, that is more flight time. But to answer your question, yes; we would need the full week, I imagine." He shrugged. "And since we can't

jettison the rear shield until we arrive because we'll be leading with it for our approach we will need the full week to refit it. Once we're in geosynchronous orbit with the Moon, we can affix the hatches then jettison the shield."

"Thanks Doctor Cortez," Nick said. All of the doctors aboard had been given honorary commissions except Cortez who had refused. Nick looked at the young technician seated by the doctor. She looked like a teenager beside the old man. "Communications and Telemetry. Sergeant Whiddon, what've you got in CT?"

"We're monitoring all frequencies," the Sergeant said. "And we're keeping an eye out for any blue shifts signifying an approaching craft." She pushed her hair behind her ear and glanced at Doctor Sanderson. He gave a quick wink and nod. "Once we're on our home trajectory, we will get with Astrophysics to see about determining potential approach vectors for ships coming from our system to narrow down our search. There's a lot of space out there to cover, you know," she added as she got off her practiced script from Doctor Sanderson.

"Excellent." Nick said. He smiled at what was by decades, the youngest attendant sitting at the main table. "Anything else?"

"No, Chief," she said. "Everything else's Bravo Zulu."

Nick stared at the young sergeant; the phrase was definitely Navy pilot-slang and he had made it a point of knowing who on the ship had piloting experience to augment their flight staff. The young sergeant was not one of them. "Nice." He said simply, planning on finding out more about her later.

He looked at the next person beside Sergeant Whiddon- Doctor Durbin, a biologist. He wasn't sure why she was at the table instead of sitting near the wall. "What's the critters got to say?"

Doctor Durbin raised an already arched, dark eyebrow at Nick. "Lots, Chief. Lots."

"Oh boy." Nick leaned back in his chair.

The staff meeting continued for almost forty more minutes. Much to the chagrin of Nick, Captain Durbin's mission brief on her

Astrobiology Department was the most interesting one who spoke during the entire staff meeting.

11

Gunnery Sergeant McCain sat back in his seat. Knowing the young pilot well, he was expecting a hard, fast ride to the surface. The pilot treated the monstrous landing craft as if it were a two-seater fighter. *It's his last drop for months, might as well let him enjoy it*, Gunny thought as the ship eased away from Space Ten.

The pilot fired the maneuvering thrusters pivoting the nose of the craft downward. As soon as it was pointed directly at the planet, the aft engines came online, rocketing the four-hundred-foot ship at the surface.

"Kids," Gunny remarked as the eight other Marines on board cheered. Only the Gunnery Sergeant and the two EMSQUATS anchored to the deck sat quietly. Both had had two of their weapons arms replaced with large metal claws to load the animals into the ship.

The group sat at the very back of the cavernous ship designed to hold two-hundred troops, a dozen EMSQUATS, and again as many heavily armored wheeled vehicles. A forward section was used as a field hospital and sleeping quarters. The landing craft itself was armor plated and bristled with defensive weapons systems to allow it to operate as an autonomous Forward Operating Base. Of the landing craft for Space Ten, it was the largest and was specifically chosen because the plan was to bring back several hundred beasts.

As the craft reached reentry speed, the gravity evened out, allowing the Marines to get up and move about.

"Okay people," McCain said as he unlatched his harness. "I want weapons ready when we land. In and out is the plan."

As the Marines retrieved their weapons from their storage racks, one moved to sit by McCain. "Gunny, I'm grabbing plant samples for Doctor Sanderson."

"Corporal Fields," Gunny said, "excellent. Take what you see fit."

"But..." The Marine hesitated.

Gunny exhaled loudly. "You can do some of the shooting too."

"Thanks, Gunny!" The Marine hopped up and walked in a fairly straight line across the bucking ship to the weapons racks.

"Kids," Gunny said again. Truth be told, he was also looking forward to hunting. With a severe lack of wildlife, hunting was strictly forbidden on Earth. Shooting Humans just wasn't the same thing. He had shot his share of sentient wooly aliens on the frozen planet of Thestias, orbiting Pollux, but that had been a decade ago. He stood and made his way to the weapons racks. "Private Sierra, assist Corporal Fields in gathering plant samples for Doctor Sanderson. Then you both join in the hunt."

"Roger, Gunny," Private Sierra said, crestfallen.

"Touch down in ten long!" A voice said over the ship's speakers as the lights all switched to red. "Coming in hot!"

Gunny shook his head. "Coming in hot to the friendliest planet we've ever found. Nice."

"It's hunting time, Gunny!" Said a Marine as he slapped a magazine into his rifle. "Ooh Rah!"

A thought occurred to him. "You ever been hunting, Private?"

"No, Gunny; first time." He smiled. "Ooh rah?"

"Oh boy." Gunny moved to the front of the exit ramp. "Listen up Marines!" He shouted over the roaring engines When they all looked he continued: "We are hunting for *food* not sport so all weapons need to be on armor piercing *not* explosive."

Several Marines thumbed their rifles, resetting their ammunition.

"Kids." Gunny said.

The red lights flashed several times. "Three minutes!" The pilot said.

The ship was still in a steep dive, it's superstructure flexing and creaking as it powered its way through the thickening atmosphere.

Gunny tapped his communications link. "Lieutenant Biggs, you busy?"

"Biggs here, Gunny. Just driving, ya know? What's shaking?"

"The ship is. Could you not come in like a fifty-ton meteor? We're trying to be as quiet and unobtrusive as possible and every 'digineous in a hundred miles has seen our red-hot approach by now."

"Roger, Gunny; I'll level it out and burn some speed off."

The roar of the engines dropped as the ship leveled out some- the additional gravity of it slowing as the atmosphere pounded the ship made Gunny's knees buckle. A loud boom rang through the ship as it dropped under Mach 1. Even so, the creaking of the superstructure didn't decrease.

"Oh yeah, that's better. Like a ninja." Gunny looked to the group of Marines. "Okay, Devil Dogs, we're moving in groups of three so partner up. Gates and Hayes, you're with me."

After a moment's jostling, the Marines were in groups of threes except for one left out because only Sierra and Fields were gathering vegetation. "Richards, you're on loading duty." He panned his hand around the inside of the ship. "We've got several hundred animals to put in here so we need to have it neat."

"Roger that, Gunny," Private Richards said. He seemed let down.

"Once you get things started, tap out with someone else so you get to join in the hunt."

"Roger that, Gunny!" This time the Private smiled wide. He looked around the hold, already making a plan for how to stack the carcasses as quickly and efficiently as possible.

"Remember this is not a firefight so we are going to..."

"Touchdown in ten short!" The Lieutenant shouted over the speakers. The lights flashed again in case someone did not hear the verbal warning.

Everyone flexed their knees and faced the exit ramp out of habit.

The ship rocked backwards as the landing gear snapped into position. As it came forward, it stopped suddenly as they hit the ground.

"Smooth as a Major's butt," Lieutenant Biggs said over the speakers. "Ramp down in ten short."

The Marines all took a step toward the ramp, weapons at the ready.

"Everyone stand fast!" Gunny said. "As I was saying, this is *not* a firefight so we are going to select our targets and fire deliberately. We have a full four hours to complete this mission which is more than enough time. Plus, a buffer of another couple hours if we need it."

The engines whined to a stop as the ramp quickly lowered and pressed into the soft soil.

"Pick your targets with the thought of eating," Gunny continued, "the more meat the better. But don't go shooting all around or you'll spook the herd and then we're going to have to carry them farther."

A Marine raised his hand.

Gunny jerked a thumb at the EMSQUATS. "Use them for the heavy lifting."

The Marine raised his hand higher.

"Cross talk to pick your target," Gunny pressed on. "When you bag one, get on the link and I'll send an EMSQUAT to you. Intel says the herd is migrating over the next rise so we're nice and close. Speaking of which, hey Big Orange."

Hearing its name, an orange painted EMSQUAT with darker orange flames unlatched its claws from the deck and stretched to its full twelve-foot height. "Online," it growled. In a dozen steps, it was beside Gunny. "Systems operating within acceptable levels. Minor issue with ammunition feed tray six that will slow cyclic fire by twenty five percent." The feed tray whirred again as it cycled. "Issue will need physical repair. Submitting maintenance request now."

"We're not expecting any action so it isn't an issue." Gunny said.

"Affirmative, Gunnery Sergeant McCain," the robot said in its deep gravelly voice.

"Gunny!" The Marine with his hand raised said.

"What is it Ribeiro? What is so *damned* important?"

"We got company," Sergeant Ribeiro pointed with his hand that was still over his head. "Lots of it. And more showing up."

Gunny looked over his shoulder. "Oh hell. And that's our rise." He tapped his comms link. "Lieutenant, button up once we're out. There's locals afoot."

"Roger that, Gunny." There was a slight pause. "Weapons systems?"

"Offline," Gunny said. "Just don't let them in."

"Got it," the Lieutenant said. "Just give the all clear when you're out and I'll button up this can."

"Let's move out, Marines." Gunny turned and gestured at the wagons. "Maybe that'll scare them off." He pointed at the EMSQUAT beside him. "Orange, you're with me." He pointed at the other. It was scarlet red with gold spatters all over it. "Spatter, hang back and take our six."

"Affirmative, Gunnery Sergeant McCain," Spatter said. "Assuming rear defense. Ooh-rah."

Gunny gave it a double-take. Marines often added programming to EMSQUATS for missions but usually wiped them clean afterwards for follow-on missions. The addition of 'Ooh-rah' probably was seen as funny by the Marines -especially since it had been painted official Marine Corps colors- and was not removed from the machine's programming. When they were all down the ramp, Gunny tapped his comms link again. "Button it up, Lieutenant. Confirming no entry of locals."

"Roger that." The ramp rose quickly and sealed.

"Move out," Gunny said.

"Gunnery Sergeant McCain," Big Orange said as he moved beside the man. "Confirming directive to engage locals to protect hunting party."

"Negative, Big Orange. Weapons offline."

"That is not the optimal course of action," Big Orange said. "Complying."

As they approached the ridge, Gunny expected the locals to leave. Instead, even more came onto it to watch them approach. By the time

the Marines got there, there were dozens of locals and ten wagons waiting for them.

"Chief is not going to be pleased," Gunny said. "What's wrong with these people?"

Several of the aliens waved at him.

Why they weren't afraid of the massive ship, the Marines that were a full three feet taller than any of them, or the even larger EMSQUATS baffled him. To his dismay, even the animals pulling the wagons didn't seem concerned about the approaching Marines. When he finally reached the lead wagon, Gunny waved his hand at the two aliens sitting on it. "Shoo!"

"Shoo?" The alien asked. He pointed at himself. "Kendra." He said. He pointed at his partner. "Siefken."

"It gets worse and worse, huh, Gunny?" Sergeant Ribeiro chuckled.

Gunny glanced at the sergeant as he regretted not learning any Sivulliik on the trip- he had figured learning the language of a race on the verge of extinction was a waste of time. "Anyone do the sleep induction language course?" He asked.

The Marines all shook their heads at him.

"Hell." Gunny said. He looked up at the EMSQUAT. "Download local language."

After only half a second, the machine had downloaded ten terabytes of language and cultural material from Space Ten. "Done." Big Orange growled. "Instructions?"

"Excuse me, Gunny; got a fire over there," said Corporal Fields. "Least it looks like it." He pointed farther down the ridge where a column of smoke roiled up from the ground to almost 100 feet in the air.

"That wasn't there a minute ago," Gunny said. He looked at the robot. "Tell them that we are a hunting party and we mean them no harm."

Orange relayed the message in its deep rumbling voice. When it started to speak, the aliens seemed shocked. By the time it was done, Kendra had stood on the buckboard of his wagon to be closer to eye-to-eye with it and was nodding at it.

When the alien spoke, Orange translated: "We are passing by on our way to Itkob when saw the lights. We heard we had brothers from afar visiting for the festival in Rudens and we wanted to meet them ourselves."

Kendra smiled.

"We are not going to the festival; we are hunting some of the animals then we will leave," Gunny said and Orange repeated in Sivulliik.

"Fire's getting closer," one of the Marines said. The rest turned to look.

Gunny glanced over at the column on smoke. "Peculiar." He said as he noticed the ground behind it wasn't scorched.

"The Father approaches," Orange translated.

"What?" Gunny said. "Are you saying that's your god?"

Kendra laughed. "Of course not." Orange repeated in English then he listened as the alien continued.

"He is the God of all; not just of us, of course."

"And he lives in that smoke?" Gunny asked.

Kendra turned and spoke to his partner, then the other aliens joined in as a lively discussion broke out among them.

After a moment, Gunny kicked Orange. "What the hell are they saying? Why'd you stop translating?"

Orange looked down at Gunny. "They are not speaking to us. Instructions were to translate between English and Sivulliik." The robot paused. "It is innocuous conversation. They are all making points in a discussion concerning their father." He looked back at the aliens. "Many of the points are valid."

"Well I want to know what they're..."

Kendra pointed at Gunny and spoke.

"Like the air," Orange said. "All around us, everywhere. Even when you do not see it, air is still there. It still has weight. It fills things

and moves about things. But it is the wind that reminds us that the air is there with us. The same is true for the smoke and fire and our Father."

"God is like the air?" Gunny asked.

Kendra stared at Gunny, then Orange. He jerked a thumb at the man. "Does this one not know a metaphor when he hears it? I was speaking poetically, of course."

"I understood," Orange said. "Perhaps I did not translate correctly."

"Have you metaphors in your tongue?" Siefken asked. "Perhaps he did not study?"

Orange pivoted his head to look at Gunny. "He is one of the most experienced among them. I do not see how he has not. Metaphors are common."

"You are mechanical, yes?" Kendra asked.

"I am." Orange rumbled. "Your description is accurate for your level of understanding."

"And you know poetry?" Siefken asked- he was one of his town's most eminent poets.

"I recognize it when it is presented but I do not create it."

"You don't strive to be more than you are?" Siefken asked.

"I am what I am." Orange said. "There is nothing more and nothing less that I can be for as long as I exist."

Gunny put his hands on his hips as the EMSQUAT and the aliens conversed.

Siefken pointed at Orange. "Ah hah my large mechanical friend! That was practically poetry! If only you had repeated your first line again at the end to bring your thought full circle."

Gunny kicked Orange. "What the hell are you three talking about?"

"The construction of poems, Gunnery Sergeant McCain."

"Poetry?" Gunny frowned. Then he kicked Orange again. "We're on a mission here and you're spouting poetry?"

"Are you even programmed for poetry?" Corporal Fields asked.

"Evidentially the locals believe I am," Orange growled. "If I add repetition to my speech." He paused a moment. "Evidently the locals believe I am."

Several of the Marines laughed. One clapped.

"Stow it!" Gunny looked back at the Marines. "Whoever's adding program to this thing is going to get their butt kicked by me *personally*." He looked up at the EMSQUAT. "Well we've got a mission to complete, Orange Poet, if that's okay with you." Gunny said. "So get rid of these locals."

"Affirmative." Orange weapons systems hummed to life. "Eliminating local populace."

Gunny glanced at the pillar of smoke that was still moving about close by. "What? No! We weren't even supposed to *wave* at the locals, much less engage them in conversation." He looked up at Orange. "Or poetry. Tell them we need to hunt so they can go about their business."

Orange's weapons systems powered down. After it translated, Kendra pointed at their wagons and the others with them.

The pair spoke back and forth.

"Well?" Gunny said.

"They have agreed to help move our kills to the drop ship."

"That's not what I said at all!" Gunny said angrily. "Where did that course of action come from?"

"It increases our efficiency providing the highest probability of success." Orange turned to face Gunny. "This course of action puts ten wagons at our disposal as well as fifty-seven experienced dressers of the animals. Probabilities indicate that locals are too curious to leave. Using locals to select appropriate targets prevents cultural misunderstandings that could escalate to violence which would result in the elimination of the locals in direct violation of standing orders."

"Fine."

"Also, the use of indigenous lifeforms for menial tasks has precedent."

"Okay."

"Locals feel obligated to assist in our hunt by the lifeform within cloud due to religious practices."

"Okay!" Gunny said again.

Orange gestured at Corporal Fields. "This course of action also frees up Corporal Fields to gather fauna with a local guide to ensure a maximum variety for Doctor Sanderson."

Gunny opened his mouth then closed it. He took several breaths. Finally, he said: "Fine then. Partner with a wagon and let the locals point out the appropriate animals." He pointed at a nearby grove of trees. "Corporal Fields, Sergeant Ribeiro, gather samples for Doctor Sanderson with a local assisting." When he saw them frown, he continued, "That shouldn't take but an hour so you'll have three to join in the hunt." He looked at the EMSQUAT. "Tell the locals we will need three-hundred fifty animals to feed us for our trip home. If they will point out appropriate animals, we will kill them and with their wagons, move them to our ship." He pointed at the two Marines. "These two need a guide because they are going to gather some plants to bring back as well." He hesitated. "And thank them for their assistance."

As Orange turned to relay the message, Fields and Rubio ran toward the group of trees.

"Kids," Gunny said.

"They are young," Orange said to Kendra. "They are anxious to join the hunt."

Kendra nodded. "That is understandable; our youth would act the same way when it came to a hunt."

"It must be a constant then. I will file that with my probabilities for future decisions."

"A wise choice," Kendra said.

"Did you tell them what I said? You sure didn't sound like you did." Gunny said.

With a nod, Orange relayed what Gunny said. After a short exchange, he looked down at Gunny. "We are in agreement."

"Good, you stay with the ship and handle loading the kills." He pointed at Spatter. "Locals are not to enter the ship under any circumstances."

"Affirmative Gunnery Sergeant McCain. Ooh-rah." Spatter's weapons systems powered up.

"Warn them off entering the ship; do *not* kill them. You two need to learn manners or protocol or something non-lethal for situations like this!"

"Understood, Gunnery Sergeant McCain. I have submitted a request for additional programming dealing with protocol," said Spatter. "Ooh-rah," it added.

With that, the two EMSQUATS turned and walked toward the ships.

The alien on the wagon waved as they left.

Since Big Orange was able to see in all directions at once, it obliged by raising one of its massive claws and waved back.

"EMSQUAT goes native. Now I've seen everything," Gunny said.

"Shoo!" The Kendra said as he pointed. He gestured at his wagon then the others then held up two fingers.

"That's going to get old. Groups of three, Devil Dogs. Fire only at the critters they tell you to." A thought occurred to him. "Under no circumstances are you to let the locals handle your weapons!" He ordered.

The hunt proceeded so well, Gunny asked for an additional two hours to increase their stores for the trip home. Then, much to Gunny's displeasure, by the time the fourth hour approached, the locals and the Marines were trading weapons back and forth as they hunted. The locals having just as poor luck with the rifles as the Marines with the alien longbows. Although the occasional success brought cheers from both races.

At the end of six hours, the landing ship contained just over four hundred gutted animals. Handshakes and slaps on the back were given by all. Even Orange waved as the ramp raised.

12

The landing craft lifted off gently- in stark contrast to how it came barreling in to Arcturus. Gunny tapped his comms link. "Lieutenant Biggs?"

"Gunny?" Came the reply.

"Everything okay up there?"

"Shouldn't it be? Something wrong back there?"

"No, Lieutenant," Gunny smiled. "I was just worried with how you lifted off this rock like it was your first time."

There was a long pause before the pilot answered. "Well, I didn't want to spook the locals down there, or disrespect them."

"Disrespect?"

"Well sure, Gunny; I don't think they were done with the ceremony when we lifted off."

"What?"

"You see, they told me that hunts always involved prayer and thanks to their God, and as they were cleaning the animals, they were praying over them. Blessing them so they were clean."

"Blessed animals? That's what we're bringing back?" A thought occurred to Gunny. "You speak Sivulliikian?"

"I did a few rounds on the way here. You know, just in case we had to negotiate any sort of surrender."

"We weren't coming here to negotiate a surrender, Lieutenant. It was an extermination operation."

"I know, Gunny; it's just easier to exterminate critters when you can trick them out of hiding. But..."

"But?"

"But after meeting them, I'm glad things didn't go that route. Seem like a good bunch of folks."

Gunny considered the young man, intent on mercilessly killing the aliens now referring to them as 'folks'. "They do seem pretty hospitable." He said as he thought back to his interaction with Siefken and Kendra. And handing each of them his rifle for them to try and shoot one of the Lirpas. Only Kendra was able to hit one of the large hairy bests, which was more than he could say about using the longbow. Even so, the time in the wagon had been jovial with the hours passing all too quickly.

"We really screwed this up, didn't we Chief." Lieutenant Biggs said flatly. "I mean royally."

"Yeah, I suppose we did." He shrugged. "Maybe we can make it right. If we set up shop nearby maybe we can come back for a visit once and a while." The ship started to accelerate harder, pushing Gunny back in his seat. "Far enough away?"

"Roger that, Gunny. I'm going to get that meat back while it's fresh. With the extra we got, we're supposed to have a feast in honor of the hunt. What do you think of that?"

"Fresh cooked, fresh meat? We're going to get spoiled."

"I'm all for that, Gunny. Pushing hard to the ship. If you could, let the cooks know we're coming in hot." With that, the pilot turned off his mic and concentrated on flying the landing craft like a fighter once again.

Gunny laughed. "Hey, troopers," Gunny said over the moaning of the engines- as they left the atmosphere, the roar of the engines dissipated since there was no air around them to transmit the sound. When the Marines turned to look at him, he continued: "I would really appreciate it if you didn't say anything about this to anyone."

Several of the Marines frowned. He sighed. "At least until I get a chance to talk to the Chief about it. Give me a half hour to explain it to him then you're clear to tell your war stories." He smiled. "And apparently we're having a feast with some fresh cooked meat so maybe you should hold the stories until then."

Even with nods and clapping from them all, the Gunnery Sergeant knew he would have to race to explain it to his superior before the entire ship knew about their antics on the surface. He tapped his comms link. "Space Ten," he said.

"Gunny? What's the word?" A female voice answered.

"Patch me through to Chiefs Hauser, Bagley and Master Sergeant Thompkins."

Sergeant Whiddon connected the man to the other three as well as Violet in her quarters and another OneGen operative in engineering. "You're on, Gunny."

"Hey folks," Gunny said. "We're loaded full and on our way back."

"Nice, Gunny," Nick said. "Any issues? Were you able to avoid the locals?"

Gunny hesitated. "Well, not completely."

"Not completely?" Nick said.

"Not exactly."

"That really sounds like a 'no' to me." Master Sergeant Thompkins said with a laugh.

"Did you have to wave them off?" Nick asked.

"Not exactly," Gunny said. "It was a little difficult to extricate ourselves..." He decided he wouldn't mention handing a weapon to the aliens unless he was really backed into a corner. "Well, the situation was fluid. But," he pressed on, "the real reason I was contacting you was to let you know we were very successful in our hunt and I wanted Master Sergeant Thompkins to know we had enough to have a sending-off meal with fresh cooked meat." He hoped the new topic would allow him to skip over the details of the hunt.

"For us? You got the three of us some fresh meat?" Thompkins said. "I'm not sure..."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea, Gunny," Nick picked up where the other left off. "And, I have to say I'm a little shocked that..."

"No, no; for the entire crew! That's why I have the good Master Sergeant patched in. He needs to get set up for cooking enough meat for the entire crew right away while the meat is fresh."

"How much meat you get?" Thompkins asked.

"Just over four hundred critters. Couple of types, and some veggies as well."

"How long till you latch up, Gunny?"

"Well, you know... Lieutenant Biggs is steering."

"Fangs Out is flying?" Thompkins said. "Hell; I better get the galley up and running."

"Sounds good, Master," Gunny said.

"Talk to you when you get here, Gunny. Safe flight." Nick said.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Details and all. Sounds like it was eventful. Of course, if we're still here, it couldn't have been so bad."

"Roger that, Chief." Gunny tapped his comms link as he once again thought of the Marines and locals jovially hunting and trading weapons. And from his experience, he also knew they had traded personal belongings as well as tokens of appreciation and friendship. He just hoped that no one had left a rifle behind. "Marines," he said aloud. When they stopped their conversations, he continued, "Are we green on weapons and ammo, Sergeant?"

Sergeant Ribeiro nodded at him. "Roger on the weapons, Gunny; did a check as we came aboard. Ammo might be a little harder to track with all the… weapons training going on while we were there," He added with a smile. "Stray shots were the order of the day."

"I just want to make sure no one left anything real important behind."

Gunny noticed Ribeiro's hand dropped to his thigh scabbard. The knife sticking out of it had a polished bone handle- definitely not Marine issue. "Well, I'm sure nothing too important was left behind. Right Marines?"

Most of the Marines wouldn't make eye contact with the Sergeant or Gunny.

"Listen, I've been a Marine for longer than all of you have been alive," Gunny said. "I know you've been trading with the locals." He shrugged. "I'm short a poker or two as well. As long as no tech was left."

Ribeiro shook his head. "Definitely no tech." He smiled. "I hate to say it but I think I've upgraded on my knife." He patted his thigh scabbard. "Good bunch of aliens down there, Gunny. It's nice to run into friendlies instead of homicidal bugs."

"Or always pissed off wooly mammoth looking things that aren't interested in talking," said another Marine.

"Yeah, seems there's more unfriendlies roaming the galaxy than friendlies." Gunny said as he considered which label other species put on Humans. He was certain it was 'definitely unfriendly' with the three species they had already either wiped out or several beaten into submission as they planet-hopped away from Earth.

The ship banked hard, pressing everyone into their seats. "Flangs Out makes a landing." Gunny said. "Nice and smooth."

The landing ship executed several barrel rolls before finally settling belly up as he matched Space Ten's speed. It crept forward slowly to the middle of the miles-long ship to its docking station.

"Latching on," the Lieutenant said over the speakers.

The ship thudded as it pressed into the two dozen massive latches that secured it to the spine of Space Ten. The air in the ship hissed as it equalized with its mother ship.

"And we even brought some fresh air back with us." Sergeant Ribeiro said. "Okay Marines, weapons and any extra ammo back in the armory, then get the rest of your gear recovered." He pointed at the Corporal. "If you'll take my weapon and stow it, I'll get this meat moving in the right direction." He looked at his watch. "Ship's time puts us at twenty till ten hundred hours so once you're done with that, you're off duty."

"Till our fresh cooked meat dinner?" One Marine asked.

Sergeant Ribeiro nodded. "Oh yeah, steak and something that's pretty close to a potato." He pointed at the four huge crates. "Thanks to Corporal Fields scavenging, we're dining in style tonight."

Corporal Fields smiled wide. He had listened to only a couple of the language induction sessions but it was enough for him to get across that he needed something that could be eaten with the meat. One of the aliens accompanying him on his vegetation gathering mission -Ramsten by name- had immediately galloped off with his wagon. By the time he returned an hour and a half later with several hundred brown oblong roots and some orange ones, the Corporal and the other alien had a very large and diverse pile of vegetation samples- from coniferous trees, to flowers, to something that tasted somewhat like an apple.

Big Orange had tilted the wagon into empty shipping crates well enough that only a few dozen of the tubers had to be tossed in before the boxes were loaded. By the time Corporal Fields got his vegetation samples loaded, the tubers were also secure on the landing ship. He was very pleased that he had accomplished his mission and still had plenty of time to hunt.

"If you're going to do it, do it right." Corporal Fields said aloud. Inwardly, he was looking forward to letting Violet know what happened on the planet surface and the fact that the Marines left everyone safe and sound.

"Then let's get to business, Marines," Gunny said as he stood. He bounded toward the closest air hatch. "If you got it from here, Sergeant, I'm going to back-brief the Chief."

"I got it, Gunny." Sergeant Ribeiro said. "See you at dinner."

"Wouldn't miss it," Gunny said as he pushed himself through the hatch and into the Space Ten hallway. He looked left and right to get his bearings, then bounded off 'up' toward Chief Hauser's quarters.

13

Gunny turned the corner to the front of Chief's door. Sergeant Huckabee was standing there, rifle at the ready. "Ahh, Sergeant Huckabee. Good morning."

"Gunny." Sergeant Huckabee looked over Gunny's shoulder for a moment. "Top of the morning."

"Indeed, it is. I'm going to back brief the Chief on the mission."

"Did it go well?"

"We're eating steak and potatoes tonight. *Freshly cooked* steak and potatoes."

"Oh man," Sergeant Huckabee rubbed his belly. "This day's going to drag until dinner time."

Gunny laughed. "It probably will as word spreads of the meal we're all getting."

The Sergeant stepped to the side and gestured at the door. "Be my guest, Gunny." He looked down the corridor again.

"Expecting someone?"

"Uhm… I guess not, Gunny."

Gunny paused in front of Nick's door. He took a couple of deep breaths then pressed the buzzer. He leaned his head toward the door until he heard Nick's muffled voice say "Come in."

Gunny thumbed the latch and pulled the door open and stepped through it.

As he did, Sergeant Huckabee looked around the corridor, shrugged, and returned to his post in front of the door.

"Morning, Nick." Gunny said as he entered the room. The two had known each other for two decades- they eschewed military protocol when others weren't around. "How're things?"

"You tell me, Tommy," Nick said. He prodded his chest with both hands. "My heart's still beating and we're still here instead of destroyed by some great cosmic disturbance." He gestured at the empty chair at the table. "Coffee?"

"Abso-lutely."

Nick stood and padded to the dispenser. He was in his flight suit. "Coffee, ten percent milk, five percent sugar." He glanced over his shoulder at his friend.

Tommy was rubbing his face with his hands.

"Thirty ounces." Nick finished.

The dispenser chimed as it started constructing the coffee. Within a few seconds it was done. Nick picked it up and placed the thick paper mug on the table, then moved back to his chair. He picked up his own large coffee. "Cheers? Cheers are in order, I think?"

Tommy picked up the mug and took a sip. "It was absurdly successful, Nick." He blew over the surface of the coffee. "Thanks to those Arcturians anyway."

"What?" Nick took a sip of his coffee. "Don't tell me…"

"Well, I mean, we'd have accomplished the mission either way," Tommy pressed on, "but they sure made it easy on us."

"And the whole 'don't even wave at them' thing was…what; a suggestion?"

Tommy put his mug down and raised his hands plaintively. "They wouldn't leave, Nick! Damned aliens stood there like helping us was the only thing happening on the entire planet." He picked up his coffee. "Hell, they even had Big Orange spouting poetry."

"Big Orange? I'm not familiar with that nickname. Who's that?"

"It's an EMSQUAT. It's got orange with orange tiger stripes."

"Poetry?"

"Poetry, Nick. I'm telling you, it was a sight to see. If you run into Big Orange, ask him for a poem. Damndest thing you'll ever see." He took a

sip. "I'm half worried someone's going to wipe his memory before you get the chance."

Nick laughed. "They taught an EMSQUAT poetry."

"And they helped with the hunt like you wouldn't believe."

"Yeah?" Nick leaned back in his chair with his coffee. "How so?"

"Well, they completely organized the entire thing. They pointed which critters to shoot, loaded them in wagons, dressed them." Tommy shook his head. "Prayed over them to make sure they were clean to eat."

"How many of them were there?"

"Almost sixty by the time we left. With ten wagons."

"I remember you didn't learn Sivulliikian. Who translated?"

Tommy stared at Nick for a long moment. "Big Orange."

Nick laughed again.

"He even waved bye to them when we left, Nick! That EMSQUAT went native in a matter of hours down there."

"Well, your visit went smoother than mine did, that's for sure." Nick got serious. "They mention anything about their god?"

"He was there." Tommy took a drink of his coffee- it was cooling enough to actually drink.

"What? You saw Him?"

"No, no. It was this big pillar of smoke that moved around the area. Keeping an eye on things to make sure the savage Humans behaved, I suppose."

"And everyone behaved?"

"Well..." Tommy said. "I mean, as far as the locals are concerned sure. As far as Chief Hauser is concerned, it might be a different story."

"Tell me those Marines didn't forget some tech down there." Nick put his cup down. "Please tell me that, Tommy."

Tommy waved a hand dismissively. "No, no; nothing like that." He stifled a smile. "You know how troops get when they're out among friendlies." He bent down and reached under the table. He unzipped the calf pouch on his flight suit and pulled out a five-inch blade.

"What you got there?"

Tommy slowly brought the knife onto the table. It was a highly polished steel blade attached to what seemed to be a piece of deeply grained wood. He put it in front of Nick. "Got one of these."

Nick picked up the knife and tested the blade- it was razor sharp. "Nice. What'd you give for it?"

Tommy picked up his coffee again and shrugged. "Just a run of the mill, standard issue Marine Mark Ten. Got a dozen of them things."

"You traded a KA-BAR for this?" Nick balanced the knife on his hand. "This is a fancy knife. Wonder how it holds an edge."

"Time will tell." Tommy held out his hand.

Nick turned the knife around, holding it by the hilt, edge against his forearm. He slashed out with it. "A little short, but still it fits in the hand nicely." He glanced at his friend. "Did you get two of them, by any chance?"

Now Tommy laughed. "Think I went to a strange planet and forget to bring you something?" He gestured at the knife. "Got a second one in my other pocket. Happy Birthday."

"You shouldn't have." Nick said.

"It wasn't that much trouble; the troops were having fun trading."

"No, I mean you could have gotten us killed. I mean, if they can wipe Earth out of the sky."

Tommy shook his head. "It was friendly down there, Nick. I wish you'd have been there. I mean, they were genuinely happy to help us out. All of them." He picked up his cup again. "Can't shoot worth a damn though."

"You let them shoot your rifles?"

"Well..." Tommy began. "Just a few times. I mean fair's fair; they were letting us use their longbows." He leaned forward. "In case you're curious, I can't shoot a longbow worth a damn either. None of us could. I think Fields traded for one so he's probably going to bring it to the range. All the kids'll want one in a week."

"Tommy, I swear."

"Now Nick, I think it went really well down there. That cloud of smoke stayed away, moving around the area, everyone had a good time, and we even got enough meat to have a fresh cooked steak tonight. I mean, what's to not like?"

"Steak, huh."

"And they've got this long brown looking, kind of look like potatoes that we're going to roast to go with them."

"Well, when you put it like that." Nick put his empty cup down. "And their god in the cloud seemed okay with it all?"

"Sure seemed to be." Tommy sipped his coffee as the two sat in silence for a long moment. "You read the stuff they give you yet?"

"I've flipped through it. Going to get Doc Sanderson to digitize it so everyone can read it."

"Everyone?"

Nick nodded. "Well, they said we were all supposed to read it."

"The God of everyone," Tommy said.

"What?"

"It was something one of them said down there when I asked about the cloud. I asked if it was their god in the cloud and he said He was the God of everyone not just them." He paused for a moment. "When's the thing going digital?"

"Probably tomorrow or the next. We need to get pushed out of the system and underway." Nick stood and carried his cup to the food dispenser. "Once we're on the way back to Earth." He smiled. "And after that steak dinner."

"That's important stuff," Tommy said as he also stood. He tipped back his cup, finishing the rest of it. "But you're forgetting one thing, buddy."

"What's that?" Nick looked at his friend.

"You still got OneGen nut cases on board that probably want to blow this ship up before we get a quarter of the way back to Earth."

Nick took a deep breath. "Yeah, that is an issue. I'm hoping I can reason with them. Maybe at dinner tonight. Nice and friendly like."

"You can't reason with terrorists. There's only one thing they understand, Nick."

"It's worth a shot at least." Nick shrugged. "If it doesn't work out, we'll leave a trail of them from here to Earth as we find them."

"Well, that's not very friendly, but I'm pretty sure it would solve the problem." Tommy gestured at the door. "Want to go see what's cooking in the galley?"

"Anything is better than what we've been eating." Nick put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "I really want to see these things we're going to be eating later on. Big?"

"Big. Bigger than an EMSQUAT. Bet they taste better too."

Nick pushed the latch on the door then pressed the door open. When it was halfway open, Sergeant Huckabee grabbed it and opened it the rest of the way. "Where we off to, Chief?"

"The galley. See who's who in the cooking zoo."

Sergeant Huckabee nodded. "Heard the hunt went really well. Wish I could have been there."

"Maybe next time, Sergeant," Gunny said as he gestured. "Chief, after you."

"Sergeant Draw-Fire, to the galley."

"Hey, where's your guard, Gunny?" Nick asked as they moved down the corridor.

"Gave her the slip earlier today when I added myself to the manifest." He smiled. "My Survival, Escape, Resistance and Evasion training is coming in handy."

As the trio bounded through an intersection, Sergeant Huckabee, pulled himself to a stop and swung his weapon down a side corridor. "Halt!" He said as he aimed his rifle.

Nick coasted to a stop just before the corridor, his Gunnery Sergeant just behind him.

14

"Tolen!" An acolyte burst into Tolen's office and skidded to a stop in front of his wooden desk. "Do you have a moment?"

Tolen laughed. "With an entrance like that, I am sure I do."

The acolyte took several deep breaths. "That is good to hear." He said between breaths.

"Well, when you are ready." Tolen smiled wide.

"You must come with me!"

Tolen laughed again. "Has Paramus put you up to this?"

The acolyte blinked. "Well, actually, he has. How did you know?"

"Past experiences with our esteemed High Priest. Are we off on a miniature adventure of some sort?" He narrowed his eyes. "Are we riding?"

"What?"

Tolen waved a hand. "Nothing; just typical antics from our High Priest. What is the issue?"

"Our brothers from afar returned!"

"What? Was anyone injured?" Tolen stood quickly. "I did not think they were to return." He moved around the desk and grasped the young acolyte by the arm. "Let us go to Paramus."

The pair moved out of the office then ran along the narrow top step that connected Tolen's office to the rest of the temple. When they got there, Tolen wheeled into the temple via the open double doors.

"Tolen, over here!" Paramus called from one of the seats along the wall- he was sitting with two others.

Tolen wheeled again and headed for his old friend. As he got there, he stopped and turned. The acolyte was still by the door. "Thank you for getting me," he said.

The acolyte put his hand on his heart and gave a short bow. "It was no problem at all. And entertaining as well."

"Tolen," Paramus said. "I was just speaking with Kendra and Siefken."

"Have we met?" Tolen asked as he extended his hand. "I am sorry; I do not remember you."

Kendra stood then grasped Tolen's forearm with his hand. "We have not Tolen; we are from Itkob and only rarely come to Rudens."

"Then it is a pleasure to meet you, Kendra." Tolen turned and reached out to Siefken. "And you as well." He sighed. "I am relieved that you are both well." He gestured over his shoulder. "After I heard you met with our brothers from afar, I feared the worst."

"Why would we not be well?" Kendra asked.

Tolen gestured to the seat. "I..." He looked at Paramus. "We..."

"I have not told them." Paramus said. "I was waiting for you."

Tolen pulled a chair out from the wall so he could face the other three. "Well, if you want to explain, that is fine by me." He said as he sat.

Paramus rubbed his chin. "Our brothers from afar are odd... unpredictable." He looked at Tolen. "And from what we have seen, may act like the Clindam."

Kendra leaned forward in his seat. "Perhaps you are speaking of someone else." He looked at his friend. "Clindam?"

Siefken shook his head. "They were odd, I will admit to that, but mainly hospitable and prone to laughter." He smiled. "And I must say, are unable to use a bow at all."

"That is very true," Kendra said. "It took many, many tries before any of them could even hit an Odivers. And that one was standing still."

"You... hunted with them?" Tolen said. "Together?"

"Yes." Kendra prodded his comrade. "To be fair, we weren't much better with their weapons."

"Worse, in fact," Siefken said. "I really could not sight down my arm because of its size so it was difficult to see where I was aiming."

"You traded weapons with..." Tolen looked at Paramus. "There must be some mistake." He stood and stretched his hand over his head. "These brothers looked like us except some are paler and some dark as the night sky. They are all much taller. Half again as tall."

"And they did not speak Silvukiikan." Siefken said. "Well, one of them did."

"It was two," Kendra said.

"Right. The mechanical poet." Siefken laughed. "That does make two."

"That mechanical poet," Kendra said. "He... it was pleasant to speak with."

Tolen sat again. He looked at Paramus for help. He got a shrug in return.

"Why don't you start at the beginning." Tolen said.

Kendra nodded. "We were coming to Rudens to the market to sell some wagons and to purchase other goods in return, when we saw the light." He pointed upward. "It was like a star but instead of being overhead, it was dropping to the ground." He jerked a thumb at Siefken. "Since we had heard that brothers from afar were coming to the festival, we assumed it was them, so we quickly went to where the light was coming down."

"It was like a sailing vessel," Siefken said. "But it sailed on the wind instead of the water." He held his hands out wide. "It was two-hundred, two-hundred fifty cubits. Perhaps more even."

Tolen nodded. "I saw a similar craft that was smaller than that. And those mechanical beasts. These brothers that came out of the ship- was one of them the Chief?"

"There was one in charge," Kendra said. "An older man. Short cropped hair. He was only a little paler than us, quite tan in fact."

"And he spoke Sivulliikian?"

Kendra shook his head at Tolen. "He did not. It was a younger man who stayed close to the sailing ship who did. I believe he piloted it. None of

the others spoke our tongue besides the one wanting vegetables. But they did learn to say left and right, and other simple things as we hunted."

"Except the mechanical one." Siefken said. "I would have liked to have spoken to it more."

Kendra nodded. "Yes, that one was quite strange. He was taller than even our visiting brothers were and he said he was mechanical but yet he could converse. It was a deep voice, but a perfect one. I am not sure how it knew Sivulliikian but it knew it *very* well. It translated for the older one that was the leader of the group."

"How many were there?"

"Ten in all." Kendra answered.

"And you hunted?" Paramus said. "The Odivers?"

"They said they needed meat for their return journey." Kendra shrugged. "I did not know they were leaving so soon."

"The Father said they must leave because of their ways."

"Their ways? Because they are different than ours? Our brothers at the coast have ways different than ours in the hill country but yet we all meet together for festivals."

"Their ways are like those of the Clindam; they kill indiscriminately. Kendra, they were here to take over the planet. Their Chief told me so, in fact."

"How can that be?"

Paramus sat back. "I have spoken at length to the Father about this and he has explained it to me."

"They seemed very hospitable, and if they are sons of the Father, how can we be different?"

"It happened long ago, this difference between us."

Paramus exhaled and gathered his thoughts. "You know well enough that in the beginning, there was nothing. Then the Father created the light to separate the night and the day."

"Of course. Then the seas and land were separated. Then He created all the creatures we see and those that we do not see."

Paramus nodded. "But… it not only happened here, it happened everywhere." He gestured upward. "For every star we see on the darkest night, there are a hundred more that we cannot see. And a great many of them have worlds such as ours."

"Which is where these brothers came from. From one of these other worlds." Kendra said. "That is reasonable."

"But… you said there was a difference." Siefken added.

"After the night and day, water and land, and creatures, the Father created us in His image."

Siefken nodded. "Reshith and Amah, who lived in the first Long Garden."

Paramus nodded. "And you remember when the Deceiver came to them…"

"Shaitan." Kendra said.

"Yes, he demanded their allegiance, offering Reshith and Amah great knowledge and power in return."

Kendra smiled. "And as it is written, 'Reshith took Amah's hand and together they sent Shaitan away.'" He smiled.

"Because when two are together in His name, He supports them and gives them strength." Siefken said, finishing the verse.

"Well said," Paramus said. "And that is how it is on our world, here." He pointed at the sky. "It did not always work the same way on other worlds, the Father has told me."

"They seemed very hospitable," Kendra said. "Perhaps these were different brothers from the ones that were here earlier this week?" He looked up at the various frescos on the temple ceiling. "Perhaps if we have brothers in one place that act like the Clindam, these were others from another place that do not?"

"I believe that to be true, Kendra. However these were the same brothers as yesterday," Tolen said. "I welcome the day when we can greet other brothers of the Father… But, the way it was explained to me... to us...

was that these particular brothers were not welcome here and were to return to their home. They had been given several opportunities by the Father and did not take them."

"Opportunities for what?"

"From what the Father told me, Siefken, to return to Him in belief." He paused. "Because they no longer do."

"That does not make sense," Siefken said.

Tolen raised his hands plaintively. "I do not understand it all but while they were here for that short time, they expressed the desire to eliminate us. The Father had me tell their Chief to look at their home in the sky." He pointed up and ahead of him. "It was a light in the sky past the end of the handle of the pan, and as we spoke, it disappeared. Then I told them they were to go elsewhere to live until they believed."

"And," Paramus interjected, "we gave them a copy of The Word."

"How were they supposed to read it when only a few speak our language?"

"It was in their tongue," Paramus said to Siefken. "It was I who could not read it. In any case, we gave it to them, told them to read it and take the lessons to heart."

"And we told them we would pray for them. For understanding and a safe journey to their home." Tolen said.

"And we have been." Added Paramus. He smiled at Tolen. "Prayer is sometimes answered quickly, aye?"

"That is true." Tolen replied.

"They did not mention any of that to us," Siefken said with a frown. "Strange. We enjoyed their fellowship while we hunted, cleaned the Odivers as was appropriate and..." He glanced at his friend. "We traded with them."

Paramus smiled. "Well, that sounds like your adventure with our brothers was far more enjoyable than ours." He leaned forward in his seat and rubbed his hands together. "What did you trade?"

Siefken pulled a long black knife from his belt. It was more than half the length of his forearm. "We traded knives with them." He smiled. "Well, Ruth traded her bow with one young man for a knife and a fire starter."

"She traded her *bow*?"

"It was a very nice-looking knife and the brother said the fire starter would last for years." Siefken offered the knife to Paramus. "And Ruth can make another bow within a week; she is truly a master at it."

"That looks very..." He took the knife. "It is light!" He hefted it several times. "Very light," he said as he looked at the blade closely. He brought the knife down and pulled the blade against his arm. It made a little pile of hair with a clean path behind it. "My! And sharp."

"The youths all had knives of different designs but they were all light and the blades sharp." Kendra said.

"Youths?"

Kendra nodded. "Well, they were all taller than us, but it was easy to tell that the ones in the wagons with us were much younger. The energetics and excitement of youth is easy to spot."

"And friendly," Siefken narrowed his eyes. "Are you sure about these brothers?"

"It is what the Father said." Tolen assured him. "Perhaps if they have those among them that are friendly, and they take The Word to heart, the Father will allow them to return."

Paramus handed the knife back. "I sincerely hope that is the case." He gestured at the knife. "Because I would like the opportunity to trade for one of those blades." He smiled wide at Tolen, "Perhaps they could let you ride in one of their flying crafts. I am sure even a galloping Odivers would be nothing compared to one of their mechanical mounts. Aye, old friend?"

"I would be pleased with a knife." He raised an eyebrow. "Or a fire starter for Loren to assist her with her cooking."

"If it keeps you from cooking, that is a fine trade indeed." Paramus deadpanned.

"I may cook lunch today. And invite you as the guest of honor." Tolen said with a straight face.

"I don't think that would be necessary," Paramus said. He held his hand to his stomach. "I would also suggest to you two that you do not accept such an invitation." He said to Siefken and Kendra.

"Well, we do need to go to the market to meet the rest of our party," Kendra said, "then start for home."

Paramus winked as he stood. "And do not let him sway you from that plan."

"Paramus, I don't know if these two brothers of ours are acquainted with your sense of humor." Tolen stood as the other two did as well.

"Well, I do jest," Paramus said. He leaned toward Kendra and said in a very loud whisper, "But get something to eat in the market that was not prepared by our wonderful leader."

Tolen nodded. "I am sorry to say it, but that is sound advice from our High Priest." He extended his arm to Kendra, "If you by any chance encounter more of our brothers, I would like to hear about it."

"Not over a meal," Paramus said again in his loud whisper. He prodded Kendra. "I am joking; I am sure that Loren could prepare something wonderful for you."

Kendra laughed. "Well, I will keep that in mind." He took Tolen's forearm in his hand and placed his other on his heart. "It was a pleasure meeting you Tolen of Rudens," he said with a short bow. He turned to Paramus. "And you, High Priest." He smiled. "It was a pleasure."

Paramus took the man's arm in his hand. "And I am really and truly glad that you had a good experience with our brothers. Indeed, the Father is good."

"All the time," Kendra replied with the customary response.

As the two left, Paramus looked at his friend. "Strange events, Tolen. The father and I had spoken about the Chief and his group after we returned to town but it wasn't about other visiting brothers."

"Oh? What did you discuss?"

"The Chief is going to be tested in his faith."

"He has faith? I thought lack of faith was the root of the problem."

"I thought so too but he has deep faith in his people. Perhaps faith in the comrades around him can become faith in something unseen." Paramus smiled. "I believe I am going to walk in the long garden to ask for more understanding of these recent events."

Tolen nodded. "After I speak with the masons about assisting Itkob, I will return to find out what you have learned." Tolen put his hand on his old friend's shoulder. "See you later today, my friend."

"Until later then." Paramus turned and walked into the temple, toward the inner door that led to the gardens that spiraled around the town.

15

Gunny pulled Nick away from the intersection as Sergeant Huckabee leveled his rifle to the side at whatever interloper was there.

"Oh, stand down, Huckabee," a female voice said. "Before you hurt yourself."

"What're you doing out here, Taylor?" Huckabee didn't lower his rifle.

"Uh oh," Gunny said. He shouldered his way past Nick. "Say hey, Sergeant Taylor, what brings you down here?" He asked nonchalantly. "Out for a stroll this top of the morning, perhaps?"

"Gunnery Sergeant McCain," Sergeant Taylor began tersely. "When you are leaving your quarters, you are supposed to take your escort with you." She pointed at him. "When you leave the *ship*, you're especially supposed to take your escort with you."

"I can explain," Gunny tried.

"Really?" Nick stepped into the intersection. "I'd like to hear that. And how you gave your escort the slip."

Gunny winked at Nick. "My back door's not blocked by a bookcase like yours."

Sergeant Huckabee laughed as he lowered his rifle.

Nick rubbed his chin. "Huh. Maybe I'll add some rollers to it."

"Gunny," Sergeant Taylor said. "If you'll come with me." She gestured down the side hallway.

"What? Where'm I supposed to be going?"

"You're coming with me to the galley," Nick said. He jerked his thumb at Gunny. "He's coming with me to the galley."

"You want to come along, Sergeant?" Gunny asked with a smile. "If you're not busy that is."

"Lead the way, Huckabee, I'll take up the rear." She eyed Gunny as she bounced past. "So he doesn't duck down a side chute or something."

"It's nothing personal, Sergeant," Gunny said as the now-quartet started to move down the corridor. "It's just that I don't really think I need an escort. You want to guard anyone, guard my wife."

"Civilians in non-essential roles are not receiving escorts," Sergeant Taylor said matter-of-factly.

"There's your problem," Nick said. "For your information, Sergeant Taylor, Mary-Ann McCain is absolutely positively essential; she keeps Gunny in such a good mood all the time."

"That is true," Gunny said. "You should see me when she's not along for the ride."

"Didn't you drop a couple of nukes in Buenos Aires when she wasn't around?" Nick asked as they all turned down a side corridor toward the central spine of the ship.

"They were asking for it." Gunny said flatly. "The whole stinking lot of them were."

The group stopped at the large opening. Huckabee looked down. "Climbing or cableing?"

"I prefer just jumping down" Nick remarked. "But I suppose we can climb it. It's only four or five decks down from here anyway."

"Roger, Chief," Huckabee said. "I'll take point. Taylor?"

"I'll keep an eye on stragglers," She raised an eyebrow at Gunny.

"You're a marked man, Gunny. All for giving her the slip once?"

"Four." She held up four fingers. "Four times. And that's not counting him leaving the ship entirely, so five in all. I've been hammered by my Lieutenant because of our Gunnery Sergeant."

"I'm a fast worker," Gunny said as he hopped onto the ladder and started down.

Nick looked over the edge, watching Gunny climb downward. "It's not your fault, Sergeant," Nick said. He turned to face her. "He had an

entire squad wiped out by a local escort that was supposed to be getting them out of a hostile-controlled area."

"In Buenos Aires?"

Nick nodded as he swung around onto the ladder. "The rebels slit their throats while they slept, supposedly under the watchful eye of their trusted guide. The radioman woke up just as they got to him." He started down the ladder. "Gunny dropped a couple quarter megaton nukes on the block to make sure he got every last insurgent. I'll tell your El Tee to take it easy on you 'cause you've picked up a real tough duty."

"Just so you know, I am on his side, Chief."

As Nick's head dropped from sight, he said "And your allegiance to OneGen?"

"Never heard of them," Sergeant Taylor lied as she too swung onto the ladder.

"Spoken like a true covert operative waiting to kill us all," Nick said. He looked down. "Let's move it down there! Give it a Navy slide!"

Sergeant Huckabee considered that for a moment- they were completely vulnerable on the ladder and he was in no position to return any fire. Getting off the ladder sooner rather than later seemed like a good idea. "Sliding," he called up as he shifted his feet to the outer railing of the ladder. He loosened his grip on the railing and began to slide down the ladder, hands barely touching the sides of the railing as he went. "On my way!"

After he was half a deck away, Gunny followed suit with the others right behind.

In no time, they were on the ship-wide galley level.

"What's that smell?" Sergeant Huckabee said.

"Meat young man, meat." Gunny said. "I almost forgot what the fresh stuff smelled like."

"Wow, that's overpowering," Sergeant Taylor said. She inhaled deeply. "And wonderful."

"Just wait until they start cooking it. You'll be in for a treat then." Nick said. "I might just stay down here while they do it."

Chief Bagley was walking toward a table that was covered in papers when he saw them. He detoured in their direction. "Welcome folks." He nodded at Nick. "We've got a real operation going on down here. Those Marines overdid it with the hunting; we're up to our ears in meat."

"Smells like it," Nick said. "Morning, Mister Bagley. Can we see who's who in the zoo?"

"Sure thing." Chief Bagley gestured behind himself. "We've got a little bit of everything going on. Follow me." He turned and started to walk toward the galley. "Since we've got so much meat, we're going to do a crew-wide cookout tonight and serve everyone some actual fresh cooked meat."

"So you're grilling the meat?" Gunny asked.

"Well, technically we're going to have to fry it since we just aren't set up for open flames down here. We've already started shunting heat from the ship's radiators to heat up the grilling plates." He gestured at the wide double doors that led into the galley. "Right door in, left door out," he said as he pushed the right swinging door in and stepped to the side to hold it open.

The doors opened to the food preparation area- large processors were set up to disassemble food products for later reconstruction, beside them were four large doors that led to pseudo-freezers; they were nothing more than large rooms that were not insulated like the rest of the ship- the vacuum of space kept them at well below zero. There were a dozen Marines cutting meat and feeding the pieces- bone and all- into the processors. Massive slabs of meat were stacked all throughout the area.

"That is a hell of a lot of meat," Nick remarked.

"You're telling me. We're using the cold rooms to store the animal product as well as a good amount of precut meats. It's the first time we've had anything besides molecules in there in a real long time," Kent said. "They're going to be floor to ceiling full even after we digitize most of it."

"Nice. Too much food is a problem I like to have." Nick said.

Gunny pointed to a corner where five Marines were working. "Those the potatoes?"

Kent shrugged. "I suppose we can call them that. They're a large, starchy tuber so they're pretty much like our potatoes. Everyone's going to get one with their steak. We're going to process some others, but a good fifty we're sending to Doctor Sanderson."

"What's Doctor Sanderson going to do with them?" Sergeant Huckabee said.

"He's going to clone them. Apparently in about three weeks, he said we'll have a self-sustaining crop of them so you'll have a fresh starch with whatever else you're eating."

"Wow," Sergeant Taylor said. "Got any other vegetables? Morning Master" he added to the approaching Master Sergeant Tompkins.

"Morning, Chief. Vegetables? We've got some purple looking thing that is close to a carrot. And a couple of bean sort of things that Doc's going to work his magic on as well." He shrugged. "It might not be the most varied meal, but at least we won't be eating reprocessed food for a year if my figures are right."

"I'll take the same food for a year as long as it's not reprocessed," Gunny said.

The group stood and watched in silence as the workers cut meat and scrubbed potatoes.

"Enough food for a year." A feeling of joy and relief filled Nick. "Thank you."

Kent looked at him. "You're welcome."

"What?"

"I thought you were talking to me," Kent said. He smiled. "The founder of the feast, I think is the term. Me and the good Master Sergeant." He put his arm around his friend. "We're founders, it seems."

"Nice," Tompkins said. "Never been called that before."

Gunny took a step closer to Nick.

"No, actually that's not who I was..."

"Okay then!" Gunny put his arm around Nick. "Well, I think we should leave these fine gentlemen to their duties and come back later on." He started to pull Nick toward the door.

"Well, if you want to stay, you're welcome to," Tompkins said, "but I really need to get back to running the show. I've got almost hundred fifty steaks to cook for crew and family in time for dinner." He looked at Nick and gave a quick salute. "See ya then, Chief."

Nick returned the salute as Gunny steered him toward the door. "I think I might see what's going on up on the bridge." He smiled at Gunny. "Is that where you're dragging me?"

"Give us a minute, will you?" Gunny said to the two Sergeants.

"Gunny, I don't think..." Sergeant Taylor began.

"Give us a minute!" Gunny snapped. "Count to sixty then head out." He hadn't stopped pulling Nick and finished his sentence as the door swung closed.

"That was weird," Huckabee said.

"Tommy, what is going on?" Nick said as he shrugged from under his friend's arm.

"Chief. *Nick*, please tell me you weren't about to thank God for the food back there. In front of those troops."

Nick looked toward the door. "I... I'm not sure now. I don't know; at the moment, it seemed like the right thing to do."

"Well, as one of your oldest friends in the galaxy and especially on this ship, and the senior ranking noncommissioned officer trying to maintain order and discipline, having *the* senior ranking guy on the ship start talking to God is definitely going to make my job harder than it already is."

Nick sighed. "Yeah." He looked at the door again. "But that's a lot of meat, more meat than we ever expected to get. I mean, locals helping us hunt and clean the animals? There is only one explanation for it, Tommy. You see that, right?"

"I do, Nick" Gunny said. "I really do, but." He stopped to gather his thoughts. After a moment, he continued: "We need to take this in steps, I think. We need to figure out what's going on ourselves. Get that book

digitized so everyone can read it and make their own decision about it. God. This thing that's going on."

Nick put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "You're right. Sorry about that. It was just weird, that moment when I realized what we had and where it came from."

Gunny put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "I get it." He said with a smile. "Pretty cool eating real food again."

"Right?" Nick smiled back.

Sergeant Taylor barged through the door. She looked at the two men with their hands on each other's shoulders. "Should I have counted slower?" She tried unsuccessfully to stifle a grin.

"I can see why you gave her the slip, Gunny," Nick said. "Do you want to say out loud where you're going, or are you just going to make a run for it?"

"You said you were going to the bridge," Sergeant Huckabee said as he came through the door. "Has that changed?"

Gunny smiled. "I'll accompany you to the bridge, Chief." He nodded at Sergeant Taylor. "If that's okay with you."

Sergeant Taylor snapped her rifle's sling to her side harness. "Sounds good to me. You need a break Huckabee?"

"If you'll give me an hour, I'd appreciate it." Sergeant Huckabee said.

"Going to spread confirmation rumors about the meat dinner?" Nick smirked.

"Well, that and I want to check on my wife. Make sure everything's okay."

Nick nodded- thanks to the small crew, he was aware of most all happenings. "She's not due yet for three or four months, right?"

Sergeant Huckabee nodded. "Three months, four days."

"Check on Household Six, Sergeant. She's a top priority. We'll be on our bestest behavior for Sergeant Taylor."

"Hey now, I didn't agree to that," Gunny said. "When did that get agreed to? How about just okayest behavior?"

"Let's go, Gunny," Nick said as he started for the shaft. "Sergeant Taylor, bringing up the rear?"

"Roger, Chief," Sergeant Taylor said. "After you, Gentlemen."

The group walked to the large shaft. As they got there, a young Marine barreled up the ladder and onto the deck.

The quartet moved to the side as the young man turned to face them. Sergeant Huckabee grabbed Nick and pulled him backward by his collar. He continued to pull, yanking Nick behind him, shielding him from whoever had just arrived.

"Easy there, Sergeant." Nick said as he tried to maintain his footing in the low gravity. "In a hurry Private Bitburger?"

The Marine did a double-take at Nick. "Oh, sorry Chief." He rendered a quick salute. "Late for my shift and Chief Bagley's not pleased when that happens." He rendered another quick salute and ran off.

"Kids," Gunny said. He smiled at Sergeant Huckabee. "Nice yanking, Huckabee. And through it all, my guard just stood there..." He turned to face Sergeant Taylor. She had her rifle up to her cheek. It was humming. "Oh, well, what I mean is, keep up the good work, Sergeant."

"Roger that, Gunny." Taylor said flatly. She lowered her rifle and thumbed the safety on.

"Lead the way, Gunny. It seems the good Sergeant has you covered." Nick said. "Okay, we'll cable it to the bridge because I'm not climbing thirty decks. If we're going to split up, we'll let you know, Sergeant Huckabee. Go check on that kid in the hopper."

Sergeant Huckabee saluted Nick. He held it until Nick returned it. "Thanks, Chief." He went to the ladder and slid from sight.

"That kid needs to get an arrestor." Nick said as he moved across from the cable and looked down the massive shaft.

"Chief?"

Nick looked over his shoulder "It's more exciting that way." He jumped out into the open air. Gunny and Taylor quickly moved to the edge

and leaned out to watch as he fell. Nick arced toward the cable, reaching it about twenty feet below.

"Well, that seems like a good way to do that," Gunny said. "Right?"

Sergeant Taylor moved around to the other side of the shaft, close to the cable. She leaned out and grabbed it. "Not in the slightest," she said as she started up.

Gunny judged the distance to the cable as Nick got even with him. "You coming?"

"Yeah, yeah." Gunny scooted around the edge of the shaft to the cable. He reached out and took hold, letting it pull him upward. He looked up. "Sergeant Taylor!"

"Gunny?" She called down.

"On belay!" Gunny called. Then to Nick he added; "Figured I'd let her know I didn't give her the slip. She seems pretty fast on the draw."

"Good thinking." Nick turned on the cable, putting his feet on a hold so he didn't have to hang by his arms entirely. He closed his eyes and thought back to watching the Marines prepare the meat. *I don't know if You're listening to me, but thanks for the meat. It's one less thing I need to worry about and I know the crew will appreciate it for the trip home.* He thought back to his quick browsing. *Amen. Right?* He waited for some sort of answer.

Fifteen minutes later, the trio reached the deck below the bridge. "Do you really think you can get those OneGen nut cases to listen to you?"

Taylor raised an eyebrow.

"They'll *have* to listen," Nick answered. "Everyone's going to be at the meal. They might not want to, but unless they get up and leave, they're stuck with me and my speech."

Gunny nodded. "That's true, I suppose. But are you just going to let anyone leave though?"

"Well, I figure I won't have to; they're still not going to be willing to tip their hand on their numbers so I can't imagine any of them will stand up and just walk out- it's a sure-fire way to get pegged as a OneGen operative and pitched in the brig."

"What are you going to tell them?" Taylor asked.

"That the war is over," Nick said. "We are probably all that is left of the Human Race and we need to start working together to rebuild it. Huckabee can't do it alone you know."

"But they don't want to rebuild it," Gunny said. "They're content with splattering this ship across the galaxy once we get up to speed."

"Well, maybe when they read the book, it will help change their minds. But in the meanwhile, I am going to declare an armistice; we're not going to look for them or press charges or anything. As of today, it's a clean slate. It's really our only option."

"What book?" Sergeant Taylor asked as they moved to the short ladder that led to the bridge.

Nick looked at Gunny.

"The Chief here, Sergeant Taylor, since you haven't heard, met God down on the planet. It was pretty much a one-sided conversation where the Almighty gave our esteemed Chief the one and only Holy Bible for us to read so we can mend our ways. And if we don't, God will destroy us like He has done with our entire solar system." Gunny looked at Nick. "How was that?"

"It's a good thing I'm the one giving the speech at dinner."

"What?" Taylor said. "God gave you a Bible? God is on the planet we just left?" She pointed down at the deck. "Down there."

"I know it's a lot to take in," Nick said as he glanced at Gunny. "And that's *not* how I'm going to present it at dinner, but essentially that's it." He hesitated. "Except I didn't actually *see* God. And He didn't talk to me. The High Priest of the town gave me the book and the mayor gave me the threat."

"From God."

"From God." Nick assured her.

"From God," Gunny said as he leaned on the ladder. "I saw Him as well while we were hunting, in fact."

"That's true," Nick said.

"That's absurd," Taylor said flatly. "I mean," she continued quickly, "that's hard to believe, Chief?"

"It sure is." Nick said as he started to climb the ladder as well. "But the sooner people start believing, the smoother this trip is going to be. Or at least if they're not going to believe, they need to stop trying to blow up this ship so we can go settle somewhere and they can just go wherever they want at that point." He stomped up the ladder. "I'm through with them."

"The Bible?" Taylor looked at her superior. "Really, Gunny?"

"It was in a satchel when they handed it to him. It was in English." He paused, unsure how much he should say. "One of the other... passengers on board had a personal copy of the Bible from Earth so we could compare them."

"And?"

"And they are the same." Gunny moved to the ladder and winked at her. "Now tell your fellow OneGen operatives to make sure they are at dinner so they get the full speech from the Chief so they can behave themselves from now on."

"I'm *not* a OneGen operative, Gunny," Sergeant Taylor lied again. "I don't even know anything about what they stand for besides they don't want us to colonize planets."

"Yeah, yeah. That's what they all say." He moved up the ladder. "Until they slit your throats while you sleep," he finished as he climbed out of sight.

Taylor stood in the empty room for a moment, going over what the two had just said to her. She looked up at the bridge then back down at the cable. She needed to get a message to Violet but didn't want to suspiciously leave her duty of protecting the two men. With a scowl, she moved up the ladder, hoping another operative was at the communications station. Or that someone else she didn't know was relaying current events to Violet.

16

Corporal Fields looked left and right as he stepped onto the platform. He had passed several Marines as he made his way to his destination, but none had given him a second look as he rode the cable down.

He still felt as if he were covered in neon lights.

Unable to stop himself, he practically jogged to the door and knocked quickly on it. Loudly. "They're looking, every last one of them, aren't they?"

When no one answered right away, he knocked again. Even louder this time. "I'm done for, for sure."

Violet yanked the door open roughly. "You? What is the deal?" She pulled him into her quarters. "Why don't you carry an air horn?" She shoved him farther in.

Corporal Fields stumbled then turned. "Sorry, I just get nervous sometimes."

"Sometimes? *Sometimes*? I don't think you know what that word means! That means you *usually* don't get nervous and we both know that's not the case." She pointed at a chair. "Sit."

"Yes Ma'am." Fields moved to the chair quickly. "I'm sorry." He looked down at the table.

Violet took a deep breath, then another. "It's fine, Fields." A smile played across her face. "As far as anyone suspects, you're here catching me on the rebound." She put her hands on her hips and shifted her weight back and forth. "Right?"

"R-Right." He kept looking at the table.

Violet pulled the chair out from the table then let it fall. The magnetic feet of the chair clacked as it gripped the deck again. "You want a drink?"

"I'm still on duty," Fields lied.

"Not alcohol, Fields; just a drink." She smiled again. "Stay hydrated Marine!" She said in a deep voice. "Dehydration's the silent killer."

"I'll have some coffee." Fields said.

"Lighten up." Violet moved to the food dispenser. "Cream, sugar?"

"Sugar, five percent."

Violet pressed several buttons. "On the way." She turned to face the young man. "So what happened on the surface?"

Fields finally looked up and smiled. "Oh, it was great! We did a bunch of hunting and had a great time. I've never been hunting before so I didn't know how it would go. I mean, I've been in some firefights but that's not the same thing." He said quickly. "I mean, you'd think it's the same because you're shooting but it's different when things don't shoot back at you."

The dispenser chimed as the drink was finished. Violet picked up the cup and carried it to the table, sliding it across to Fields. She pulled her drink in front of her as she sat. "How about you take a breath every now and then so I don't miss anything?" She took a drink then stared at Fields for a moment. "Like that." She gestured. "Now start at the beginning."

"Well, we're heading back to Earth." Fields hesitated. "You knew that, right?"

"Yes." Violet said coolly. "You trying to push my buttons?"

"N-no."

"Then talk current events."

"Well, we were going to be short of food because we're going back with everyone instead of just a few people and..." He stopped and took a sip of coffee then looked at her hopefully.

"Better." Violet said.

"And because we going to be short of food, we needed to get some fresh supplies." He took another sip. "So we went down with Gunny to hunt."

"Hunt what?" Violet rested her hands on the table.

Fields shrugged. "I don't know. Some big hairy looking thing." He held his arms up high over his head. "Four legs. Long tail. Big as an EMSQUAT."

"And the locals?"

"They helped!" He smiled. "Oh, we had a great time hunting with them. They shot our guns and we tried using their bows." He bent down as he reached into his calf sheath and brought up a smallish knife. "I traded for a knife even!"

Violet sat back, confused. "Wait. You're telling me you went down there with what, a squad?"

"Squad light; there were ten of us." Fields said.

"Fine; ten of you and you hunted and had a fun time."

"Oh, yeah."

"With the locals."

"Yeah."

"And that's it?" Violet leaned forward.

Fields took another sip of coffee. "Yeah. They seemed nice."

"And what happened then."

Fields looked down at his coffee then back at Violet. "Well... we came back."

"What did you do to the locals?"

Fields blinked. "Let's see... We waved bye?" He tilted his knife. "No wait, first we traded for stuff, then we waved bye."

"How many of them were killed?"

"The animals? Oh, I don't know a few hundred. They loaded them in the transport after they were killed and cleaned so I didn't get a good count on them."

"The locals."

"The locals helped with the cleaning. They ran the show, really."

Violet rubbed her temples. "How many of the locals were killed? How many did the Gunnery Sergeant and his men kill?"

Corporal Fields shook his head. "None of them. It was a good op. Ran according to plan. All the boxes checked."

"A good operation was not killing the locals?"

Fields nodded. "Sure. Pre-brief didn't mention killing locals"

"And you didn't kill anyone down on the planet."

"Nope." Fields put his knife back in its sheath. "Well, yes. We killed those big animals to eat." He smiled again. "That's a good thing, right? I mean, we're not supposed to be killing the locals, right? Just the people on the ship, right?"

"Right," Violet said. "Who else did we have on the planet?"

"Well, Gunny was there." Fields started. "And Lieutenant Biggs was flying and..."

"No, you idiot; I mean from our group. From OneGen." She clenched her fists. "How many OneGen operatives. How many people who were at the meeting you were at were down on the planet?"

Fields thought for a moment. "Just Private Sierra."

"And he will tell me the same story you just did?"

Now Fields frowned. "I'm not a liar you know!" He snapped. He looked around the room. "I mean, I tell her straight exactly what happened..."

"Fields."

"And what do I get for my trouble? You're a liar Fields, a damned liar." He shook his head.

"Stop talking to people that aren't there!" Violet said loudly. "I swear it makes you look crazy!"

"First a liar, now she's calling..." Fields caught himself and stopped.

"You killed enough food to get back to Earth then?"

Fields crossed his arms. "Why don't you ask Sierra since you don't trust me." He looked away. "I mean, why not?"

Violet exhaled slowly. "I'm sorry Teddy. I just get upset sometimes."

Corporal Fields smiled wide. "Upset *sometimes*? I don't think you know what that word means. You're *always* upset with me."

"It's because I like you," Violet lied. "Really I do." She reached out for his hands. "You know that's true."

"Oh, I don't know." Fields shook his head. "Maybe I should ask Sierra if that's true." He looked away. "That's what I think, right?"

Violet stood. "Well, thanks for coming by to talk to me, Fields."

Fields now looked at the other corner of the room. "She says it like it was an option, don't she?"

Violet turned to look in the same direction. "Tell him to stop acting that way," she said.

For a long moment, the two looked at the far corner of the room. Finally, Violet leaned over the table, putting her face close to the young man's. "Thanks for coming is a nice way of saying 'get out'."

Fields did a double take at her, "Well, I know when I'm not wanted, that's for sure." He stood quickly, chair clattering behind him as he did. "I'll just go take some time off until dinner time. That's what I'll do."

"Do that, Fields. Get some alone time." Violet moved to the door and opened it. "Just you and the crazies in your head."

"I'll do that! Then I'll get me a great dinner. A real great dinner!"

"What?" Violet said, genuinely interested. "What great dinner?"

"We bagged a bunch of extra of those big things and we're having steak for dinner." Fields smiled wide. "Fresh steak! The whole crew'll be there."

"Everyone?"

"Well, I suppose someone'll be on the bridge, but yeah; heard everyone's supposed to be there." Fields rubbed his belly. "For some fresh cooked steak."

"That is good news," Violet said. She looked at Fields. "Thanks for coming," she said as she narrowed her eyes.

"Huh!" Corporal Fields picked up his cup and practically stomped out of Violet's quarters. "Well, I'm going to go then, if that's how it is." When he got outside the door, he turned to look at her. "If that's how it is."

"I suppose that's how it is." Violet said. She looked over Fields' shoulder. "Oh no! Someone's coming, Theodore; they'll see us!"

Corporal Fields' eyes got large. "Wha'do we do?" He said quickly.

Violet closed the distance between them then put her hand on the back of his head. "See you soon, babe." She pulled him close and kissed him passionately.

Corporal Field's eyes got large as she did it. When she let go, he turned around to see who was there- the passageway was empty. "Hey!"

Violet laughed. "Guess it was one of those crazies you keep in your head wandered by, Fields!" With that she pushed him out of her room then pulled her door shut.

Corporal Fields wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Well what's a guy supposed to do about that, do you think?" When he received no reply, he turned and headed to his own quarters to wait for dinner time.

Violet continued to chuckle as she walked to her bunk. "What an idiot," she said aloud. "If I could jettison him into space and pin it on Chief, I'd do it in a heartbeat." She picked up her pillow. Under it was a pistol. "But I suppose that won't happen, will it?" She took the pistol then returned to the table, placing it near her coffee. She looked at the corner Fields had been looking at. "How about I just get this entire ship ripped apart across a half million miles? Does that work for you?" With a headshake, she sat in the chair Fields had sat in. "Once everyone's eating, that is."

17

Violet stepped off the ladder into the area below the bridge. She looked down at the piece of paper in her hand. She looked at the panels running along the walls- they ran from bright red, to orange, to blue- depending on the systems they governed. After turning a full circle, she spotted the large panel that was drawn on the paper.

She looked up through the opening into the bridge as she moved across to the panel- it was painted bright red with white slashes on it. It was the only one so colored.

Violet unlatched the brightly colored cover to reveal a series of switches. A few were in the down position with red lights indicating they were inactive. The majority of them were flipped up and had a green light underneath.

She looked up at the bridge for a long moment, considering her next actions. With a grim look on her face, she again looked down at the paper. Holding it out in front of her, she flipped a dozen switches to the 'off' position, defeating the safeties that kept the clamps to the shield locked. She then flipped another four switches to the 'on' position to tell the system that the two air-tight doors had been affixed over the hatch she had just climbed through even though they were both stored twenty feet away.

She looked to make sure she had the sequence correct- for jettisoning the forward shield.

Trying to destroy a large, slow-accelerating ship like Space Ten was a difficult affair. There were no large explosives available to cause a catastrophic breach since the only weapons systems on the ship were ballistic in nature and mounted on landing craft. Trying to commandeer the ship and sail it into a large object such as a nearby planet or asteroid would take the better part of a day just to maneuver it so it was pointing the right direction to even begin heading toward such an object- which would then take another entire day just to get moving toward it thanks to the ship's inertia. Trying to maintain control of the bridge for two long days would be nearly impossible. Especially since the second bridge could be brought online in a matter of hours. The quickest and more efficient way of destroying the ship was a ship-wide decompression. Since the cable shaft

ran the length of the ship, exposing one end of it to the vacuum of space would effectively decompress the entire ship- any individual cabins that were sealed would just become tombs since there would be no way to leave them to try and reach one of the numerous landing craft aboard.

Of course, if someone were in a landing craft, they would be fine.

That was not the case at the moment- everyone was currently in the mess hall of the ship except for one crewmember in the emitter room and another on the bridge. Of the two, only one needed to be eliminated to deal with everyone else in the very open mess hall that led right to the cable shaft with no airtight doors between them. The one in the emitter room would die also- eventually.

Violet checked the pattern of the switches on the panel in front of her. They were indeed set to release the forward asteroid and bridge when the command was confirmed on the Flight Deck. As she looked up through the hatch, Violet put her hand on the small of her back, touching the pistol tucked into her belt.

"Here we go." She said aloud as she moved to the ladder. "All must die so that Earth can live," she reassured herself.

Violet started up the ladder.

For a moment she hesitated as she peeked in- she did not know who would be manning the bridge. "All must die," she said again as she finished climbing up.

Jeffrey was sitting at the Communications Station, feet up on the console when he noticed a head popping through the opening. He quickly brought his feet down. "Oh; it's you." He laughed as he stood. "Caught me off guard there, Viol'."

"I figured I'd come see why you were here instead of with everyone else," Violet said. She moved to the console, keeping it between her and Jeffrey. "What's going on?"

Jeffrey pointed at the main view screen. "Not much. Crawling out of orbit is about it. We were at around fifty miles per second the last time I looked." He smiled at her. "Was a half hour ago so we're probably getting close to five times that."

Violet put her firing hand on her hip, the other on the console to steady herself. "At that rate, it will take a week to even be out of the system."

"No, remember; it's exponential acceleration. We'll be over one Cee in a few days," Jeffrey's smile faded. "Violet, I need... we need to talk. And now is as good a time as any."

Violet moved her hand to the small of her back. "Oh? About what?" She had not known that Jeffrey was going to be on the bridge when she decided to destroy the ship. The fact of the matter was she planned on killing everyone on the ship including her fiancé, however doing it face-to-face made it more difficult.

"About God. About what we are going to do." He frowned. "About you and OneGen wanting to destroy the ship."

She lifted the back of her shirt, putting the handle of the pistol in her palm. "God?" She asked, purposefully ignoring the accusation.

"I know you've been having meetings in the room, Viol'. And that's fine." Jeffrey nodded at her waist. "And if you're going to shoot me, you should at least hear what I have to say first."

Violet pulled the pistol from her belt and brought it around. "What do you have to say, Jeffrey."

Jeffrey took a step to the side from in front of his chair. "Do you know what happened on the planet?"

Violet kept the gun trained on him. "Just bits and pieces. Nothing concrete. I know you people were going to just wipe out another civilization. That I do know."

"We didn't, Violet." Jeffrey took another step to the side. "And if you'll listen, I'll tell you why. And you will hear Chief say the same thing."

"Chief?" Violet's face scrunched up. "And you expect me to believe anything that comes from that murderer's mouth?"

Jeffrey exhaled loudly. He appraised her for a moment. "Have I ever lied to you?"

Violet laughed. "Not as far as I know. Of course, you could just be a really good liar."

Jeffrey took another sidestep- he was now halfway to the edge of the console. "I told you about my religion. I told you about my uncle. I told you about our mission even though we weren't supposed to tell anyone."

"The mission to wipe out another entire species!"

"But I told you, didn't I?"

Violet nodded. "I suppose you did. But that was all to justify the ends."

Jeffrey shook his head. "No. No it wasn't; it was because I cared about you and I didn't want to lie to you about anything that I was doing." He leaned forward, putting his hands on the console. "And I told you that I hated the mission and was going to do everything I could to keep us from destroying those people down there. Didn't I?"

Violet shifted her eyes away from him.

"DIDN'T I!" Jeffrey shouted angrily as he leaned farther over the console.

Violet flinched. "Yes. Yes, you did, I suppose."

"Well I'm not lying to you now either, Violet. Something happened on the planet that changed everything. Changed us."

"Are you saying God?" Violet laughed. "*God* happened?"

Jeffrey nodded. "Yes. And that's why we're heading back to Earth. Because God happened and Earth's not there anymore." He stopped and stared at her. "You've heard that, haven't you?"

"Yes." Violet whispered.

"And we're trying to make it right."

"You and Nick?" Violet said. "And Tommy? Bunch of murderers trying to do right by God?"

Jeffrey smiled at her. "If you'd ever read the Bible, you'd know that that's who God wants to save most of all." He tightened his grip on the console and flexed his knees. "Sinners are always at the top of His list."

"That's a load of crap, Jeffrey." The pistol shook in her hand as she aimed it at him.

"No; it's the truth. God wants us to repopulate a new planet. That's why we've been given this chance."

"Going back to Earth is a chance?"

"Well, Chief decided that to see if we can save anyone. Then we are going to one of the other planets."

"Because God said so."

"Yes; to be fruitful and multiply and be joyful." He tilted his head. "When was the last time you were actually joyful, Violet?"

"I…"

"Because it's what…" Jeffrey looked over Violet's shoulder at the viewing monitor. "Huh, that's a hell of a thing." He remarked.

Instinctively, Violet turned to look.

When her head turned, Jeffrey jumped over the console right toward Violet. In the low gravity, his weight wasn't enough to knock her down, but he did knock her off balance and was able to get a hand on the gun.

"Comms." Nick's voice said over the speaker where Jeffrey had been sitting.

Violet tried to get her other hand on top of Jeffrey's to pull it off the pistol grip but his momentum pushed the pair back. It didn't help that his body was across her chest, pushing her back. As she tilted back, she instinctively put her hand back to break her fall even though in the light gravity, there was no danger she could hurt herself.

"Violet, just listen to me, please!" Jeffrey tried to pry the gun from her hand as they fell back in slow motion.

"You all deserve to die!" Violet said.

As they bounced off the deck, her grip loosened and Jeffrey pulled the gun from her hand. He continued to roll over her chest, face, and head, then onto the deck. Thanks to his zero and low-Gee gravity training, he tucked his feet under him and rolled to a standing position, sliding backward on his feet several feet.

Violet struggled to stop her momentum and ended up on her hands and knees. "Liar." She said as she moved to stand.

"I never said anything about jumping or not jumping the Comms console." Jeffrey said as he thumbed the safety on the pistol. He then tucked it into his belt next to his own pistol.

"You're all alike. Liars every last one."

"But everything you said was the truth though, right? Why you came on this trip. Why you were interested in me. All of it. Right?" Jeffrey sidestepped her towards the Comms console.

"Ground Zero?" Nick said.

Jeffrey leaned over the console and flipped a switch. "Chief?"

"Glad you could make it, El Tee."

"Yeah, me too." Jeffrey said.

Violet crossed her arms. "So now tell him who I am already so he can jettison me into space."

"All okay El Tee?"

"Sure, Chief. Waiting to patch you ship wide so everyone here can hear as well." Jeffrey said.

"Well, tell him already." Violet snapped.

"Sorry about that delay, Chief," Jeffrey said as he looked at her. "Violet and I were talking and we wandered away from the Communications Station. Looking at the planet, you know?"

"No worries, El Tee. Not anymore at least. Patch me ship wide."

"You're on, Chief." The Lieutenant said. He flipped the switch patching Nick over the ship's public-address system. He gestured at

the seat in the sciences section. "Have a seat and listen to what Chief's got to say. Then I'll give you my part. Okay?"

Violet moved to the seat. As she sat, she glanced at the Flight Deck, judging the distance. "Whatever you say, Jeffrey."

Jeffrey noticed her glance. "I don't know if you know this or not, but we're under lockdown right now. Principles have body guards and the whole ship's being searched."

"Test." Nick's voice echoed across the speakers on the bridge.

"All fail safes are locked down," Jeffrey continued, "so any plans you had to disable the ship won't work without Doctor Sanderson's personal security code." He leaned back against the comms console. "So sit and listen to him."

Violet slouched back in her seat. "Fine."

"I'm glad you're all here," Nick said. "And if you would listen while you enjoy this great meal, I'd appreciate it."

"Listen, Violet, really *listen* to what he has to say and we'll talk it over when we eat." Jeffrey said.

"Fellow Marines, ladies, gentlemen," Nick began. "A lot has changed since we left Earth. The main thing being that I've met God."

Violet sat up. "Oh come on."

18

Nick looked around the mess hall- the entire crew was there except for two. Lieutenant Simpsons was on the bridge and Mister Bagley was manning the reactor room. He shook his head. "Unbelievable."

"What's that?" Gunny asked.

"This is all that's left of an entire planet. An entire race." Nick gestured with his hand. "A lousy hundred forty-six of us."

"One forty-seven counting Sergeant Huckabee's kid. We're gaining ground." Gunny patted his friend on the shoulder. "And there might still be survivors back home that we can add to the count."

Nick exhaled. "I suppose so." He smirked. "Course Doc Sanderson said he can mix our genes a few hundred ways and just clone a whole batch of new Humans when we've got the space for them."

"I much prefer and appreciate the old-fashioned way." Gunny said. He patted his stomach. "Now, if you could make that speech soon so I could get me some steak, I'd appreciate that as well."

Nick nodded. "Here goes nothing." He tapped his communications tab. "Comms."

No one answered.

"Comms?" Nick looked at Gunny.

Again no one answered.

The two waited for a long moment.

"Weird; I told that kid to be waiting for my call about now."

"Maybe he went to the head." Tried Gunny.

"He's young; he could hold it." Nick tapped his link again. "Ground Zero?"

After another long moment, Lieutenant Simpsons answered out of breath: "Chief?"

"Glad you could make it, El Tee."

"Yeah, me too."

Nick gave Gunny another look. He covered the comms link. "We got everyone here?"

"As far as I know, we've got the El Tee steering, and Mister Bagley down in the reactor room stoking the fires. Both are armed as well."

Nick nodded. "All okay El Tee?"

"Sure, Chief. Waiting to patch you ship wide so everyone here can hear as well."

Nick covered his comms link again. "Someone's up on the bridge with him. Holy hell- get a guard up there."

"It's not like someone could sneak up on him up there," Gunny said. "I mean…"

"Sorry about that delay, Chief; Violet and I were talking and we wandered away from the Communications Station. Looking at the planet, you know?"

Nick sighed, relieved. "No worries, El Tee. Not anymore at least. Patch me ship wide."

"You're on, Chief." The Lieutenant said.

Nick put his hand over his communications link. "Here goes nothing. Wish me luck." He removed his hand and said "Test". His sound echoed through the room- and the rest of the ship. He walked to a chair he had positioned against one wall. As he stepped up onto the seat, several turned to look.

"Uh oh; Chief's going to talk table manners," a young Marine said through a mouthful of meat.

Nick smiled back at him. "It's worse than that," Nick said. "So please continue to enjoy this great meal while I speak."

A few Marines nodded at him. Several gave him a thumb's up.

Feeling that was the best he was going to get since most of the crew was eating their first actual non-reprocessed meal, he pressed on:

"Fellow Marines, ladies, gentlemen," Nick began. "A lot has changed since we left Earth. The main thing being that I've met God."

A large portion of the crew looked up at Nick.

Gunny took a step toward Nick. "Uhhh, Chief?"

Nick waved him off. "How about I start by thanking the responsible parties for the feast you are all enjoying?" He pointed at Gunny. "I'd like to thank Gunny Sergeant McCain and his hunting party for bringing down these delicious beasts."

A smattering of applause ran across the mess hall.

Gunny waved and gave a short bow, thankful his friend was sticking with members of the crew to thank instead of deities.

"And of course, the outstanding mess staff for preparing the meal."

There were other claps.

"Just so you know, we've enough meat that we won't have to eat reconstituted for a year and by then we'll be long settled on a new planet."

This time Nick got even more applause.

Gunny turned and sat. Relieved.

"And of course, God." Nick said matter-of-factly.

Most everyone looked at Nick.

Gunny stood.

"Keep eating while your food is hot," Nick said. "Now that the thanks are out of the way, maybe a little explanation is in order."

The crew returned to eating. They still kept an eye on Nick however.

"A lot has changed since we left Earth." He smirked. "Things haven't gone as planned, as you all know." He pointed at the deck. "Because if they had, I'd be giving this speech planet-side." He pointed across the room. "Instead, we're powered up and pushing out of the system." He took several deep breaths. "And really, what it boils down to is, is it's all because of God."

A Marine sitting off to Nick's right raised her hand and waved it to catch Nick's attention. When Nick looked she stood. "Chief, I know I probably speak for a lot of us here." She gestured around her. "But what are you talking about? God is running the show now? I mean, that's illegal even to talk about."

Nick nodded. "If you had said what I just said not a day ago, I'd have said the same thing, Staff Sergeant Tarlemo. And I've had pointed you toward the brig. Have a seat, enjoy your meal and I'll try to explain."

"Thanks Chief, it's just that it's..." Tarlemo sat. "Illegal, right?"

"I get you." Nick raised his hands up plaintively. "But unfortunately, current events are going to have us all changing our way of thinking. I'm sure you've heard the rumors from the first landing party, and the second as well by now." He pointed down again. "The planet we are orbiting is different from any planet we've ever encountered. The inhabitants there are a friendly, well-spoken race. And from what I can tell, the main reason for that is that God is down there with them."

Once again everyone stopped to stare at Nick.

"Chief," Tarlemo raised her hand again and started to stand.

"You don't need to stand, Staff;" Nick said with a smile. "Your legs'll get tired."

"Roger, Chief," she said. "So, God lives on this planet? That's hard to believe."

Nick considered that for a moment. He thought back to not only his conversation with Gunny, but his with Tolen and Paramus. He smiled. "A wise man recently told me that your lack of believing in God has nothing to do with His belief in you." He looked at Gunny. "And another wise man told me that He is the God of everyone. Just because God is there on the planet doesn't mean He isn't everywhere else." Nick shrugged. "The bottom line is that it really doesn't matter what you believe, the facts are that God is down there on the planet. I've seen Him, and Lieutenant

Simpsons and everyone else in my landing party saw Him, and Gunny here has seen Him, along with everyone in his landing party."

A Marine several tables back stood. "Excuse me Chief, I was on your team down there, where was God?"

"Remember that column of smoke?"

"Some sort of atmospheric anomaly, I figured," the Marine said. "You're saying that was God?"

"He was in the pillar of smoke." Nick hesitated. "Or the pillar of smoke is just a representation of him so the locals know when he is near."

"But you said God is everywhere."

Nick shrugged. "I'm sorry I can't explain it better. I'm still trying to wrap my brain around it myself. But while I was down there, Tolen, he's the mayor of the town we were in, told me that God wanted us to change our ways and while Tolen pointed at it, Sol disappeared from the sky."

"God destroyed everyone we know back home and we're supposed to believe in Him now?" The Sergeant asked. "Sounds pretty heavy-handed."

"It's like with Noah," Nick said.

"Who?"

Nick smiled at the young man, realizing that he and probably the rest of the crew would not know who that was. Nick pressed on. "Please eat while I start at the beginning." When everyone returned to their meal, he continued: "Our mission as you all know, was to set up the planet below us, Arcturus for immediate colonization. We were to remove the indigenous population and leave as much of the infrastructure in place as possible."

The Marines as well as civilians nodded as they resumed eating-once the ship had left, they had all been told.

"When our landing party landed, we had our plan set for the planet. Then we met with two locals. Two locals who knew we were coming." He shrugged. "Of course, since they have simple telescopes

they knew ahead of time of our probe that had been circling the planet for the better part of a year. And they were sure to see our landing crafts and our jumpers."

More nods from the diners followed.

Nick held out his hands. "But they had drawings of us. To scale even. And when we met their mayor, Tolen, he told us... Lieutenant Simpsons and I... that we were to leave and to mend our ways or we would face the same fate as Earth." Nick's voice faltered. "Because God had wiped it away. While their leader had me looking up at the night sky, Sol disappeared. Gone. Now, telemetry shows that something's happened back in our system. Something catastrophic." He cleared his throat. "And that's why we're going back to see what happened. To look for survivors."

"Then what, Chief?" A young Lance Corporal near him asked. He hesitated for a moment. "What do we do then?"

"Well, Corporal Bradshaw, after the leader showed me that Sol was no longer in the night sky, their High Priest told me that God wanted us to mend our ways or we'd suffer the same fate."

Several Marines snickered.

"And to help us, the high priest gave me a copy of the Bible."

Now some civilians laughed as well.

"It's true," Nick snapped. "And, you should all know that the copy that Paramus, their High Priest down on the planet gave me, matched exactly to a copy that one of the crew had."

The laughs stopped and murmuring started.

"This primitive on a planet that's thirty-six, thirty-seven light years from Earth handed me a Bible written in plain English. A Bible that he couldn't even read. A Bible he said God gave to him to give to us."

The murmuring stopped.

"There is really no explanation for how that could be besides it's what God wanted to do." Nick put his hands on his hips. "I've been skimming through it, reading here and there. There are stories in it, lessons, and promises. But it wasn't given just to me to read; it's for all of us to read. The bottom line is that we are probably all that is left of the Human Race

and we have been directed by God to do something and we need to do it. Like Jonah, I suppose," Nick added thinking of another story he had perused dealing with a man who didn't want to do what God wanted him to do- and he suffered the consequences.

Blank stares from the crew greeted him.

"Which brings up my next point. I am going to have the Bible digitized so that everyone aboard can read it."

Corporal Bradshaw raised his hand.

"Or sleep induction it if you prefer." Nick looked at the young man. "Yes, Corporal?"

The Corporal looked around for a moment. "Uhm... could I see the printed version? I mean... I've never seen one before. My parents talked about it and I'd just like...." He shrugged. "I don't know... to see it?"

Nick considered that. "Of course. If you want to see it, that's no problem."

"I'd like to see it too," said another Marine.

"Me too," said a female- the wife of one of the Marines.

A clamor started up among the crew.

Nick raised his hands. "Okay, okay. Quiet down!" He shouted. "I suppose I can set it up for viewing someplace." He hesitated, unsure of where to put it. "Maybe..."

"Astrophysics would be the best place, I think," Doctor Hawking said as she stood. "We're pretty centrally located, have the extra space as well."

Nick smiled at her. "Excellent suggestion, Doctor." He lowered his hands. "I'll get it set up there within the next couple of days so you can see it for yourself. If seeing it helps you believe, then that's fine with me. After it's been digitized, of course."

"So we're heading back to Earth... to look for survivors?" A Marine asked.

Nick nodded. "Yes. And once we see if there is anyone there we can help, we will head to one of the other three planets that was scouted for colonization." He smiled. "And thanks to Doctor Sanderson, he will make sure we have fresh cloned meat and vegetables once we're there." He pointed at Doctor Sanderson. "Right, Doc?"

Doctor Sanderson didn't look up from his meal. He did however wave a fork with a large piece of meat on it.

Nick frowned, "Anyway. I think that's probably about it for now. Updates as..."

"Chief!" Gunny called. "Uh, Chief?"

Nick looked at his friend. "Gunny?"

"That other matter you discussed?" He looked out at the crew. "That thing with the... *people*. Buenos Aires? Remember?"

Nick snapped his fingers. "Right, thanks Gunny." He turned and looked around at everyone. "One more thing. A real important one so listen up. As of this moment on, I am declaring an armistice."

"Who are we fighting, Chief?" A Marine asked.

Nick looked around the dining area, hoping to catch a reaction from those seated. "OneGeneration. As of right now, I... we have no quarrel with anyone associated with the OneGen organization and I'd like to think that they will also not have any quarrel with us." No one seemed to react.

"How can we trust them, Chief?" Corporal Bradshaw asked. "I mean, they want to kill every one of us."

The murmuring started up again.

"Listen!" Nick shouted. "We have all made mistakes. On both sides. And we've lost people. On both sides. Nothing can change that. But what *can* change is how we go forward." He raised his hand. "And I say we go forward as one crew. One crew going back to Earth to see if anyone there can be saved. One crew that will settle peacefully on another planet. One crew that won't make the same mistakes again. With God's help." He lowered his hand. "We can and will survive and become better people for it."

No one said anything.

"And we'd like to sit down with the OneGen leadership to discuss any ongoing grievances." Gunny added.

"Yes, sooner rather than later." Nick smiled at Gunny. "How was that? Did I cause enough of a ruckus? Did I miss anything else?" He looked around the crew. "Any alibis?"

When no one said anything, Gunny smirked. "You've caused bigger ruckuses, but this one was definitely in the top ten."

"Nice." Nick rubbed his hands together. "So what's next?"

"How about we just start with enjoying this great meal?" Gunny offered. "Take it a day at a time and not try to kill each other in the meanwhile."

"Words to live by," Nick said. "Can we all at least agree to that?"

No one said anything.

"Then I'll leave it at that." Nick said as he hopped off the chair. "I'm due for a steak myself."

Gunny gestured toward the serving table. "Sounds good to me, Chief. It's just you and me," he said as Nick approached him.

"Hey, where's Mary-Ann?" Nick asked.

"She said that freshly cooked meat took precedence over whatever antics we were up to. Seems she's finally on to us."

"I can't believe it took her this long to lose patience with us." Nick looked up, realizing he was still on the ship wide speakers. He tapped his comms link again. "Hey, El Tee, Can you turn me off so I can eat without the whole ship hearing? Hate to hot mike my meal. We'll send someone to swap out with you."

"Roger that, Chief." Simpsons said.

"See you, El Tee and Violet as well."

"Sure thing. We'll head down shortly." The Lieutenant switched the link off.

"Let's eat some honest to goodness real food, Tommy." Nick said as he pushed his friend to the large warming table. "How long's it been since we had steak?"

"Panama." Gunny said after a moment's thought. "That fire base up in the mountains; Cerro Punta."

"Panama? That was what, ten years ago?"

Gunny nodded. "Yeah; we're due, I think."

With that, the pair walked to the serving table where the steaks were being kept warm.

19

"Hey, Dad," Samantha said as she placed her tray on the table and slid into the chair. "Mister McCain."

"Samantha," Gunny said. "Where's your brother?"

"On his way. He's getting the drinks." A smile played across her face. "Nice speech, Dad."

"Thanks." Nick smiled at his daughter. "It went over better than I thought."

Samantha smiled back. "So... What's next?"

"We head home."

"And try not to kill each other," Gunny offered.

Nick nodded. "Try not to kill each other. That's always important." Nick said as he chewed.

Nikki put a drink in front of his sister as he too sat. "What's important?"

"Not killing each other," Samantha said.

"I suppose so." Nikki turned his plate around and smelled the meat. "Wow, that smells good."

"Tastes good too," Gunny said. He looked over the young man's shoulder. "You know, I think I'm going to take my plate and go sit by my significant other." He put his knife and fork on his tray and picked it up. As he stood, he picked up his drink. "I'll see you folks later."

"Okay, Gunny." Nick said. "See you."

Nikki cut a piece of meat. "I can get used to eating like this."

"Sorry I've been kind of busy. Things are complicated at the moment. So how are things with you two?" Nick said.

Samantha shrugged. "Things're all right." She looked at her brother. "Can I talk to Dad? Alone?"

Nikki smirked. "Is it about Sergeant Mellow?"

"Nikki!"

"He already knows, Samantha," Nikki said as he raised his hands defensively. "He asked *me* about him."

"Dad?"

Nick put down his fork. "I've been told that scuttlebutt on board is now a professional sport. I'm trying to move up from the amateur ranks."

"I see." Samantha looked down at her plate. Along with a hearty slice of meat, there were actual vegetables and a potato. She poked at it with her fork. "And?"

"I said he was an okay guy," Nikki said. "I mean, as okay as a guy kissing my sister can be." He shrugged. "You could do worse with those Marines, that's for sure."

"Dad?" Samantha said again.

"Sergeant Mellow seems like a good trooper," Nick said. "He's what? A year older than you?"

"Just over a year." Samantha speared a long green vegetable stalk. "I mean, as far as company on the ship, unless I want to start hanging out with twelve-year-olds, my options are pretty limited."

Nick laughed. "That is true, I suppose. We do have an unusual age gap on board." He narrowed his eyes. "How much hanging out are you talking about?"

"We're not serious or anything Dad." Samantha rolled her eyes. "And I absolutely positively will *not* discuss that any farther." She stuck out her tongue. "Where's Mom when you need her?"

"I don't think Mom's around anymore," Nick said flatly. "I don't think anyone on Earth is, actually."

"How do you know that?"

"The entire system has been ripped apart, Sam." Nick pushed his tray away. "We have to face facts that Earth... when we get to Earth... is not going to be anything like it was when we left."

"It was a dump," Nikki said as he chewed a large piece of meat. "The whole system was. If you want to be honest about it."

"It was a mess, yes," Nick said. "But it was still a barely livable mess. And it was *our* still barely livable mess. If the big brains in astrophysics are right, then something big slammed into the Sun. Or something big slammed into a couple of outer planets that then slammed into the Sun."

"Wow." Samantha ate the piece of vegetable. She pushed it to one side in her mouth. "But Mom was going to be on the next transport after us. With Doctor Valencia and the others. When exactly did Earth get destroyed?"

Nick thought about that for a moment. "Well, not taking into account any of the time-shift between here and there, taking it at face-value, it was when we landed on the planet two days ago. Because it sure didn't happen thirty-six years ago."

Samantha chewed and swallowed. "Well we've been gone for six months, Earth time. That's plenty of time for other ships to have left."

"That's true," Nikki said. "There could be a dozen ships heading this way by now. At least the outer colonies are heading this way at least."

"The problem with that Nikki, is that we're not 'heading this way' anymore. This way is a dead end. And at the speeds we are all going, the odds that any of our messages will find a ship are worse than pretty slim." Nick pulled his tray back in front of him and stabbed another piece of meat. "If we knew flight paths, then we'd have a better chance, but since none of this was expected, we didn't have any cross-talking on flight vectors."

The three ate in silence for a little while.

"This is really good meat," Samantha said finally. "I had no idea this is what meat tasted like when it was fresh."

"I think I'm in love," Nikki said as he put another piece of meat in his mouth.

"So, Mom could be on a transport heading this way and we just don't know, right?" Samantha said. "And when they get here, they'll get the same message as we did from those aliens and they will head back the same way we went, right?"

Nick took a drink. "Well, that depends if they are willing to listen to what the locals have to say. Honestly, if that kid with his leg banged up wasn't showing me sketches of my landing party, we'd have gone into town weapons blazing."

"What do we do? If anyone else shows up and does that, they'll just get killed."

"We dropped a beacon in a high orbit. It's transmitting what happened on the planet and what we're doing and where we're going. If... *when* another ship comes up on the system, they'll be well under light speed so they will get the message as soon as they get to the heliopause, long before they get near Arcturus."

"Is it transmitting the Bible too?"

Nick shook his head at his son. "No. But it has it in its memory so whoever gets here can download it. We kept the message short so we can blast it continuously so even if someone just catches the tail end, they'll realize they need to hear the whole message" He hesitated. "Do you want to read it?"

Nikki gave a half-shrug. "I don't know. I suppose?"

"I really think you should, Nikki." Nick said.

"Really, Dad?" Samantha asked. "But that's what caused all the problems on Earth to start with; religion."

Nick shook his head. "No, people started the problems on Earth. If you read some of the chapters… the early chapters and some of the ones near the end of the book, you'll see it's people doing their own thing that caused the problems."

"Why would you read a story out of order?"

Nick considered that. "It's more like a textbook than a story," Nick said. "The first half of it is a history. So you know where people later on are coming from and referring to. The second half seems to be about one

person. Jesus. And his lessons about life. And the starting up of His church."

"And you don't have to read it in order?"

"From talking to El Tee Simpsons, it does help if you read a bit of it chronologically to have an idea of who people are, but you can skip around. I read the first few chapters in order then I read other chapters here and there."

"The ones about Jesus."

"Some." Nick nodded. "Those later chapters are about His lessons and his life and death. Actually, there are several chapters written by different people about His life."

Nikki pushed a piece of meat to one side of his mouth. "Isn't that redundant?"

"Well, they were written by different people; Matthew, Mark, and a couple of others, so you get different perspectives on the same events." Nick sighed. "It's hard to explain, you just need to read it to see what I mean."

"Okay, Dad," Samantha said. "I'll get it downloaded so I'll start reading it when it gets on the system."

"It'll be up for sleep-induction in another day too," Nick said. "And like you heard, the original paper copy will be in Astrophysics if you want to see that one."

"I don't get it. What's the difference?" Nikki asked. "They digitize directly, right?"

Nick nodded. "It's scanned in so yeah, it's identical. Maybe it makes it seem more real to them than just a digital one."

"Weird." Sam speared some more vegetables.

"For some people, seeing is believing." Nikki said.

"Doubting Thomases," Nick said.

"Who?"

"He's one of Jesus' followers. He didn't believe anything he didn't see himself."

"Smart guy."

"Well Nikki, sometimes faith is worthwhile too. Jesus told him that the people that believe without seeing are blessed. Having faith was important to Him."

"Faith? Come on Dad." Nikki ate some more meat. "That's archaic."

"We have faith every day. Not in a religious way, but we do." When his son smirked, he continued. "When I'm on a mission, I have confidence in my fellow Marines that they are going to do their jobs. That they're going to have my back. I trust my life to my fellow Marines and they trust theirs with me. Without having to check to make sure we are doing it. That's faith."

"I suppose so, now that I think about it. But that's a military thing."

"I also have faith in my scientists that they are making the right decisions to get us back to Earth as quickly as they can, as safely as they can. I don't run their numbers personally to check them. That's faith too."

"What about the OneGen terrorists?" Nikki smiled. "Do you have faith in them?"

"I have faith that they only think about themselves and given half a chance, they will blow this ship up across an entire parsec."

Nikki finished his meat. "That's not so good faith."

"That's why I am going to get the Bible out there for everyone to read; so that they look for faith in something more than their personal beliefs. Something bigger. Something better."

"Things like religion?" Nikki put his fork down.

"Things like love and kindness and helping your fellow man."

"That does sound better than what has been going on," Samantha remarked.

Nick thought back to a chapter he had read the night before. "Matthew said 'What good would it be for someone to gain the whole

world and lose his life? What would people give in exchange for their lives?'."

"OneGen says that everyone must die for the Earth to live, so they are willing to die for their beliefs."

Nick shook his head. "They say everyone must die for Earth to live. What they are really saying is that they are willing to *kill* for their beliefs. Lawyers call that a distinction without a difference. They need to read the chapters that deal with what Jesus said about love and forgiveness." He looked at his children. "I'll really feel better when you two have read through it."

"Sure, Dad," Nikki said. "Have you talked to Doctor Sanderson about it?"

Nick shook his head. "No. I'm…I'm waiting for him to bring it up."

"Worried about what he will say?"

"Yeah, Nikki, I really am." Nick sighed. "I mean, I'd like him to read it with an open mind but I don't know if he will. He's kind of stubborn."

"Kind of?" Nikki laughed.

"I'd like to see the actual book too, now that I think about it." Samantha said.

"It'll be in Astrophysics in a couple of days. Right now, it's in my quarters so you can look at it there."

"Cool!" Samantha put her utensils on her tray. "Thanks, Dad."

"You going to do that now?" Nick asked.

"Well..." Samantha hesitated. "There's not much else going on right now."

"Jeff isn't off shift for another few hours," Nikki explained.

Samantha hit her brother on the shoulder. "Nikki!"

"It's fine, Samantha," Nick said. "That will give you something to do until you meet up later. And you two can talk about it."

"While we're on the subject, you know since Jeff's got a job and I was thinking that maybe..." Samantha hesitated again.

Nick leaned forward. "Whoa, whoa, what exactly are you thinking? You're a little young to be considering..."

"No, Dad." Samantha rolled her eyes. "I'm not looking to get married; I was just going to say that I was interested in doing something while I'm on board. You know, get some sort of job or something."

Nick sat back. "That sounds like a good idea. What do you have in mind?"

"Working with the new hydroponics section. That was always a subject that I liked in school."

"Do you need a recommendation for that?" Nick asked. "I'm not sure who's heading that up, actually. I can ask Brian about..."

"*Dad*," Samantha said, "I've already got the job on my own. I start on Friday. Doctor Bellows is working on that project in the Bio Diversity and Genetics department."

"We have a bio diversity department?"

Samantha rolled her eyes. "Yes, Dad, now we do. It's part of Astrobiology. And he'll be working with me on finishing up my high school classes so that I don't get behind on that. At some point I'm going to college once I get my last two years done."

"Very nice." Nick picked up Samantha's tray and sat it on top of his. "As usual you are on top of it."

"I have plans to finish my last three months of school too," Nikki said.

"Really?"

"Well, it's more of an idea right now." He looked around suspiciously. "Kicking something around."

"This idea?" Nick asked, unconvinced.

"A strategy, really." He leaned back and looked over his shoulder. "It's definitely coming together, this thing."

Samantha shook her head as she stood. "Well, with that kind of organization going on, there's no way I could add anything to it."

"See you, Samantha," Nick said.

"Bye, Dad." Samantha waved as she left.

"So," Nikki leaned forward and lowered his voice to a conspiratorial level, "what I have decided..."

"Decided? There's more than an idea?"

"Much more, Dad!"

Nick leaned forward as well. "What's the plan?" He whispered loudly.

"It's a secret." Nikki whispered.

"You can count on me," Nick assured his son.

"Ranching!"

Nick leaned back. "You mean like with animals?"

"Yeah, Dad." Nikki said, excited. "I was always top of my class in biology and genetics." He lowered his voice again. "And the field is wide open."

"That is true," Nick said, "I know Doc Sanderson mentioned he wanted to begin putting something together."

"He has, Dad."

"Really?"

Nikki leaned back. "It's under Astrobiology and I'm on the team; terrestrial husbandry." He lowered his voice. "Did you know we have two calves down near the emitters? Male and female. Top secret deal going on down there."

"One each; that's convenient." Nick smiled. "No, actually I didn't know." He snapped his fingers and pointed at his son. "Hey; that's that faith thing I mentioned!"

"Yeah, nice tie-in Dad."

"So what are you going to feed them?"

"It's mainly a nutrient slurry but also some grass. Doc said within a month he'll have cloned enough of it that we can feed them mainly grass with some nutrients instead of the other way around."

"So; ranching."

"Technically it's animal husbandry." Nikki corrected. "But I like the sound of 'rancher' better."

"Me too."

"Once we get settled wherever we end up, we're going to have not only indigenous animals to manage, but the ones that we have with us." Nikki sat back. "It's a big responsibility. I mean, it's fresh food for everyone or back to reprocessed food."

"When you put it that way," Nick laughed. "That *is* big."

Nikki frowned. "I'm being serious, Dad!" He said angrily.

Nick put his hands out. "I know you are and you're right. That is a big responsibility and I'm glad you're wanting to tackle it. Honestly, I thought..." He paused.

"Thought what?" Nikki was still frowning.

"I thought you were interested in being a Marine."

Nikki shrugged. "Well, I do like the Corps, but I figure that there won't be much need for Marines once we get settled on another planet. It's not like there are other Humans who will come after us. Should be nice and peaceful. Boring even."

Nick sighed. "Boring; that will be a nice problem to have." He smiled. "Ranching sounds like a real good job."

"Doc's pretty sure we can domesticate these animals we have, breed them smaller so we can ride them." Nikki smiled. "A real live cowboy like in those movies!"

Nick laughed. "I didn't think of it that way; that sounds excellent." He put his hand on his son's shoulder. "That *will* be great. Really great." He yawned wide.

"I'll put these trays away. You should get some sleep, Dad." Nikki said seriously. "You're running on fumes."

Nick nodded as he finished his yawn. "I suppose I am. It feels like I've been up for a month."

Nikki stood and picked up the trays. "Maybe tomorrow I can take you down to see them."

"That would be interesting. Down by the emitters?"

Nikki nodded. "Almost. Yeah. Getting down there is the hassle."

"If the job is right, the commute can be worth it." Nick stifled another yawn.

"Get some sleep, Dad." Nikki gestured with his head. "No detours; the ship's in good hands and can make do without its Chief for at least eight or nine hours." He smiled. "That's an order."

Nick patted his son on the shoulder. "In that case, I'll see you in the morning." He gave a sloppy salute and moved off. "Love you, Nikki."

"Love you too, Dad."

20

"Roger Chief. See you in a minute." Jeffrey said. He flipped a switch then looked at Violet. "Did you listen to what Chief had to say?"

"He sounds insane," Violet said. She mimicked Nick's voice, "With the help of God we will live in peace and prosper." She shook her head. "The rantings of a lunatic."

"Except you've heard the same thing from me." Jeffrey said. He pushed himself up off the console. "Remember?"

"I remember." She put her hands on her knees and leaned forward.

"And you didn't listen then either."

Violet shrugged. "It was seditious talk."

Jeffrey laughed. "I never thought that a terrorist would worry about being seditious." He got serious. "I was telling you those things, Violet. Because... because I cared about you and like an idiot I thought you cared about me." He frowned. "But it was all a lie, wasn't it? You call *me* the liar but everything *you* said and did was a lie."

"Not everything was a lie." Violet said softly.

Jeffrey shook his head. "Sorry; I don't believe that. Otherwise you wouldn't have been up here with a gun. What were you planning on doing?"

Violet looked at the floor in front of her.

"Well? There's really not much you *could* do." He looked around. "This hulk of a ship would be hard to blow up while leaving a high orbit. Engines are going but it would still take an hour to turn, a good day to actually vector into something. That's a long time to hold the bridge with just a pistol." He looked up. "Hey! You were going to jettison the shield, weren't you?"

Violet continued to look at her feet.

"That's it, isn't it. A ship wide breach to space. So that means you've got some people in engineering that showed you the proper jettison configuration and what order you needed to do it." He looked at the flight deck. "And on the flight deck even." He leaned forward. "Am I right?"

Violet looked at him. "You're the smart one, you tell me."

"I just did." Jeffrey crossed his arms. "And now I'm telling you again- God has plans for us and they don't involve a bunch of selfish terrorists trying to blow us up."

"Selfish?" Now she looked at him. "Us selfish? You people are the ones destroying the Earth! Destroyed the Earth. And we're the selfish ones."

"Instead of trying to make things better, on working to improve things, you've decided for *everyone* that they all needed to die. That's pretty selfish. Selfishly homicidal. Who gave *you* the right to decide who lives and dies?"

"You have wiped out entire *species* and you're going to lecture me about deciding who lives and dies?"

Jeffrey leaned back. "You know that I didn't feel that way. I was never for killing off any species. Was I?"

"No."

"Who's in charge of OneGen here on the ship?"

"I don't have to tell you that."

"Well, Chief's going to want to talk to who's in charge to make sure everyone's on board with the new plan."

"The new plan," scoffed Violet. She mimicked Nick's voice again. "To live in peace on a planet and become better people because of God." She returned to her own voice and said angrily: "That's only until you... they go back to destroying things."

"It's different this time."

"Why?"

"Because now Chief's got something bigger than himself to believe in. And so will everyone else."

"When they read the Bible." Violet's tone still hadn't changed.

The clanking of boots on the ladder made both turn to look.

"Hey ho, Jeffrey," said a young female as her head popped above the opening. "I'm here to relieve you of your trick." She hopped up the last couple of rungs to the deck and swaggered over, her curly fire-red hair trailing behind her in a definitely non-regulation style. She was wearing her flight suit but the zipper was down almost to her navel and she had cuffed her pant legs to her calves. The white lace tank-top she wore under her flight suit showed she wasn't wearing a bra. To complete the outfit, she was wearing sandals.

"Hey, Wick," Jeffrey said to the other lieutenant. "Took you long enough." He did a double take. "Wow, could you be any *more* out of uniform?"

"I sure can! You want to help me turn this thing inside out?" Wick ran her hands down her flight suit as she raised an eyebrow seductively.

"That's *not* what I meant."

Wick laughed. "I know. I was off duty and eating, minding my own business even. Then out of the blue I was told to swap out with you." She pursed her lips. "Seems I'm trustworthy enough to be left alone on the flight deck no matter how I'm dressed."

"And no one said anything about your outfit?"

Wick smiled wide as she put her hands on her hips and pushed her elbows back. "Nothing derogatory, if that's what you're getting at."

"I can't imagine why," Violet said sourly.

"So you hurried right up, huh?" Jeffrey smiled. "No time for boots even."

"Duty Roster has me off until tomorrow for the grave yard shift." She shrugged. "I did slow down my eating when Gunny said it was *you* I was replacing. If it were anyone else up here, I'd have come right up. But I figured if I had the chance to make Ground Zero do some Eights on Pylons for me, I should take it."

"I have been doing a little flying, now that you mention it," Jeffrey admitted. "But now the ship's yours, Coyote," Jeffrey said, using the other pilot's call sign. "Try not to ding it up."

"That was one time." Lieutenant Wick said. She crossed her arms and cocked her head to the side. "Okay, maybe two."

"And ramming that tanker amidships?"

"Okay; two and a half."

"Half?" Jeffrey laughed. "Only half for a fifteen-million-ton tanker fireball?"

"Yeah; because they were asking for it. The lesson learned was that you don't get between a Coyote and its prey. Damned collaborators trying to defend that Corvette that would've cut the convoy to shreds."

"All I can say is it looked great from where I was sitting. Like a giant sunset in space."

"Review board was on my side," Wick said matter-of-factly. She jerked a thumb at the hatch. "Go get some steak before it's all gone."

Jeffrey gestured toward the hatch. "Let's go, Violet."

Violet stood, unsure. "Okay, I suppose." She gave a curt nod to the lieutenant. "Lori," she said icily.

"Violet," Lori said with a smile. "It's always good to see you."

"Huh." Violet answered.

Jeffrey hesitated. "She work for you?" Jeffrey jerked a thumb at Lieutenant Wick.

"What?" Wick gave Jeffrey a double take. "Why would I work for her?"

"Just a guess. Seems Violet likes to break things too. Figured you two might be working together."

Violet shook her head. "Nope. Guess again." When she made it to the hatch, she turned and walked down the ladder.

"See ya, Lori," Jeffrey said as he hurried to catch up with Violet.

"Come back up if you get bored," Lori said with a hungry smile. "I'm here all night. Just me and my sandals." She wiggled her toes. Her toenails were painted the same shade as her hair.

Jeffrey shook his head as he went down the ladder. He was never sure how much of her flirting was serious or just to annoy him. Violet was waiting at the bottom of the ladder, arms crossed. "So where do we go from here? The brig I suppose? Then you can go get your steak." She glanced upward. "And dessert."

"The brig? Now you sound insane." Jeffrey pointed at the cable. "We're going to eat fresh cooked steak, of course."

"That's it?"

"Nope; we're going to talk during the meal. Like civilized people. I'm going to tell you about my faith and you're going to listen. And you're going to tell me about your beliefs and I'm going to listen. Maybe we can meet someplace in the middle."

"I don't see how that's going to help."

"It's going to give you an idea on how Chief and the rest of the crew is going to believe and act. And maybe I can understand you people better. And so you can tell the other OneGen operatives about what we talked about. And their leader can talk to Nick. Then maybe we can find a way to live together."

Violet raised an eyebrow. "You mean you and me?"

Jeffrey shook his head. "That ship's as banged up as the ones Lori pilots. I mean OneGen and the rest of us. Right after the meal, I'm going to be talking to Operations about getting you your own cabin. You need to pack. Today."

Violet nodded. "Okay." In truth, she did have feelings for Jeffrey, and enjoyed his company, even though she wanted to kill him along with everyone else. She had not known he was going to be on the bridge- she was expecting one of the other pilots which would have made killing them easier. Especially Lieutenant Wick who seemed to always be throwing herself at Jeffrey. Now the thought of being alone on the ship- and perhaps another world, frightened her. "Maybe we can start over?"

Jeffrey shrugged. “Like Gunny said; let’s take it one day at a time and not try to kill each other.” He pointed at the cable. “After you.”

The pair rode the cable down to the mess hall in silence.

After getting their food without speaking to each other, they ate in a corner with energetic, heated, and sometimes very loud debate. By the time their meal was over, Violet had admitted she was in charge of the ship’s OneGen operatives and she had even agreed to meet with Nick. She and Jeffrey even made some amends.

Even so, that night Violet slept in her new cabin alone.

Jeffrey slept in his- without going by the bridge.

21

Jeffrey slid into the copilot seat on the Flight Deck. "Morning Chief. All in the green?"

"We're in the green," Nick said. "Moving along all green. We're a thirty-mile-long cucumber in space."

"Hey! Operation Green Light!"

"No." Nick said flatly.

Jeffrey smirked. "Why are you back at the helm, Chief?"

"I couldn't sleep so I relieved Lieutenant Wick around zero four hundred hours to see how things were going. She seems to like those graveyard shifts."

"She hit anything on the way out?"

Nick laughed. "She did not. You know, truth be told, I'd have rammed that separatist tanker as well. It was tight quarters and she had that souped-up Corvette gun ship she had to deal with before they destroyed any more transports. Her ship's plating was in good shape so it would take the hit. Seemed pretty reasonable at the time. And effective; the blast pushed her right where she needed to be." He smiled as he thought back. "I spoke on her behalf at the hearing. Man, that was one hell of an explosion. Beautiful even. You see it?"

"Everyone closer than Jupiter saw it. Fifteen million tons'll do that. Seems I remember learning someplace that you can turn a ship with thrusters, or pushing off something, or pivoting on the tarmac. And now I suppose surfing on a shockwave as well."

"The fleet got some damn good piloting out of Wick that day. Saved a bunch of lives."

"I suppose so."

"And she's a good-looking gal as well, that El Tee Wick. Lots of curves in all the right places." Nick gave him a sidelong glance, "Hear she's still single too."

"Still, huh?" Jeffrey looked at his friend. "Chief, I appreciate it but I'm still dealing with my fiancé wanting me dead. I'm not sure I'm ready for another serious relationship so soon."

"Doesn't have to be serious to start with." Nick said. "You just need to establish a beachhead."

"A beachhead?"

"You know; get your foot in the door. Set up a cordon. Establish a no-fly zone."

"That's a lot of innuendo."

Nick raised an eyebrow. "Plant your flag?"

"Wow." Jeffrey shook his head. "Still, I'm going to cool my jets for a little while, I think."

"All I'm saying is that there aren't a lot of potential relations on this ship; we're running sixty to forty on the male, female ratio, you know. You cool those jets too long and you'll not have anyone qualified to start them back up again when you're ready for some flying."

"You're a real romantic, Chief."

Nick gave the man another sidelong look. "I'll start calling you Flameout if that happens."

"Nice." Jeffrey smirked. "Listen, I know that Wick is a seriously good-looking woman. Flat out gorgeous, that's for sure. Great pilot, and fun to hang around with. And I know that she's kind of..." He looked at Nick. "Hey! Did she put you up to this?"

"Who me?" Nick feigned innocence. "Trying to get two of my best pilots together so that I've got one less issue to worry about?"

"Yeah; that wasn't incriminating at all." He stared at Nick. "Well?"

"Jettison the shield, huh? Pretty effective," Nick said, changing the subject. "I wonder who down in Engineering gave your gal the right sequence for the relays. Classified stuff."

"And to override the airtight door safeguards." Jeffrey reminded. "It's probably someone high-ranking."

"I suppose so. Maybe Violet will tell me who it is when we talk."

"Just make sure you're armed," Jeffrey smirked at Nick. "She probably will be."

"Sergeant Huckabee will be there. I don't think Doc Sanderson has us clear yet." Nick laughed. "I'm worried he might be harder to convince than she will, I think."

"One step at a time."

"So are you and Violet still..." Nick's voice trailed off.

"She's got her own cabin. She's twenty decks down. With the unaccompanied folks."

"Party Town?" Nick laughed again. "Pretty wild down there."

As the ship sailed from Earth, the crew swapped cabins with families and couples moving higher, closer to the mess hall and recreational areas. The single soldiers had migrated down closer to the gyms, their recreational areas, and the firing ranges. Lowest on the ship's spine, nearer the miles-long uninhabited areas, the single scientists and techs had set up their homes. It was here that deck-wide parties took place on a regular basis.

"She is young and single. And she's really good looking too. Maybe she can find someone there to keep her company. She doesn't like being alone." Jeffrey said "She grew up on the streets of New Orleans, fighting for survival."

"I've been to the Venice of the West," Nick said, thinking back to his vacation in the French Quarter with its buildings surrounded by slow-moving canals. "That'll give us something in common to talk about."

"Living in a five-star hotel for a week and living waist deep in water isn't really common ground, Chief."

Nick pursed his lips. "Maybe we'll talk about the weather. That's a safe topic. Or religion. That's always good for pleasant conversation. I hear that Wick's interested in those subjects."

"Speaking of." Jeffrey steered the conversation back around, "Did Wick put you up to talking to me?"

"Look at the time," Nick said as he stood. "Got to go meet that homicidal ex-fiancé of yours." He smiled. "We're talking over breakfast. Always a safe meal and nothing like dinner where crewmembers get afraid from all the yelling they hear from a couple of adults. Adults who are supposed to be betrothed." He yawned. "Sorry."

"I'll take that as a resounding yes." Jeffrey looked at Nick. "You can't sleep? You do look kind of run-down."

Nick shrugged. "I'm having weird dreams."

"Weird dreams?" Jeffrey said, seriously. "Do you need to talk about it?"

Nick waved him off. "I'll get a handle on it." He looked toward the exit. "First I need to get a handle on our resident terrorists." He hesitated. "Or maybe the latrine first then terrorists."

"Well, your priorities seem to be right, Chief." Jeffrey gave a salute from his chair. "You are formally relieved, Chief; I'm on stick. Good luck down there. With Violet, not the latrine."

"Toilet humor, nice." Nick returned the salute. "I'll fill you in later."

"Take the rest of the day off, Chief. We've got this. Seriously." Jeffrey said. "Chief, you look like you need fifteen hours of sleep just to get even. Get some sleep. Relax some. Don't come back up here till tomorrow."

Nick nodded at the young man. "Okay. Maybe I'll do some reading after breakfast. Relax even." He walked toward the door labeled in red letters 'Lat 001'.

22

Brian Sanderson jumped to the cable and began the slow ride to the bridge. As he hung, he twisted and stuffed the paper he had just printed off into his shirt to ensure he did not lose it. As he rose, he looked across to the ladder as it appeared at regular intervals through the gangways spaced out along the spine of the ship.

His first thought was to climb the ladder to the bridge but he knew it would have been slower than cabling up- not that he would have made it all the way anyway. Even though he was fit, he was after all, a hundred thirty years old. He looked up at the ten-minute ride ahead of him and snorted angrily. "Maybe another dip in a T-Cell tank would do me good."

Once T-Cell tanks had been perfected, they were used to repair all sorts of grave injuries and all forms of cancer. They were also used as a rejuvenation tool. Spas and massage parlors had quickly purchased them, advertising to take ten, twenty, even thirty years off one's appearance. While it did repair physical appearance with now healthy- youthful- cells, it did not actually hinder the aging process. Even with such a healthy appearance - relatively speaking- Brian knew he had thirty or forty good years left. Then possibly five not so good ones until his ultimate death.

He looked up again at the distance that did not seem to be getting shorter. With another snort, he started to climb the moving rope hand over hand. The weight of the rope below made using his feet to lock into place between footholds impossible. After a mere thirty seconds of climbing, he almost lost his grip. Panicking, he bear-hugged the thick rope. "Easy old chap." He said to himself. "You'll go from forty years to forty minutes of freefall to your demise. All before breakfast."

As his heart slowed, he relaxed his grip on the rope, setting his feet on a set of the innumerable pegs fixed into it twenty feet apart. "The information'll keep."

Ten minutes later, Brian heard the squeaking of the massive pulley near the top of the ship. He repositioned himself on the inner side of the rope so he could easily step onto the narrow gangway that led to the bridge. When the walkway was even with his knees, he stepped up onto it and let go of the rope. He flexed his hands as he made his way to the ladder. Once

there, he rubbed his tired hands together then climbed the remaining fifteen feet to the bridge.

The young woman at the comms station was the first to see him. "You climb up here, Doctor Sanderson?" She asked with a smirk. "Getting your workout in?"

"Maybe later, I think." He answered with a smirk of his own. He hadn't known why the twenty-something had been interested in him, he just enjoyed it. 'Great-great grandfather issues' was as far as he had considered it. Now he knew better. "If you're off shift any time soon, Sergeant Whiddon."

"I'm off at thirteen hundred." She looked at her watch. "That means you've got about four hours to do whatever important things you are always doing."

Brian waved his hand dismissively. "Just routine science stuff. I'm the science officer you know." He winked.

"And security as well mister two important hats."

"It's the science one I'm wearing today," Brian lied. "Important science things done in a scientific way even."

"Scientifically," Sergeant Whiddon laughed. "I'd imagine. Maybe you can tell me about it later."

Brian nodded as he thought back on all the seemingly innocuous pillow-talk the two had shared, that now thanks to his research, seemed very cold and calculated. "Sure, sure. Just let me know if I'm boring you too much." He smiled. "See you then, Jean." He figured that there was no sense ruining a good thing, at least until he needed to have the attractive young Sergeant detained. Or ejected into space, if Nick had his way. He was sure that the speech at dinner the night before was all a ruse. With a final wave, he turned and walked to the flight deck.

"Jeffrey," Brian said as he put his hand on the man's shoulder, "are you always working?"

"There's not much else to do, Doc." He looked up and smiled at the man. "Of course, there's not much to do up here either." He panned his hand across the instruments. "Telemetry is good. We won't even have another near miss for two weeks and the last one we had

wasn't even close enough to do more than wave at it as we went by. We have an abundance of clear, boring sailing going on. What brings you up here?" He waggled his eyebrows. "Besides a certain Comms Sergeant?"

"Oh? Is Sergeant Mellow up here?" Brian feigned innocence. "Been meaning to talk to that young man."

"Yeah, that's who it is. You know she's young enough to be your grand… great grand…"

"Neighbor," interrupted Brian. "A great, grand neighbor. Someone I could borrow salt from. Or a cup of milk." He shook his head. "Damn, I thought I was being sneaky, too."

"Doc, there are only about a hundred of us on this can. With mostly nothing to do but gossip. Nothing and no one is too sneaky enough these days."

Brian turned so his back was to Sergeant Whiddon then fished the paper out of his shirt. "Nothing and no one?" He uncrumpled the paper. "Even our OneGen conspirators that we have aboard?"

"They do seem to be pretty sneaky," Jeffrey admitted. "Besides of course, my fiancé. And she isn't giving any names even though she's agreed to stop any further actions. She doesn't trust Chief *that* much."

"Yes; he told me as much." He smiled. "Therefore, I have been taking an alternative. scientific approach to the problem."

"You going to threaten to put her in an air lock?"

"No; that's Nick's approach," Brian said. "I've taken the mathematical approach to the problem."

"Math doesn't lie."

"Very true, young man." Brian sat in the empty copilot seat. "And even though I might not have the truth, I have suspicions with a fairly good degree of probability."

"You aren't one-hundred percent sure?" Jeffrey teased. "Chief of Sciences *and* Security?"

"Well, up to high nineties is where my probability runs," Brian held up the list. "But I'll stand by my numbers."

"I'm not on that list, am I?" Jeffrey asked nervously.

"Initially you were in the low twenties, but once I factored in familial information, you moved up to the forties."

"Doc!"

"And of course, once I factored in your fiancé, you moved to the sixties."

"What?"

Brian laughed. "Low sixties, so you're probably all right."

"I'm all right," assured Jeffrey.

"Spoken like a true covert terrorist operative."

Now Jeffrey laughed.

"Don't worry; I'm also in the mid-forties so I'm not far behind you."

"And Chief?"

"The teens." Brian looked around. "Speaking of. Don't tell me I came all the way up here and he's run off."

Jeffrey shook his head. "He's in the head. Can I see the list?"

Brian looked around. "I know I don't need to tell you…"

"Yeah; close-hold," said Jeffrey. "I got it." He held out his hand.

"At least it's a short list," Brian said as he handed over the list. "Just over ten percent; about what I expected."

"Nice." Jeffrey scanned the list.

"You taking a trick, Doc?" Nick patted his friend on the shoulder. "Good luck getting Ground Zero to do anything else." He smiled at his friend.

"I told you Chief; there's nothing else to do around here."

"Oh, I don't know. Our esteemed Sciences and Security Officer seems to have figured out how to occupy his time. Shockingly so."

"It's purely for medicinal purposes," Brian said.

"Hey," Jeffrey said, "*she's* on the list?"

"Who?" Nick asked. "What list?"

"Doctor Sanderson's medicinal purposes. He has a list of the terrorists."

Brian nodded. "And sweet Jean is on the list."

"How long have you known?"

"Since about forty-five minutes ago. Sorry, Nick."

"Oh, Doc. Is she playing us? She's been listening in on all our communications too, hasn't she?"

"Probably." Brian shrugged. "She's most likely been patching in her co-conspirators on all our conversations too."

Jeffrey's eyes got large. "Sergeant Huckabee and Taylor are on the list?" He handed the list back to Brian. "Those two that hung out up here with their weapons following Chief and Gunny around!"

"Exciting, isn't it?" Brian said. "Well, Nick, at least we've been on the up and up since Arcturus, so that helps us, I think."

"Up and up?" Nick said.

"It's all been comms about helping the Earth, then preserving these aliens; nothing about exterminations or wholesale genocide."

"Well, when you put it like that, I'm not sure I want to be on our side either," said Jeffrey. "I thought we were the good guys."

"We *are* the good guys," Nick replied. "We're trying to save humanity; OneGen wants us all dead."

"We just need to work out some sort of long-term truce with them." Jeffrey added.

Brian handed the list to Nick. "We just need to reach them is all."

"I'm talking to Violet over breakfast today. I'll see what I can do." Nick said.

"Talking over a meal might help."

"Violet and I had a pretty good talk over dinner. And…" Jeffrey's voice trailed off.

"And?" Brian said.

"And we've agreed to disagree."

"That's commendable." Brian said. "But that's no guarantee that the others." He gestured at the list. "These others might not be too keen on going along with her. There are lots of moving parts keeping this craft on course. Parts that can be disrupted with the right know-how. Not to mention all of the vacuum of space wanting to be in here and just needing an open airlock as an invitation."

"Geeze, Doc," Jeffrey said. "You really know how to put a guy on edge."

"Facts are facts."

"If it helps, we agreed not to do anything rash that's going to endanger our mission to Earth." Jeffery said. "And after we finish up there, if Violet and her pals want to go to a different planet, I told her we'll make sure they are outfitted with a decent ship and they can and go do their own thing. And we won't stop them."

"So the whole 'putting them in an airlock' is off the table?" Brian said sourly. "I'm really a fan of that method; stops any repeat offenders."

"For the time being." Nick said. "And if you've got a list of suspects, it will be easier to make sure they stick to their end of the bargain." He looked at the list "How'd you come up with this?"

"I set up an algorithm for where people lived, duty assignments, infractions both major and minor." Brian tapped his chin. "Psychological examinations and any personal documents that I could find. It ran all night long with me adjusting inputs here and there."

"Where was I?"

"You were in the low Teens, Chief," Jeffrey grinned. "Apparently insubordination didn't rank against you."

"That's good to know." Nick handed the list back to Brian. "See what inroads you can work with the good Sergeant and keep me posted."

Brian gave a sloppy salute. "You got it, Chief." As he left, he angled by the comms station.

"Hey Chief, I want to talk to Violet about this."

Nick shook his head. "Not a good idea, El Tee."

"Why's that?"

"If the Doc is right with his list, then we would be tipping our hand that we've identified their operatives." Nick smiled. "Let's just see if we can get Violet to give up the names herself, then we can compare them to what we've got to see if she's on the up and up."

Jeffrey pursed his lips. "Fine. I'll keep talking to her in general then to see what I can do. What do you think about discussing… religion with her? Should I be talking about that with her?"

Nick sighed. He thought back to his dream. He had been reading the Bible when he had time. The book was not at all what he had expected for such an allegedly seditious book- the first few chapters dealt with individuals, action, betrayal, and he had to admit, adventure, as well as guidelines for general living. *Maybe after I get the whole thing in my head from the sleep induction, I'll have a better handle on this Jesus guy. Then I can talk to Brian about it too.*

"Chief?" The lieutenant reached toward him. "You all right?"

Nick startled, unsure of how long he had kept the other man waiting. "Sure, sure."

"Sure, I should talk to her, or sure you're all right?"

Nick remembered the question. "Both, I think. We're all going to get up close and personal with this. You might as well get a jump on it. You can talk to El Tee Wick about it too, you know. She's probably eating right now. Sitting all alone"

"Still at that game, huh?"

"Who me? I'm not at anything." Nick feigned innocence. "You should talk to her. Who's next in the hot seat?"

Jeffrey rubbed his chin. "Let's see. I've got Staff Sergeant Mendez coming on duty in three hours."

"That's close to lunch time."

"I suppose." Jeffery said unconvinced. "Sort of."

"Mendez. Was he on that list?"

Jeffrey shook his head. "Nope. He's good to go as long as Doc's figures are good."

Nick nodded. "Well, I'll come back at the end of Mendez's trick, what's that twenty hundred?"

"Eighteen; we're running six-hour shifts since it's so quiet. What happened to coming back tomorrow?"

"I'll get bored." Nick said. "How about I talk to Violet, get some rack time, then be back after that? I'll take my time and get some sleep, then I'll be back so you can get some time off too."

"That does sound nice. I suppose as long as you promise to get some time in the rack too. Deal?"

"Deal." Nick started to walk towards the ladder. "See you later."

Jeffrey saluted from the chair. "I mean it; get some sleep; you look like you haven't gotten much lately."

"Yeah; you got it."

Nick walked past Brian and the young sergeant as quickly as he could, then slid down the ladder to ride the cable down to the mess hall.

Jeffrey shook his head as Nick walked away. He was sure he wasn't interested in trying to patch up his relationship with Violet- the fact that she had no problem killing him along with the entire crew put a very real damper on it. And Lieutenant Wick seemed ready, willing, and able. And very easy on the eyes. Jeffrey put his arms on the chair's rests and slouched down, frustrated. But she was also a fellow pilot. And a relationship going sour with a fellow pilot in such close quarters could make his life very difficult. With a sigh, he slouched even more in his seat, feet resting on the instrument panel. "Just keep your head

down, Ground Zero, first get to Earth," he crossed his legs, "deal with reigniting your engines second."

23

Nick startled awake. He had had the same dream again- he was a Roman Centurion and he had lost over a dozen soldiers. Not in battle- they were just missing in town. Each time in his dream, he ran frantically in the labyrinth of narrow, winding alleyways. Every time he would stop a local to ask where his men were, he would receive the same answer "You are the one that is lost."

That was when he would wake. No matter how he searched, once he asked anyone where his men were, and he received the same answer, he jolted awake. Every single time he went to sleep.

"Comms, what's our current speed?" He asked.

"Fifteen point seven five C, Chief," came the reply. "Acceleration within expected algorithms. All's in the green, Chief." They had been underway for only three weeks but thanks to Mister Bagley's refocusing of the emitters, and budgeting power to non-essential systems, they were accelerating almost ten percent faster. Another two weeks had been effectively removed from their already quick journey. And thanks to an uneasy truce with One-Gen, it had been uneventful.

Nick swung his legs off his bed- it struck him that his feet reached the floor easily. "Three months. Just under three months then maybe Earth will get this out of my head." He looked down at his feet. It seemed as if decades had passed since his feet dangled from his bed back on Earth. As he yawned, he reached over and turned on his bedside lamp.

"You have the dream again?"

Nick jumped- he had once again forgotten that Rebeca was in his room. Every time he woke up. "Sorry." He turned the light off, returning the room to the faint glow of the blue lights along the floor. He put his face in his hands, elbows on his knees. "Forgot."

"I think I'm going back to my room so you can sleep," Rebeca said. "And I can too. And later you should talk to Brian about your dreams. You can't keep avoiding it."

When Nick didn't answer, she got up and quietly slipped out.

Nick sat, face in his hands for several minutes. "Why am I the one that's lost?" he said to the empty room. He grabbed a pillow and slung it at the door. "Why?" Thanks to the increasing gravity, the pillow sailed in a graceful arc only about ten feet.

He moved to the food dispenser. "Coffee, ten percent cream, five percent sugar. Eighteen ounces." As the processor obliged, Nick picked up the now-bound book. Nick had drilled two holds along one side of it after their first dinner of real meat. Using two aluminum bars and two bolts, he had created a hard spine for it. He was surprised that when he did, the margins of the book accommodated its binding with generous gutters on opposing pages- as if it has been created with the expectation of being bound. "Think of everything, don't you God?" Nick had remarked. "Romans." He said. "The Romans."

After the staff meeting, he had started reading the book, making it through to the chapter full of statistics. Nick thought back to that reading *Not statistics, it was Numbers.* With his eyes drooping, he had stopped reading and went to bed soon after Rebeca. After a few days of this, he had made it to the stories of the various judges God sent to His people. As usual when he stopped reading for the night, he flipped through the entire book reading chapter titles. After a week of the Bible being in the astrophysics lab, he had ordered a copy of it to be placed there and he had brought the original back to his quarters to read it personally- as Tolen and Paramus had instructed. He had even eschewed getting it in sleep sessions so he could read it himself. Unfortunately, ship's duties seemed to keep him from reading very much of the Bible. He had only made it to Joel- a prophet who warned about God's judgement and a coming restoration of blessings that would come through repentance.

Nick rubbed the sleep from his eyes. "Romans," he said again. He flipped through the book searching for it. "Come on God; You can do gutters but not a table of contents?" He said as he searched. Finally, near the end of the book he found the chapter. "Is this where you want me? I was trying to read the books in order." The food processor chimed that his drink was ready- thanks to Mister Bagley's adjustments, individual food processors now worked on a secondary power grid with requests prioritized

and processed in order based on an algorithm that took into account ingredients as well as the individual's rank.

Nick got up and retrieved his coffee. He tentatively sipped it as he sat back at the table. "Romans," He put the coffee down and began to read - "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God…"

24

Nick sat at the controls, eyes half closed. He was jolted awake by a hand on his shoulder.

"Sorry, Chief; didn't realize you were dozing."

Nick rubbed his face with his hands. "Not much to do up here." He looked up at the person who had woken him. It was Sergeant Lincoln from the maintenance department. "You fixing something or taking a trick, Sergeant?"

"I'm taking a trick." He gestured at the other seat. "The Lieutenant had me in the simulator for about a hundred hours on the trip out and I sat left seat with him on a few dozen nights." He smiled. "And we're pretty much on autopilot right now, so he said I could take a half-shift solo trick. Sergeant Mendez will be up in about three hours."

Nick nodded. "Well, I'm beat so I'm not going to argue with you."

Sergeant Lincoln nodded. "Sure thing, Chief." He hesitated for the slightest of moments. "You should go get a snack or something on your way to your rack. I've got this."

Nick pulled himself up. "Sounds like a plan." He gestured at the controls. "The ship's yours."

"On stick." Lincoln smiled again at the Chief as he eased past him. "Got it from here, Chief."

Nick walked to the access ladder. He looked back at the young Sergeant at the controls. He thought back to Doctor Sanderson's list- Sergeant Lincoln wasn't on it. With a shrug, he slid down the ladder to the always-moving rope. "Maybe a snack is what I need." He jumped for the rope going down and easily grabbed it. He slid down the rope to one of the bulges that acted as handholds then closed his eyes as he hung. After a few minutes, he watched as the deck numbers went by, counting them as they slowly passed. As he got closer to the mess hall, he half considered just continuing down to his quarters. At the last moment, he leapt for the landing. *Just something light to help me sleep*, he thought as he entered the large open area. He scanned the room- It was completely empty except for two

young men sitting at a table together and another using a portable wet vacuum to mop the floors. *It is three AM* he thought as he moved to the food-dispensing machine. "Evening, gents," he said to the pair as he passed their table.

"Chief," said one. The other just nodded.

Nick brought up the display and typed in a beef sandwich. The display still read Earth-centric items even though the meat was not beef but the meat of one of the animals from Arcturus that had been broken down to the molecular level for storage. The meat's structure was similar enough to the ship's programming that it could be reassembled correctly. As Nick pressed the enable button, the young man at the table slid quietly out of his seat. His partner right behind him.

The soldier using the portable vacuum clattered it on the floor to help cover any noises made as they moved toward Nick.

"You gents want anything?" Nick asked. "I'm buying." He turned to look at where the pair had been seated. He was surprised to see them right behind him. "Sneaking up on me trying to get a free drink?" He said with a smile.

The one on the left raised a thick blackjack and swung it. Nick ducked to the side, catching a glancing blow from the thick leather tube filled with steel ball bearings on the side of his head, it continued down hitting his collarbone. It broke with an audible crack. Nick staggered to his knees as blood gushed out of the gash in his head.

"No thanks, *Chief*. We don't need you doing anything else for us," said the other as he kicked Nick in the chest, knocking him onto his back. "Now that you've even got Violet against us now."

Nick's eyes rolled up in his head as he fought to stay conscious. A ringing in his head told him that he had a concussion to go along with the gash but even so, he tried to roll over onto his side to stand and fight his attackers. He breathed in deeply to try and clear his head.

The man using the vacuum let it fall without turning it off-without being pressed against the deck, it now made a loud sucking sound, providing background noise. He took two running steps and kicked Nick in the ribs.

Nick had just made it to his knees when he was thrown onto his back from the blow. Now along with trying to focus his attention on the attackers, he was gasping for air. He tried again to get up.

"Still trying to get up, *Chief*?" Asked the one with the blackjack. He bent over and hit Nick across the back with it just as Nick got to his hands and knees. Once again, Nick was on the floor, his ribs burning and probably broken where they had been hit.

"Help the Chief up, Pat," said the one who had been vacuuming.

Pat bent down and grabbed Nick by his upper arm, yanking him to his feet. "Up and at 'em, Chiefie Weefie. We want to talk to you."

Nick inhaled sharply as his broken collarbone ground around inside his shoulder.

"We're going to talk to him?" The one with the blackjack asked. He raised it up. "I thought we were just going to bash his head in. Want me to hit him again?"

"Sure, Sam. Give him a shot to let him know we mean business."

"For Pete!" Sam said angrily as he brought the blackjack down hard.

Nick tried to lean out of the way but Pat held him in place. The blackjack hit him squarely on the top of the head. White flashes danced in front of Nick's eyes as his knees gave out. The outer edges of his field of vision blackened.

"Stay with us Chief," said Pat. "We'd hate to have you miss the action." He jerked Nick's arm.

Lightning bolts of pain shot through Nick's shoulder as his broken collarbone shifted around again. He jerked his head up. "Wait…" He started. "Just let me…"

"Shut UP!" Sam waved the blackjack at Nick. "Get his other arm, Bill." He said to the one that had been vacuuming.

Bill moved to Nick's other shoulder and grabbed him. "Where we taking him?"

"Nowhere. This is as far as he's ever going to go."

"Excuse me, gents," a voice said. Nick tried to focus on the new arrival but couldn't.

Pat looked over. "Get back to whatever you're doing, Jaz."

"I was getting something to eat." Corporal Jaszczak rubbed his flat belly. "I'm starving you know." He nodded at Nick. "Well, well, Chief. Seems your day isn't going to end well." He put his hands on his hips and stood Akimbo. "Say, I seem to recall I still owe you something from planetside when you stopped me from shooting those locals." He shook his hands out and took a couple of jabs at the air as he bounced on the balls of his feet. "If memory serves me correctly."

"Corprall…" Nick slurred.

"Shut up, I said!" Sam shouted. He whirled around on Corporal Jaszczak. "Who are you?"

"Corporal Ivan Jaszczak to the Marine Corps. Sansei Ivan the Terrible to his students." said Pat. "He teaches martial arts and stuff." He shrugged. "Took a couple of classes."

"Yeah?" Ivan smiled as he put his hands back on his hips. "Get anything out of the classes?"

"A little," said Pat, conversationally. "Got busy with other stuff. You know? Nothing personal."

"Yeah," said Ivan. "It happens." He waved his hand dismissively. "No offense taken. You should stick with it though. Comes in handy in a pinch."

"I suppose. I was thinking of signing up for the Krav Maga classes. I missed the last one. Got another planned?"

"Sure, sure. I'm going to be starting up another…"

"If you two are through walking down memory lane," interrupted Sam, "I want to get this finished." He gestured at Nick. "This pig needs to die."

"You going to kill him right here?" Ivan asked.

"What's it to you?"

"Oh, nothing, Pat." Ivan rubbed his belly. "I was just here getting a late snack when this target of opportunity arose." He walked to the drink dispenser and pressed several buttons. "Since I'm here…"

"Yeah, you can take your best shot," Pat grinned wide at Sam. "He'll knock out teeth, Sam."

Ivan took his drink from the dispenser. "Not sure if killing him here is a good idea though." He walked back to the trio then looked at Nick. "Kill him here and someone else walks by and he's in a tank in no time. When he comes out, you're all getting jettisoned into space at twenty Cee." He looked around. "Or whatever we'll be going in a couple of days."

Sam slapped the blackjack into his hand. "What do *you* suggest?"

"Pitch him down the shaft. Hit him on the head first, of course. And by the time he hits the bottom he'll have been dead for a good twenty, twenty-five minutes from this deck. The odds of anyone at this hour even hearing him hit are nil, and the guards are inside the reactor chamber so they won't hear him either." He smiled. "It will be shift change at oh-eight hundred hours before anyone notices the very cold corpse of Chief Nick Hauser." He toasted Sam with his cup. "And that will be way too late to harvest any viable Chief Warrant Officer Five T-Cells." He raised his cup of coffee and toasted the other man. "Nice, huh?"

Nick raised his head to look at the Corporal. Even groggy, he was surprised at the cold, callousness of him. In their various sparring sessions, he had seemed downright friendly towards him. "Corprrral…" he slurred.

Pat slapped Nick hard. "Fine last words, *Chief*."

"Well, I need to get to bed; I'm on an early shift tomorrow, so let's get this show on the road," Ivan said. He gestured toward the exit. "Follow me, gents." Without looking back, he walked across the dining area to the shaft.

"Let's go," said Sam. "Drag him if you have to."

Pat and Bill dragged Nick towards where Ivan was standing- whether Nick's legs weren't working, or he was trying to delay the inevitable made no difference to them.

When they got to the shaft, Ivan looked down it. "Pretty good fall from here." He brought the cup up to his lips then stopped. He chewed on the lid for a moment. "Make sure you hit him hard enough to kill him so

that he's already dead when he falls. That will make it pretty much too late to even get him to a tank if someone happens to see him when he hits."

Sam looked at the blackjack. "Fine then. Turn him around so I can hit him on the back of the head, then you two shove him off."

"Nice and hard." Ivan said with a smile. "Need a hand with it?"

"Juss lishen," Nick said groggily.

"Shut UP!" Pat shouted. "Do it already!"

"I can do it!" Sam snapped. He looked from the blackjack to Nick. "I know what I'm doing!"

"Hit him, Sam!" Bill coaxed his friend. "For Pete and his girl. He killed them in cold blood."

Ivan nodded. "Fine, fine. I just want to make sure you hit him with a lethal force." He winked at Sam. "Like this." Without warning, he tossed his cup at Bill. When it hit him, the loosened lid flew off covering his face in nearly-boiling coffee. Bill brought his hands up to his face, letting go of Nick. In one fluid motion, Ivan kicked Nick squarely in the chest, knocking him backward and away from the shaft. Nick skidded a full ten feet away after he hit the ground. As Ivan's leg came back down, he pivoted on his other foot to deliver a strike to Sam's throat, fingers extended but bent slightly at the end. Sam's throat crushed around Ivan's hand. As Sam's eyes got large, Ivan casually shoved him over the edge. "One," he said.

"Shtop," said Nick weakly as he rolled to his side.

Pat stepped forward and threw a roundhouse punch at Ivan.

Ivan easily deflected the punch. "You should have taken more classes," he said as he delivered a flurry of punches to his head and chest. Stunned, Pat fell back onto his butt, blood gushing from his broken nose and split lip.

Bill blinked through red eyes at Ivan. "You stinking…" His curse was cut off by a crushing kick to his solar plexus. Bill's diaphragm clenched preventing any air from getting into his lungs. All he could do was gasp as he doubled over.

"Corprrl, shtop." Nick slurred. He tried to push himself onto his elbows but he slipped on the pool of his blood that had formed under him.

Ivan grabbed Bill by the shoulders and planted his feet, preparing to sling Bill over the edge to follow his partner. "Two."

"Ivan, please," Nick said. "Please don't."

Ivan looked at Nick. "Chief? Are you sure?"

Nick nodded at the young man. As he did, the room wobbled and spun around him. "Forgive." Nick's eyes rolled back in his head as he fell backward.

"Fine then." Ivan hefted Bill upright and punched him squarely on the chin. He was unconscious before he fell backward onto the deck, banging his head roughly.

Pat struggled to get to his feet.

"If you stand up, Pat." Ivan warned. He clenched his fists.

Not wanting to find out what he would receive if he did, Pat dropped back onto his butt. He pinched his nose to try and stem the flow of blood. He tilted his head backward.

"Lean forward so the blood doesn't run down your throat." Ivan winked. "Personal experience." He looked around the area. "What a mess." He said to no one in particular. He tapped his communications tab. "Uh…" He said, suddenly unsure of who he needed to talk to first. "Communications? Who's up there?"

"What's up Ivan?" Asked a bored voice. "You doing some late-night sparring?"

"Actually, yes," said Ivan. He hesitated for a moment as the voice registered. "Stephan?"

"Yeah; it's me. I'm not going to spar with you, if that's what you're asking. Never again."

Ivan smiled. "No, actually I need a couple of medics to come to the shaft at the mess hall. Got some injuries here, I suppose."

"What? Who are you sparring with on the mess deck?"

"Some guys jumped Chief Hauser. He's beat pretty bad and the two I got to are beat up as well." He looked over the side of the shaft. "Oh, and there's another one heading towards the Feeder Chamber."

"He trying to get away?"

"Oh no; he's already dead." Ivan said matter-of-factly. "But he's going to make a mess when he hits if you can't get him stopped before then." He looked at Nick. Nick rolled his head to the side to look at him.

"No." Nick said simply. "Don hur 'em."

"Chief's got some serious head injuries." Ivan said. "He's not making any sense. You really should put a fire under who you send. And wake up the Doc."

"Stay put. I've got help on the way," said Stephan over the intercom. He tapped several other communications links. "Attention all, we have several injured that need immediate attention. Severe head injuries to Chief Hauser, two others injured as well. One dead falling down the shaft. I need security to the Mess Hall as well."

"What?" A groggy Doctor Popovich asked. "Are you serious?"

"Chief's been hit a couple of times real hard on the head with a pretty nasty looking blackjack, Doc," Ivan cut in. "He's bleeding pretty bad and not making any sense."

"Grabbing a kit and on my way." Doctor Popovich said.

"I'll take care of the guy in free fall," Chief Bagley said. "Got a few minutes to spare with where he started from."

"I've got security on the way," said Doctor Sanderson. "And I'm... Well, I think I'll meet you at medical."

"Good." Ivan looked around. "What should I do?"

"Do *not* put pressure on any of those head wounds!" Doctor Popovich said. The lilt in her voice made it clear that she was running. "I'll be there shortly. I'll have an assistant get a couple of tanks heated up. Just keep him still."

Ivan nodded even though no one could see him. As he moved past Pat, he kicked out, trying to knock Ivan into the shaft. Ivan did a

little skip-jump to avoid Pat's feet. "Pat, I don't care what Chief said; if you move at all I will flat out kill you so no tank will put you back together." He moved past the now cowering man to Nick. "Chief?"

Nick's eyes swiveled to the man. They did not seem to be focusing well. "Dey okay?"

"Roger, Chief. They're all okay," he lied. "I will make sure they are all taken care of." He cradled his superior's head in his arms. "Why do you care about them anyway?"

"Suppose forgive." Nick sputtered.

"They were going to kill you and you're going to forgive them?"

"Suppose to," Nick said right before he passed out.

Ivan shook his head then turned to Pat. "Chief might forgive you but I sure don't." He pointed at him. "I'll make sure you get what's coming to you."

The men sat in silence for a long four minutes until five guards dropped into view, arrestors held to their chests. As they slowed, they swung over to the edge and brought their weapons up.

"What've we got?" Said the Sergeant.

"Chief here is hurt, those two did it," said Ivan. "And there's one more…"

Ivan was cut off by Doctor Popovich running over from the other end of the passageway- she had taken the ladder since her cabin was only a few decks above, next to the sick bay. "How's Chief?" She asked as she dropped to her knees and skidded to a stop beside them as tears welled up in her eyes.

"He's not making sense." Ivan said. "They hit him on the head a few times." He gestured at Pat with his head. "Throw them in a brig."

The Sergeant looked at the two battered, bleeding Marines "Do they need medical attention? They kind of look like they need medical attention. Doc?"

Ivan exhaled. "I suppose. Chief wanted them taken care of." A thought occurred to him. "What about the one that's falling?"

"Kent… Chief Bagley is on it. He's talking to his team that's down there; they're going to set up a net with arrestors to catch him." The doctor looked at Nick. "So we should put that one in a tank as well?"

Rebecca ran over from the direction that Doctor Popovich came from. "Nick!" She too slid to the deck beside him. "What… who did this?"

"He got jumped by three guys." Ivan said. "Good thing I happened by." He moved out of the way as Rebecca moved Nick's shoulders under her knees. "He said not to hurt them. I think he's planning to Court Martial them or something."

"That's the best they deserve." Rebecca gingerly tilted Nick's head to look at the still-bleeding gash on the side. His scalp had been pushed aside, revealing his skull. Cracks were visible in it and parts were pushed in. "Oh, Nick."

"Let's get him to sick bay so I can get those injuries stabilized." Doctor Popovich leaned over Nick. "Occipital good. One... pretty severe across the Parietal Lobe." She blew out through pursed lips as her hands came forward. "Oooh, that's real soft." She continued to feel his head. "Oh boy; some penetration on this one. Sensory Cortex is real soft." She moved her hands across his forehead then down his neck to his shoulders. "Frontal Lobe is fine. Oh, broken collar bone." She sat back on her knees. "Nothing that will keep him from being carried by hand as long as nothing else is wrong." She moved her hands down Nick's torso. "Couple of broken ribs." She smiled at Rebecca. "It looks worse than it is; a couple of three weeks in a tank. Four tops because of the brain injuries."

"He has brain damage?"

"Brains are pretty resilient; nerves'll even rewire around damaged areas without any treatment. His injuries are to the top of the head so those aren't memory intensive locations." She smiled at the other woman. "He'll be the same old Nick."

"Need help moving him?" asked the Sergeant. He pointed even though he didn't need to. "You've got five decks to climb, you know."

"Please. And I'll send a medic to the brig to clean up those two once you get them there." She patted Rebecca on the shoulder. "I'll go

ahead and make sure the tank is ready. It will take a few minutes to harvest some of his T's then we'll drop him in for some quiet time."

The Sergeant nodded at the doctor. "Head on up, Doc; we're right behind you." He turned to look at the rest of the guards. "Simmons, give me a hand with the Chief. Sierra, Alvarez, Fushimora; get those two locked up. And keep me posted."

"We're on it Sergeant Bellows," replied Fushimora- the highest ranking of the three privates. "I'll send an update when they're secure."

Private Sierra pointed his rifle at Pat. "Get to your feet and keep it nice and slow or I'll pound you so they'll be putting *you* in a tank too."

"Or maybe not," pointed out Fushimora. "Adding you to the feeder pile is always an option."

Pat looked at the rifle. He knew that it wasn't just a bluff- while in space, Security Forces were equipped with kinetic rounds that would immediately expand to two-inch disks once they left the barrel. Even at close range, they wouldn't penetrate the hull of the ship. While they would not penetrate skin, they would definitely break bones and even kill. He worked his way to his feet. "This isn't over."

Alvarez nodded. "Yeah, you still got to go down to the brig. And if you give us any lip, I'm sure we are allowed to beat the hell of out you until that medic arrives." He gestured toward the shaft. "Get to the cable."

Sierra reached down and shook Bill. "Get up you." When the unconscious man didn't move, he looked at the doctor and then Ivan. "He okay?"

Ivan moved to the unconscious man. "Oh, he's fine." He reached down and rubbed his knuckles across the center of the man's chest. The man didn't move. "Yeah, I guess I hit him pretty hard. You're going to have to carry this one down, sorry."

Private Sierra held his rifle out to Alvarez. "Great. Thanks for that, Ivan *Death Blow* Jaszczak. I got him; you carry the next one, Alvarez."

"Deal." Alvarez said with a smile. "Don't hit no one for the rest of the day, Ivan."

"Hope this isn't how the rest of my day is going to go." Sierra squatted down and grabbed Bill under the arm. As he pulled, he swiveled under him, lifting him onto his shoulder. "Got him. Let's move."

Sierra prodded Pat with his rifle. "If you act up, I'll make *you* carry him. Now get going."

Without another word, Pat moved toward the cable shaft.

"Updates, Gentlemen," Ivan said as he picked up Nick. "And as Chief would say, thanks for your service." He flashed a wide smile. "Nice, huh?"

"It's not the same when you say it," Alvarez said as he shuffled away. "It's close but not quite there."

Ivan shrugged. "Huh. Maybe in twenty-five years."

25

Rebecca walked into the medical bay with Samantha and Nikki.

"Morning, Rebecca, kids" Doctor Popovich said. "Today's the day."

Rebecca nodded. "Today's the day." She walked to the front of the large T-Cell tank. She could barely make out Nick's form in the milky fluid. She laid her hands on the curved glass. "It's been a long four weeks."

"It sure has; Nick's not going to be pleased with everything he's missed."

Rebecca laughed. "I don't know about that. Flying in a straight line with nothing to do isn't his idea of a good time. You know what he says..."

"Monkey pushes button," both kids said at the same time.

"That's right." Doctor Popovich moved beside the tank. "Of course, he still has what, a good month's worth of the flight to lament about, right? And besides, he's been getting operational updates via sleep induction as well as that Bible Brian digitized."

Rebecca nodded. "I've been reading it too." She looked at her friend. "You?"

"Some of it here and there," Popovich shrugged. "Work kept getting in the way. I just ended up sleep inducting it all."

"And?"

"It's definitely not as dangerous of a book as I was told. I mean, forgiveness and redemption doesn't seem like it would be able to start all the wars that happened."

"Talking with Brian, he said that the main conflicts were because of different religions and even different sects of the same religion. When you think you're right and everyone else is wrong, things can get testy."

"Testy is an understatement." Popovich said. "Earth is destroyed thanks to religion."

"To be fair, we destroyed the Earth all on our own. Religion didn't pollute the oceans and create acid rains that wiped out crops. Or toxified the water supply."

"I suppose so."

"And from what I've been reading," Rebecca said, "Jesus talked about loving those that caused us harm or consternation."

Samantha nodded. "It's easy to love people that love you; even sinners can do that. You have to also love the people that don't love you."

"I read that too. And it does make a lot of sense." Doctor Popovich said.

"It's tough to believe that when someone tries to kill your Dad though," Nikki said.

The Doctor exhaled. "Well, here goes nothing." She flipped two switches on the end of the large horizontal tank.

Rebecca looked down at Nick. "Wonder what his first words will be."

"Probably something about those three thugs that are still in the brig. Can't imagine he'll be too pleased with them." Nikki suggested.

"Love those that do you harm." Reminded Rebecca

"Yeah, let's see if Dad takes that to heart," Samantha said.

The quartet watched as the fluid pumped out of the tank, revealing Nick's pale body.

"Wow, he looks young." Rebecca said.

"Well, the T-Cells work all over repairing damage. His brain functions are all back where they need to be and he's just had a total body, four-week exfoliate rejuvenating bath. That would have cost a fortune back on Earth."

"Damn; you might need to put me in a tank a couple of times so that I'm not self-conscious around him."

"Gross," Nikki said.

Doctor Popovich laughed. "We'll sneak you in a couple of times and keep it quiet." She reached under the table and pulled out a large white towel. "Here you go."

As the last of the liquid drained from the bottom of the tank, Doctor Popovich flipped the lid back. Nick was still unconscious thanks to the medications he was breathing that kept him sedated. She removed the respirator from his face. "A little fresh air for a minute or so and he'll be coming around. And... while he's still under, I might as well get this out as well." She removed the tape holding a thin tube. She grasped the feeding tube and pulled out all two feet of it from his nose. She patted Rebecca's shoulder. "Let me get this into disinfectant and I'll be back in a little."

Rebecca gently wiped Nick's face dry. When she was done, she took Nick's hand and waited.

After almost a minute, Nick cracked his eyes open. "What the hell happened?"

"You've been in a T-Cell tank, Nick."

He fully opened his eyes. "I feel like I was eaten by a bear then crapped off a cliff." He flexed his shoulders as he twisted his back. "Damn, I'm stiff. How long have I been in here?"

Doctor Popovich sidled up to the table. "Just over four weeks. You're going to be stiff from sitting still that long. Even with us stimulating them a couple times a day, your muscles are none too happy."

"I remember getting off shift then going to my cabin."

"You went to the mess hall, Nick." Rebecca said. "Remember?"

Nick concentrated. "Yeah. I went to get something to eat. A sandwich." His eyes opened wide. "I got jumped. It was three... or four of them."

"Three bad, one good. Luckily Corporal Jaszczak was there and he saved you."

Nick stared at the ceiling for a moment. "Four weeks. What'd I miss?"

Doctor Popovich thought about recent events. The latest staff meeting came to mind. "Well, Uranus is gone."

Nick and Nikki both chuckled.

Rebecca shook her head. "You know, I expect that from you, young man, but you," she pointed at Nick, "have hundreds of light years under your belt and have visited dozens of worlds."

"Crappy news, huh, Dad?" Nikki said.

Samantha rolled her eyes.

"Couple of Juveniles." The Doctor said.

"Ow!" Nick winced "Laughing hurts. Help me sit up."

Doctor Popovich moved to the other side of the table so she could grasp Nick's other arm.

Together, the two women helped Nick sit up.

"Better?" Rebecca said.

"A little." He took several deep breaths. "Feel foggy, Doc."

"That'll wear off."

"Wait; we lost an entire planet?" Nick said seriously. "What happened?"

Doctor Popovich nodded. "Seems that one of the exo-planets, telemetry thinks it was Galileo Two, hit Uranus and it slammed into the sun. They believe the debris field wiped out most of the asteroid belt and probably Mars. The helium processors on Mercury probably don't have much hope."

"Five hundred folks lived on Uranus," Nick said. "Another thousand on Mars' moons. At least fifty on Mercury."

"Between Titania, Oberon, and the helium mines on Uranus, there were close to eight hundred. They said an even hundred on Mars and its two moons."

"Damn." Nick rubbed his face. "And Earth?"

"It's still there as far as telemetry can determine. But…"

"But?"

"It was beat with asteroids, Dad," Nikki said. "There's probably not much left."

"And," Samantha added, "with the Sun not putting out any energy, the Earth's cold now."

"I think this is a lot to take in," Doctor Popovich said. "Why don't we give Nick a little time to readjust."

"Four weeks? Is there any good news?"

No one said anything for a moment. Finally, Nikki spoke: "You missed The Swap."

When Space Ten traveled toward its destination it accelerated constantly to provide gravity, reaching incredible speeds. Once it was about three quarters of the way, it would turn and decelerate creating gravity for the remainder of the voyage. However, since the ship was oriented in one direction, having the gravity reverse meant that ceilings were now floors, requiring the entire innards of the ship to be flipped. Quarters were designed with bunks and desks that were on a roller system so they could be unlatched, rolled from the floor, up the wall, to the ceiling, and then re-latched on the opposite side of the room. The same held true for the machinery and computers in the various divisions. As well as every single bathroom- which numbered in the hundreds to accommodate a full crew. It was a days-long drudgery that was handled by every member of the crew. The only automated reversal was the bridge which would unlatch from the front end of the shield and pivot on massive hinges back along the spine. Since the viewscreen was not an actual viewport, it did not need to face the direction of travel to display what was in front of the ship. The only noticeable difference was that the entrance ladder was now at the front of the bridge instead of the back. Since deck and gangway numbers started at zero from the center and middle of the ship moved out to the ends, even newly arrived personnel (if there were any) would not be disoriented by a ship swapping, as it was called.

"Well that is good news." Nick said. "Hate flipping furniture all day long. Anyone do my place?"

"I got your quarters flipped for you, Dad," Nikki said. "You're set."

"See? Things are looking up, Nick," Rebecca said.

"You'll feel better after a hot shower," Doctor Popovich said.

Nick rubbed his hands across his slick chest. "Yeah; after a shower I think I'll be better. I feel like the bottom of a taxi." He looked down at his chest. "Hey! I'm as smooth as a baby's butt." He smirked. "I must be downright irresistible now, I'd imagine."

"I see your brain is back to normal."

"Nice, Dad," Samantha rolled her eyes again. "Well, I think we'll just meet you in the mess hall." She stood. "Nikki?"

Nikki nodded. "Yeah, I don't think I want to sit here and watch Dad shower." He stood as well. "See you in the mess hall, Dad."

"Sounds, good kids." Nick smiled at them. "Love you."

"Love you too," Samantha said.

"Irresistible, huh?" Rebecca said after the kids had left.

Nick grinned at Rebecca. "A guy's got to have priorities."

"Let's get you in the shower, Nick." Doctor Popovich said. "I had one of your flight suits brought down along with some socks and boots." She raised an eyebrow. "It seems you don't own underwear."

"It's overrated. When you wear flight suits that are practically pajamas to work and actual pajamas when you're not working, there's no need for them. Man, I'm stiff." Nick arched his back. "And I ache like I'm back in that Québécois prison camp."

"What?" The doctor looked at Rebecca.

"It's a long story; I'll tell you later," she replied.

"Fun times," Nick remarked.

Doctor Popovich pointed at the far end of the medical room. "The sooner you start walking around, the sooner you won't be so stiff. And a hot shower will help too. We were stimulating your muscles so they didn't atrophy but that's not the same as actually using them."

Nick tried to swing his legs over the top of the ledge of the table and couldn't. "I think I'm in need of some assistance." He tried again unsuccessfully. "Disgraceful."

"Just take it easy, Nick." Rebecca picked up Nick's feet and swung them over the edge so they hung down the side of the tank.

Nick leaned forward and looked down at the floor. "That's kind of a long way." As he looked, the table started to lower closer to the floor. "Hey, lookit that. Technology." He looked over his shoulder. "Thanks, Doc- you're a pal."

When his feet touched the floor, Rebecca took Nick's arm and pulled him forward. "Up you go."

Nick teetered as he stood. "This is uncomfortable." He raised his arms over his head. His back popped in two places. "Most uncomfortable."

"A nice hot shower will help. Then you can make your way to the mess hall." Doctor Popovich said. "Just eat light for a few days since you've been on a liquid diet."

"The mess hall." Nick stared straight ahead, his brow furrowed. "The mess hall! It was Lincoln that suggested I go there." He looked at Rebecca. "He's got to be OneGen."

Rebecca nodded at him. "We can let Brian know." She patted him on his shoulder. With a grimace, she pulled her hand back then wiped it on the towel. "Once you're not so slimy."

"Right. Shower first. OneGen confrontation next." Nick gingerly started walking toward the shower, teetering as he went. "I'm moving like a damned old man." He remarked.

Rebecca laughed. "You're the smoothest old man I've ever seen."

"Me too," Doctor Popovich said. "And I'm a doctor with easy access to T-Cell tanks, so that's saying a lot."

Nick pulled down one side of the medical bikini shorts he was wearing, exposing one pale -smooth- cheek. "I'm smooth all over, you know."

Doctor Popovich shook her head. "*Smooth* isn't the word that comes to mind."

"Juvenile?" Rebecca suggested.

"Juvenile," repeated the doctor. "Yeah; that's the word that keeps coming to mind."

"Since you two aren't appreciative of my obvious talents..." Nick opened the door to the shower, stepped in and then closed it behind him. "The show's over." He ducked out of view as he removed his shorts.

"There's some good news," Doctor Popovich giggled. "I'm going to reset the tank for storage, you going to wait here, Rebecca?"

Rebecca shook her head. "I'll go wrangle up Brian and meet Nick in the mess hall so they can catch up. Let him know, will you?"

"Okay. No problem."

With that the two parted ways.

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Nick sat with his tray of food untouched- he waited until Doctor Sanderson sat.

"Glad to see you back up and about, Nick."

Nick nodded at his friend. "And?"

Sanderson picked up a piece of meat with his fork. "And you're looking pretty good, I must say." He put the meat in his mouth and chewed slowly. "Years younger."

Rebecca hid her smirk

Nick waited patiently while his friend chewed. "Well?"

"It's really good."

"Brian, did you read any of the Bible when you were digitizing it?"

"I did skim it, and I even plugged into it at night."

"Good, so you know what's in it then."

Brian picked up another piece of meat. "I do, and thanks to my hyperthymesia, I now remember every single word."

Nick pushed his tray to the side. He leaned forward and stared at his friend. "So, what do you think?"

"What do I think?" Brian looked at Nick's tray. "I think I'll agree to discuss it but only while we eat." He pointed at his tray. "That's real food, Nick. I'm still giddy to be eating real food. You've been asleep for a month, on a liquid diet; how can you not be thinking of that steak there?"

Nick looked at his tray. It did indeed have a large piece of actual meat on it as well as some mashed potatoes and a handful of what looked a lot like string beans. "Well, now that you mention it." He pulled the tray back in front of him.

Rebecca nodded as she speared some of the beans. "We really need to find a place where we can eat like this every day."

"That's what we're doing." Nick said as he cut his meat.

Brian shook his head. "No; what we're doing is heading the opposite direction of one of three planets we found where we could set up shop."

"We have to see if there are any survivors." Nick said.

"I've been talking to Lieutenant Simpsons," Brian said. "And from what he tells me happened on the planet, you were told that there was nothing to see back on Earth."

"We still have to check."

Brian fought to keep a smile off his face. "Okay, Thomas. We can go check those nail holes for you."

Rebecca snorted.

Nick pushed the piece of meat in his mouth to one side. "I was getting the downloads while I was getting put back together, Doc; so I get what you're saying. We should have just head to one of the other designated colonies, but…" With a frown he went back to chewing.

Brian shrugged. "Well, as long as you know we're not going to find anyone there."

"We might."

Brian cut another piece of meat. "We might, I suppose." He said, sounding unconvinced.

Lieutenant Simpsons walked to the table. "Hey there Chief. Nice to see you again."

"It's nice to see anyone again."

Jeffrey nodded. "Yeah; you looked pretty rough when they got you to sickbay."

Nick leaned back, arching his back as he stretched. "Well I still feel pretty rough. Like I'm one giant cramp."

"That'll wear off. You were in that tube for a long time." Jeffrey smiled. "Hey, maybe you can go do some sparring with Corporal Jaz. That'll loosen you up."

"I'm so stiff I wouldn't be able to block anything. I think I'll just stick with shaking his hand for saving my life." Nick said.

"I'm sure he'll find you now that word's gotten out that you're walking the decks again." Jeffrey held up his tray. "Got to get up to the bridge. If I see him, where can I tell him you'll be?"

Nick considered that for a moment. "Well, I'm going to head down to the brig first, then up to the bridge."

"One end to the other, huh?"

"Yeah. So, give me a good hour to get up there."

"You sure you want to go to the brig today?"

"Those troops have been down there for a month now," Nick said.

"Then they'll keep for another couple of days, Nick," Brian offered. "You should take it easy."

Nick shrugged. "I should. But I feel like I need to go down there."

Jeffrey started to walk away. "I'll tell the good Corporal you'll be topside in an hour then."

"See you up there…" Nick hesitated. "Say…What's your call sign again?"

Jeffrey turned to look at Nick. "As the esteemed doctor and lovely astrophysicist will confirm, it's *not* Flameout."

"What?" Rebecca said.

"Have Chief, explain it; I need to get to the bridge." Jeffrey said with a headshake as he left.

Rebecca looked at Nick. "Are you being mean to that poor boy?"

"Who me?" Nick pointed at himself with his fork. "I was just trying to get him back on track is all."

"This ought to be good." Brian cut another piece of meat. "On track?"

"Well…" Nick hesitated. "It all started when Violet tried to destroy the ship."

"Rude, is what that was." Brian said as he ate another piece of meat.

"And then Jeffrey broke up with her."

"Understandable." Brian added in as he chewed.

"And you're getting him back on track, Nick the matchmaker."

"Why don't you finish your steak?" Nick asked.

Rebecca laughed.

"So," Nick said as the other two resumed eating. "I suggested to Jeffrey that he needed to find some other companion on the ship before all the good ones were all taken up."

"Romantic, isn't he?" Brian said.

"I said that if he cooled his jets for too long, there would be no one around to restart them so I'd start calling him Flameout."

"Hopeless romantic," Brian said.

"And I figured," Nick continued, "that since he was a pilot, he should be involved with another pilot."

Brian put down his fork and knife. "Rebecca, please tell me that this man that you seem to care about has enough sense in his head to know that office relationships are almost always a disaster."

"Well, up until a second ago, I *could* have said that. But now…"

Nick frowned.

"So, what you're saying is that in his sixty something years of living, no one has pointed out the disasters that close office relationships are destined to become?"

"It seems so." Rebecca picked up her tray. "Want to eat elsewhere?"

Brian picked up his tray as well. "Now that you mention it."

"Okay, okay. Maybe it wasn't the best suggestion." Nick held up his fork. "But Wick was interested in Jeffrey as well."

"Wick? That hot head?" Rebecca said.

"They'll make great looking kids," Brian said. "Red hair and freckles." Brian winked. "Those are recessive genes, you know."

"I knew that," Rebecca said. "I took a science class once." She tilted her head. "Or maybe it was twice."

"If it's worth doing once, it's worth a second go," Brian said.

"You know, I was expecting a little more…substance to this conversation." Nick said.

"About what?"

"What do you think, Brian?" He repeated.

"I think they'll have great looking redheaded kids. With about a six percent chance at blue eyes, I'd say." Brian smiled.

Nick put his fork down. "Brian, if you don't start discussing the Bible instead of the color of Jeffrey and Lori's kid's hair, you've got a hundred percent chance at a *black* eye."

"You brought up Jeffrey and his potential new girl, not I," Brian said defensively.

"So… the Bible." Nick coaxed.

"I'd heard of it before but never read it; it's not nearly as seditious as I was led to believe."

"That's better." Nick picked up his fork and stabbed a string bean. "I mean… we never got to really discuss it when it got aboard, then I ended up in a tank… and I just wanted your opinion."

Brian considered that for a moment. "I believe it."

Nick leaned back in his chair. "I'm glad to hear that." He startled. "Wait. you believe it? Just like that?"

"Well, I mean..." Brian said.

"Here we go."

"Do I believe that a book that happens to be in English and matches a version of the Bible we had aboard the ship that was given to us by an alien race that is nowhere close to interstellar travel came from God to mend our ways?" Brian shrugged. "How could I not?"

"I'm being serious, Doc."

"Oh, I am too, Nick. Dead serious." He put his fork down. "We need to not only read and take to heart what is written in that book, we need to make sure everyone else does as well."

Nick nodded. "Yeah, especially those OneGen folks. I'm pretty sure that not all of them have taken the time to read it."

"Not just them Nick; I imagine there are others aboard that have either not read it because they don't intend to or have skimmed it and just blow it off."

"But why would they do that?"

"It happens all the time with technical manuals." Brian hesitated. "I mean, this is kind of a technical manual; a manual for life, so folks figure they'll just get to it later. If they are doing okay without it, then why take the time."

"That's crazy, Brian. After what has happened how could they not want to read it?"

Brian shrugged. "Nick, the Israelites saw all *sorts* of miracles in Egypt- the Passover, the plagues, walking through a raging sea. And then when they get out in the desert, they keep falling back on their old ways. The book of Judges recounts their failures over and over." He leaned forward. "And *they* had a pillar of smoke in the daytime and one of *fire* at night reminding them that God Almighty was hanging around to take care of them." He spread his arms out wide. "We don't have anything even remotely close to that here, my dear friend."

"I didn't think of it that way," Nick said.

"Brian and I have talked, Nick and we think it could be dangerous." Rebecca said.

"What?"

"Keeping the people around who aren't interested in changing their ways." She looked at Brian. "We've talked it over and we think it would be best to just let them go their own way."

Nick shook his head. "We're really low on numbers when it comes to what's left of humanity. I don't think we can afford to let half the crew wander off."

"No, no, Nick- it's nothing like that. I don't think we're talking about more than ten to twenty percent of the crew."

"So you think about twenty percent of the crew isn't on board?"

"I've been doing a little research…"

"More algorithms, Doc?" Nick smiled.

"More like asking around. Having my security folks ask around."

"Spying? You're spying on the crew?"

Brian waved a hand dismissively. "Even Moses used spies to reconnoiter the promised land. If it's good enough for Father Moses, it's good enough for me."

"What do these… security personnel tell you?"

"We got about fifteen percent of the crew that are hardline nonbelievers and about five or six percent that are on the fence."

"They all should go, Nick," Rebecca said. "We can't start a new colony with people who are working against us."

"That's seditious talk, Rebecca," Nick said. He raised his hands plaintively. "What am I supposed to do; just kick them off the ship?"

"If that's what it takes." Brian looked hard at Nick. "In the book of Joshua, God orders the Israelites to wipe out the Canaanites as they come into the Promised land. And to wipe out everyone in Jericho." He hesitated, "Except for Rahab of course."

Nick exhaled slowly. "But God hasn't told me to wipe out those people."

"You don't have to wipe them out, Nick. When we get to Earth, just let them leave with their own ship to go wherever they want to go." Rebecca said. "Make a ship-wide announcement."

"Yeah, I could do that." Nick looked down at his nearly empty plate. "We've had enough conflict without bringing some along with us to our new home." He frowned. "You know, we need to decide what we're going to call our new home."

Brian smiled. "We need to decide which planet will *be* our new home."

"Well, besides Arcturus, we have Murphrid and Megrez." Nick said. "I'd really like to be closer to Arcturus so we can hopefully go back for a visit. Both of those are within thirty light years or so."

"That sounds reasonable. Arcturus was the nicest of those three." Rebecca said.

"And out of the three, Job only mentions Arcturus. Figures that's where God would set up shop."

"Nick, God didn't set up shop on Arcturus," Brian said. "The fact of the matter is that God set up shop everywhere; it's just that we decided we didn't need Him on Earth."

"So it's either Murphrid or Megrez for sustainable systems." Nick said.

"Murphridians? Murphridites? I don't think I like either of those names," Rebecca said. "And since star names are completely arbitrary, I say we pick something better."

"Well, we could always go with Delta Ursae Majoris instead of Megrez," Brian said. "We could be Delta Ursae Majorites. That's got a nice ring to it."

"I think I'll stick with 'human'."

Nick nodded at her. "Me too." He sighed. "Well, like everything else from now on, I say we pray about it and see what comes up."

"Sounds like a good plan." Brian put his utensils on his now empty plate. "But we should also keep Gelise Six Six Seven in mind. It's close to Earth and definitely has the resources."

"Earth is finished, Brian." Nick said. "We need to look elsewhere for a home world. Maybe Gelise can be a colony once we get settled and start pushing out again. But for now, I think we need to decide between Murphrid or Megrez."

Brian smiled. "Then it really should be Murphrid since it's just a mere three and a third light years from Arcturus. I'll run some numbers but I really think my recommendation is going to be Murphrid. Since it's also in the Bootes constellation, we can call us and the Arcturians collectively Bootites."

"I don't think so." Nick said.

"Booties?"

"Even more of a no."

"Well, I think we should at least keep an open mind, about it." Brian smirked. "That's what I'm doing."

"An open mind?" Nick asked.

Brian picked up his tray and stood. "Of course! It's a good thing I'm a man of science because that's what we scientists have; open minds to new ideas."

Rebecca stood as well. "That's not a sentence I thought I'd ever hear."

"Oh, I assure you it's true." Brian said. "Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from telling lies. Psalms thirty-four, verse thirteen." He started to wink then stopped himself. "Bah; you've got me spouting scripture. See what you do to me?"

Nick stood. "It does my heart good to see, Brian. It really does." He gestured ahead to the window for food trays and utensils. "After you."

Once their trays were put on the conveyor belt, Rebecca patted Nick on the shoulder. "Well, I'm going up to my shop. You be careful down there with those guys."

"I'll be fine."

"You weren't fine the first time you were with them," Rebecca reminded him.

"I'll be fine, I promise." He leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek. "But thanks for worrying."

With a wave, Nick and Brian walked toward the shaft in silence.

When they got there, Nick looked down the miles-long tube.

"You okay?" Brian fell silent for a long moment, waiting for his friend to answer.

Finally, Nick nodded. "I suppose I am."

"You sure? Why don't you give yourself a day or two like Jeffrey said."

"It's been a month. I'd like to think those Marines are ready to talk. Or at least listen."

"Okay then. I'm heading to sciences to check in with my staff. And I'll start crunching numbers on the other two potential colony sites. Let me know what comes of your talk."

"Sure thing. Talk to you later, Brian." Nick gave a sloppy salute to his friend then gingerly walked to the cable. "This soreness needs to work its way out." He remarked as he grabbed the cable and lowered from sight. "See ya."

"You too, Nick." Brian said with a wave. Once his friend was out of sight, he tapped his communication link.

"Doctor Sanderson?" A voice said.

"Sergeant Mellow. Hello. Could you please send someone from the security detail to the brig?"

"There trouble there, Sir?"

"No and I want to keep it that way; Chief Hauser is going to talk to the prisoners."

"There's a guard down there."

"Yes, that is correct. But what I'd like is a second one there as well. There are three prisoners after all, and Chief isn't armed."

"I suppose having a second one there would be helpful" Sergeant Mellow said. "Maybe I should go too."

"No, Sergeant, that's not necessary." Brian shook his head even though the young man couldn't see him. "All I want to do..."

"I'm off in about fifteen minutes and can go straight there. I think I could..."

"Sergeant Mellow," Brian interrupted, "Right now I need a guard to double-time it to the brig or Chief is going to be down there without them. He's already on his way down from the mess hall."

"Oh, oh, roger that, Sir. I'll put out an all-call for whoever is closest." Sergeant Mellow said. "They'll be on their way immediately. Sergeant Mellow out."

The line went silent as Sergeant Mellow contacted the Marines scheduled for guard duty- they were the only ones armed on the ship.

"Ahh, kids." Brian said. With a smile he moved to the cable to go up to his department. "You know what they say, Sergeant; honor your father and your mother so that you may be long in the land the Lord your God is giving to you. Exodus twen…" he said, then he caught himself. "Ahh! There I go again." With a frown, he grasped the cable and let it lift him upward.

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Nick rode the cable down to the lowest inhabited level of the ship. He stopped twice to rest his arms. As he stepped onto the deck, he shook out his tired arms. "Disgraceful, old man," he said out loud.

A Marine sitting on a chair turned to look. She had a tray of food on her lap. When she recognized Nick, she jumped to her feet, scrambling to hold the tray as she grabbed her rifle that was leaning against the wall. "Chief! I wasn't expecting you."

"No worries, Marine. Have a seat." Nick walked up to the young woman.

The Marine turned and put her tray on the chair. "Actually, I wasn't expecting anyone for a good couple of hours." She looked around. "Not much happening down here." She pointed up. "Heard a party going on at the start of my shift. Ended about an hour ago."

Nick laughed. "I hear there's always some sort of party going on in Party Town."

"Not as many as there used to be. Things have kind of quieted down here lately. Weird." She nodded at the door. "You want to..." she hesitated as she looked over Nick's shoulder. "Huh; more company."

Just as Nick started to look, Sergeant Taylor jogged up to the pair. "Sorry I'm late, Chief." She nodded at the other Marine. "Private Moon."

"Sergeant." Private Moon said tersely. "Are we back on escort duty?"

Nick's insides tightened. He forced himself to not to glance down at Sergeant Taylor's weapon to see its status. When Sergeant Taylor didn't answer the Private, he tried the same question: "Are we back on escort duty?"

Sergeant Taylor shook her head. "No, Chief. Doctor Sanderson put the word out he wanted extra security to come down here to make

sure everything was okay." She smiled. "I was just a couple of decks up, so I came down."

"I have everything under control, Sergeant," Private Moon said testily- it seemed to be her default mood. "The prisoners and I have an… understanding."

"I am sure you do, Private," Taylor said amicably. "Doctor Sanderson just wanted to make sure things stayed under control. Better safe than sorry, is the Doctor's motto." She winked. "He usually winks when he says it."

"Well, I'm glad you're here," Nick lied. "You've been talking to the prisoners?" Nick asked as he pointed at the cell. When Sergeant Taylor looked at the door, Nick glanced down at her rifle- it was on safe but it was definitely loaded.

"Not unless I really have to." Private Moon gave a shrug. "They're nuts, you know."

Sergeant Taylor raised an eyebrow.

Nick saw Taylor's reaction and decided to change the subject to try and keep things calm. "So… what's this understanding you've worked out?"

"They don't give me any trouble and I don't manually open the out-vent of their latrine introducing them intimately to the vacuum of space." Moon pointed to the control panel beside the door. The switch panel had been opened, exposing the wiring behind it.

Inside Nick cringed. *Any help would be appreciated God. Anything at all.*

"I'm pretty sure that was *not* part of your instructions, Private" Taylor said angrily. She looked at the makeshift brig- it was a standard room with minor modifications. The solid metal front door had been replaced with one that had a five-foot-tall, two-foot-wide ballistic glass panel. The metal edge still allowed for an airtight seal and an additional lock had been bolted to the outside of the door as well. The room also had two bunk beds in it instead of one regular-height bed. With four chairs around the round table, it made the room a bit more cramped than normal. "How do you even know how to do that?"

Private Moon shrugged. "I'm seeing a guy in LSR. Pretty simple to do, really."

"We having a party out there?" Sam moved to the glass partition. "Oh, it's Private Vent Your Atmosphere. Sorry I spoke without being spoken to."

"Morning," Nick said. "Good to see you up and about. Private Brooksville, right?"

"That's me, Chief" Sam said. "Doc Sanderson said they almost didn't get to you in time. I'm glad they did."

"I appreciate the sentiment." Nick turned to look at Private Moon. "Let me in so we can sit and talk."

"If you think that's best, Chief," Private Moon said, not sounding convinced. "It's not what *I* would do."

"Well, talking through this glass one at a time isn't really what I came down here for." Nick turned to face the door.

"Not at all is the best way to talk to these nut jobs." Private Moon said as she thumbed the cover off the switch to open the door, exposing a bright red toggle. "Or one at a time at most, but you got it, Chief."

Sergeant Taylor's rifle hummed to life.

Nick cringed. *Lord, if you can just keep everyone calm while I talk to these guys that would be great. If you can get Taylor to listen too, I would appreciate it.*

Private Moon's weapon hummed to life. "Ready, Chief?"

Well, at least we're even now, Lord. Thanks for that. "Let's get this show on the road."

Private Moon flipped the switch up.

Sam stepped back as the door popped opened. He gave a short bow as he pushed it farther open. "Welcome, Chief, to our humble abode."

Nick walked into the room. "Why don't we all just sit at the table so we can talk?" Nick gestured at the table then frowned. "Seems we're short a chair." He added when he saw there were only four chairs.

"I'll just stand behind you," Sergeant Taylor said.

Nick eased himself into the chair. "Please have a seat, Gentlemen." He gestured at the three empty chairs.

As the three men sat, Sergeant Taylor pressed the door release and stepped into the room as the door closed behind her.

I'm trusting You, Lord. That's got to count for something.

"We were wondering when someone was going to show up. We appreciate you coming down here personally, Chief," Sam said.

"I figured it would be sooner." Pat said. "It's been a month now."

"Well, I just got out of the tank earlier today," Nick said.

Pat looked down at the table. "Oh. I didn't…"

Sam looked down at well. "We didn't know, Chief."

As Sam looked back up, Sergeant Taylor pointed her rifle at the back of Nick's head. She nodded at Sam.

"Well, I'm here now. And I'm here to talk." Nick said. He looked at the other two men. "And to listen as well."

Sergeant Taylor moved the muzzle of her rifle to less than a foot from the back of Nick's head.

"No," Sam said.

"What?"

Sam shook his head and quickly glanced at Taylor. "I mean, can you listen first, Chief?"

"Sure, Private." Nick leaned back as Taylor lowered her rifle.

"I just want to apologize for..."

A bang on the window made everyone look.

Doctor Sanderson banged on the window again. "Hey!" The door unlatched and he muscled his way past it.

"Doc? What's up?" Nick smiled. "That's some entrance. Real dignified."

Doctor Sanderson looked from the men at the table and then Sergeant Taylor. Her rifle was hanging by its sling, pointed at the deck. As the green LED indicated, it was ready for action. "Uhm. I was just in the neighborhood and thought I'd stop by to get that update?" He tried.

"That's nice of you, Doc, but we haven't gotten very far yet." Nick gestured at the table. "And I don't think we have room at the table for anyone else." He said.

"So everything is okay, gentlemen?" Sergeant Taylor asked.

"Sure." Nick said. "Seems that way."

Sergeant Taylor waited.

"Everything's fine Sergeant," Sam finally said. "Just fine."

Nick looked at Sam then at Taylor.

"Well then, how about I escort you back, Doctor." Sergeant Taylor smirked. "Seems we've got something to talk about."

Doctor Sanderson raised an eyebrow at the young Marine. "Seems we do." He gestured at the door. "After you." After she stepped out, he turned to look at the men at the table. "I'll leave you to it then. Remember what we talked about at the table."

"I'll fill you in later, Doc," Nick said. "Promise."

Doctor Sanderson left the cell and then turned to Private Moon. "Keep an eye on those three. Sergeant Taylor and I are going back up."

"Yes, sir," Private Moon said. She glanced at Taylor. "And I'll keep the door open." She moved to the doorway, rifle at the ready.

"Let's go, Giada," Doctor Sanderson said. "How about a cup coffee?"

"Okay by me, Doc." Sergeant Taylor thumbed her rifle off and slung it over her shoulder and across her back. "You want me to lead the way?"

"Well, while it is customary for ladies to be first," he winked at her, "decorum dictates that while going up stairs or ladders, it's gentlemen first."

"Suit yourself," Giada headed to the cable.

Nick looked over his shoulder. "You're welcome to come in and sit, Private Moon."

"I'm fine right here, Chief," she said.

"Better fields of fire, huh?" Pat said. "You're real warm hearted."

"If the Marines wanted me to have a warm heart," Private Moon snapped, "they'd issue me one. Haven't heard anything from supply yet."

Pat laughed. "It's hard to argue with that, huh, Chief?" He shook his head. "Anyway. Sam? You were saying?"

"I was saying." Sam said. He leaned forward across the table. "I was saying that we are sorry for what we did, Chief."

"I appreciate it," Nick said. "I really do."

"I don't know if you know or not, Chief, but we are pretty sequestered down here. Not much news gets sent to the brig." Sam said.

"We know we're heading back to Earth because something happened there, but that's about it." Bill said.

"And that we're not going to colonize the planet," Pat added.

"We heard that too." Bill said.

"Yes," Sam said tersely. "But what we agreed to talk about," he reminded them, "was something else."

"Right." Pat said. "Go ahead, Sam."

"As I was saying, we aren't getting a lot of news down here but one of the things we are able to do is access the ship's library."

"And we have been." Pat said.

"A lot." Bill added.

Sam glanced at his two comrades. "We've been reading the Bible that was brought back up from the planet."

"I see," Nick said, elated. "And?"

"And we are sorry for what we did. And we," he gestured at the other two men, "want to ask you for your forgiveness. It… it would mean a lot to us."

Nick considered that for a long moment. "Then I forgive you," he said simply.

Sam breathed a sigh of relief. "You've been reading it too?"

"Well, some of it. I got it all while I was under along with ship's status."

Sam leaned back in his seat and relaxed. "That is good to hear. We were worried you hadn't had the opportunity to since... the... when we..." He faltered. "We are really sorry."

A verse popped into Nick's head. "As distant as the east is from the west," Nick said, "that is how far He has removed our transgressions from us."

"Psalms one-hundred three." Sam said. "Verse twelve. I read that just this morning."

"Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him." Bill nodded. "Verse thirteen."

Nick leaned forward and put his hand on Sam's shoulder. "We're ahead of schedule to get back to Earth. The system is decimated. We don't know what we're going to find when we get there, but I need everyone on their game for rescue efforts, gathering remaining supplies, and swapping out our shields, and then pushing out for one of the other planets. Can't live on this tin can forever."

"You can count on us, Chief." Sam smiled. "This isn't a furnace but we've seen the Lord."

"Daniel three," Nick said, recognizing another passage.

"Daniel three, twenty," Bill agreed.

"Wait a damn minute," Private Moon interrupted. "Is that it?"

Everyone at the table turned to look at Private Moon. "What?" Sam asked.

"First off, stop talking in code." Private Moon let her rifle clatter to her side at the end of its sling. She put her hands on her hips. "Second, you're just letting them out? I mean, they tried to *kill* you and now it's all okay now?"

"There will probably be a hearing, I would imagine," Sam said.

"That is true," Bill added. "I mean, we kind of expect that."

"Haven't you been reading the book?" Pat asked.

"Book? *Book*? I don't read; I get to watch a lousy hour of my shows before I fall asleep. That's after standing around *guarding you three idiots* for twelve hours a day. And since it takes me fifteen minutes to get down here; that's another half hour for the round trip!" She pointed at Sam. "Along with doing laundry, working out, standing inspections, eating, *oh and sleeping*, you three made it damned hard to have any sort of social life! *Books*? I see my boyfriend once every other day for dinner. That's it! Who has time to read?"

"Well... I..." Sam looked at his two companions then Nick. "I'm sorry?" He offered.

"Un-be-lievable." Private Moon stormed out of the room. She slammed the door shut behind her.

"Huh." Pat said. "I figured everyone had been reading it."

"To be honest with you, I have no idea how many of the crew have actually read it." Nick said. "But as Private Moon just pointed out, there are other things going on on the ship."

"I suppose so, Chief." Sam said. "Well, we will accept whatever is decided."

"But we'd like to speak on our behalf," Bill added quickly. "I mean, that's not too much to ask for, I don't think."

Nick stood. "I will talk to Gunny. I'm sure he's been holding off on convening a Court Martial hearing 'til I was up and about."

The trio stood as well.

Sam crisply brought his hand up in a salute, "Roger that, Chief. Thanks."

Bill and Pat followed suit.

Nick returned the salute. "It will be before the end of the week; we're just a month out from Earth."

Sam blinked. "A *month*? How is that possible?"

Nick smirked. "Apparently everything is possible when the Lord's got His hands on it."

"That is true." Sam said. "We'll be trusting in the Lord and waiting to hear from you."

Nick swung the door open. "Sounds good, Gentlemen." He stepped out of the brig and pushed the door shut.

"Sorry about that outburst, Chief." Private Moon said. She exhaled loudly. "It's just that... stuck down here…guard duty…those three." She fumed.

"I get it," Nick said. "Back in the day it seemed like I was a career guard."

"How'd you get out of it, Chief?"

"I got promoted to Lance Corporal."

"And that got you off guard duty?"

"I went from Private to Staff Sergeant before dropping a Warrant Officer Packet to become a pilot." He smiled. "I'd like to say the jobs get better, but the best I can say is that the jobs get different." He smiled. "Hey, you make Lance, then you'll be in charge of a shift of guards while you're guarding."

"I'm not sure that's any better."

"I didn't say the jobs would be better; I said the jobs would be different."

"I think I'll just finish my degree instead."

"Oh?"

"I'm on top of finishing a Master's in Genetic Engineering with a minor in Chemistry."

"You should talk to Doctor Sanderson. He's going to be heading up the effort when we get planet side."

Private Moon pursed her lips. "Maybe I'll stop by between doing laundry and eating dinner."

Nick laughed. "Well, these three will be out within the week, I imagine. That should free up some time to get on Doc's team."

"Chief, *seriously*?"

"You have heard what happened on the planet, right?"

Private Moon shrugged. "Something about ancient tech kicking us off the planet. Earth is having a crisis so we're going back."

Nick stared at the young woman. "Moon, *seriously*?"

Private Moon raised her hands plaintively. "Hey! I've been busy, Chief! Scuttlebutt is all I've got time for."

"The planet was peaceful and welcoming." Nick said. "Because the... inhabitants there still believed in God." He hesitated again. "In fact, God was down on the planet with them."

Now Private Moon stared at Nick. "Chief."

"And their High Priest personally gave me a copy of the Bible. In English. To take back to the ship and share with everyone so that we too can share in the joy and bounty of the Lord."

"*Chief*." Private Moon said again. "Come on, now."

"Honest! I had it digitized, you can get it through sleep induction in a couple of nights." He held up a finger, "But I do think that you should actually read it yourself as well. Getting the words in your head isn't the same as getting the Word in your heart."

"The Bible."

"There's a hard copy sitting in Astrophysics if you want to read it on paper." Nick pointed upward. "Honest!"

"There's a Bible sitting in the middle of the Astrophysics Lab that I can go read."

Nick grinned. "Technically, it's over on a side, but yeah, it's there all right."

"Okay." Private Moon said. "I'll swing by there to take a look, Chief."

"When are you up for Lance?"

"Three months."

Nick patted her on the shoulder. "Quick and easy; the time'll fly by."

"Yes, sir." She saluted.

Nick returned her salute. "Have a good day and thanks for your service down here at the end of the ship." He turned to leave.

"Roger, that, Chief." Private Moon sat roughly.

Once Nick was on the cable, she turned to the glass door and kicked it. "Okay, you three idiots, fill me in on this Bible that apparently *you* spend all day reading because you have nothing else to do with your time!"

Sam scooted into view- he was sitting in a chair. "I thought you'd never ask, Ling," He said with a smile. "It seems that in the beginning there were these two people, Adam and Eve..."

28

Nick slowly climbed the ladder to the bridge. This was the day he was dreading- Space Ten was reentering the solar system. All the staff meetings had the same news- the system was devastated and the likelihood of finding any survivors was small. At each meeting, updated reports put the probability lower and lower as they approached. The staff meeting the day before, the techs didn't even use numbers instead saying the chance had dropped to 'probably no one at all'.

Nick looked around the bridge Everyone was manning their station, looking grim. Nick moved behind the flight deck. "Can I have everyone's attention?" When everyone looked he cleared his throat and spoke: "I want to thank everyone for their hard work on this trying mission. I know the tension levels have been through the roof as folks got the news that they probably had no family to be found back home. But, all I can say is we need to trust in the Lord. Whatever happens, happens for a reason." He raised his hands plaintively. "I honestly don't know what we're going to find when we get to the first colony but rest reassured that we won't leave the system until we are sure we haven't left anyone behind." He smiled. "It truly has been an honor serving with you."

"I know I speak for everyone when I say 'thanks Chief'," Brian said from the sciences station. "We're all ready to get this mission done so we can move on to our new home."

Several techs nodded as Nick walked to the flight deck. "How're we looking, El Tee?"

"We're coming in hot and straight. Currently at point seven five Cee and decelerating steadily. We'll pass Sedna Two Station in about forty minutes."

Nick eased into his seat. "Anything from the station?"

Jeffrey shook his head. "Not yet. Within another half-hour we'll be able to see the planet." He looked up at the massive view screen. It did not actually open directly to space but relayed images from several dozen Ultra-Definition cameras set up around the ship to allow the bridge to see in all

directions if necessary. The cameras were also able to receive the entire spectrum of visible and invisible light. "I've bumped up the mag but we're still looking at a spot of light."

Nick looked at the view screen. It was comforting that the scarce pattern of spots of lights were familiar to him. More often than not thanks to the distance between stars, it was practically a static starscape that one had to diligently watch for an extended period of time to notice the stars moving. Space was, for all intents and purposes mostly empty with massive distances between stars. "Well, let's run through the checklist; that'll get us a half hour burned."

"You want stick?"

Nick shook his head. "Nah; I'll side-seat this one. The honor's yours."

Jeffrey smiled. "Thanks, Chief. Telemetry has us on a parabolic that will take us between the Sednas, Pluto, pass between Saturn and Jupiter, then meet up with Earth after a pretty sharp course correction. Neptune will be way off course but close enough that we can talk to the two colonies there. The other inner planets and asteroid belt will be a zig zag unless we run a Corvette out to them. I think we should head to Earth after Jupiter and have the Dauntless and the Intrepid see what there is to see on Mars and Venus. Or maybe even drop a Corvette if we hear something on our way in." He hesitated. "And that will do it for places to look." Reports for the past two weeks had indicated that Mercury had been obliterated. The odds of finding anyone on Venus were almost nonexistent. The same held true for Mars.

"Sounds like a plan. Moving at point seven three Cee, we're what; seven hours from Earth?" Nick picked up a clipboard and scanned it. "Yeah; we've got a pretty good alignment. Nice."

"Roger, Chief; six hours, thirty minutes for our initial flyby for Earth, so says telemetry."

As was often the case, ships reentering the solar system would do so at nearly the speed of light because of the distances between the planets. Once in the system, they would use the Sun and a specifically timed engine firing to decelerate sharply then coast at a modest three hundred thousand miles per hour to their destination.

Nick considered what the Lieutenant said. "Well, if we want to take a closer look or pick anyone up, we can just dump a drop ship and keep pushing through the system." He shrugged. "We have to swap shields anyway so we'll be sitting for a week. That's plenty of time for a drop ship to rendezvous with us with how fast they are. Especially the Corvettes."

Jeffrey nodded. "Good point." He tapped his communications link. "Gunny?" He looked over his shoulder at the tactical station where Gunny was sitting. It was definitely close enough to walk to but at fifty feet, trying to just talk to someone there would have been disruptive.

"What's up El Tee?"

"Chief thinks we should send a drop ship if we come across anything at the Jupiter or Saturn bases and we just push through to the inners."

"Sounds like a plan to me; this hunk takes a week to get up to speed once we slow down. I want to know what's happening on Earth." He hesitated. "Not that I don't care about colonists. Well... there are some I don't care for."

As Earthlings moved out to colonies on other planets, the sentiment was that since they were on their own planet, they should be able to govern themselves instead of relying on Earth. Especially as they became increasingly self-sufficient. The feelings of independence sometimes forced Earth to position soldiers on colonies to tamp down talk of seceding from Earth. Oftentimes resulting in bloodshed.

"Roger, Gunny. The separatists on Europa and Io might still be partying due to Earth's demise."

"I'll get a couple of drop ships outfitted and put the crews on an Alert-Fifteen standby in case we need to crash a party."

Jeffrey laughed. "Appreciate it." He tapped his commlink to close the connection. "I can't imagine anyone being unhappy we showed up. Think anyone's expecting us?"

"Well, we have been broadcasting like a supernova for the past couple of months." Nick said. "Those first signals would have gotten here over week ago. Hopefully if we do find anyone, they are packed and ready to go."

"Here's hoping." He looked at Nick. "Let's run the list."

"By the numbers" Nick retrieved the grease pencil that was attached to the clipboard with a piece of string. "One. Fuel pile shunts one to five." He held the pencil above the box as Jeffery cycled each fuel bypass one at a time, ensuring their indicator lights went from green to amber and back to green.

A half hour later, Nick examined the clipboard. "Confirming we're all in the green except for auxiliary fire control on the aft bridge, and landing craft four, the Green Bay is down for engine repairs."

"Confirmed." Jeffrey said.

Nick hung the clipboard back on its peg. "I have to say, the ship's held together pretty good for what is essentially a sixty-five-light year mission."

"That's always a good thing."

"I've come back into the system with a couple of ambers and all the rest in the reds."

"Sounds exciting."

"Hot as hell then cold as hell is more like it. Eating T-rations and drinking warm recycled water before it freezes." Nick shook his head. "Those radiators are great at dumping heat in the short term, but you run without them for a couple of three months and Big Space does a pretty good job of getting you down to a hundred below pretty quick. Everyone's wearing everything they own."

Jeffrey raised an eyebrow. "Even underwear?"

"Had to borrow a pair. Most annoying."

Jeffrey laughed. "Nothing like technology acting up to make your life miserable."

"That's the one true constant in the universe." Nick pointed at the screen. "Sedna Two." There in the middle of the screen, much larger than the other white spots was a reddish planet. "Finally, a home port. Hate not knowing what we're rolling into, though."

"Maybe this will help." Jeffrey leaned over to one side and looked into what looked like a tall silver cup. "Scanners on."

"What?" Nick glanced at Jeffrey. "Isn't that your coffee cup?"

"Scanning for life forms." After a moment, Jeffrey sat up and grinned wide at Nick. "Inconclusive, Sir."

Nick pursed his lips. "Maybe we should raise shields."

Jeffrey laughed. "Now *there's* some cool technology. Why don't we have *that* yet?"

"Magical scanners that will tell you anything and everything, or shields that hang out in space around your ship violating all the laws of physics?"

"I'd take either."

Nick looked at the screen again. The ball was about a foot across now. "What's magnification set at?" He looked down at the instrument panel. "Crud, already up all the way." He flipped a switch and the planetoid gained a slightly more reddish tint. "Let's see if we get any activity on infrared." He looked at the planet.

"Breaching the Heliopause," Jeffrey said.

The ship shuddered slightly and the viewscreen splashed with color as the ship passed through the spherical region around the solar system where the outward-moving solar wind made of protons and electrons was unable to overcome the force of the solar winds of nearby stars. After a few moments, the screen returned to normal.

"Always love doing that." Nick remarked. "What have we got on infrared, El Tee?"

"Looks like just background heat. Got a spot of red where it looks like the reactor pile is, but that's way too cold to be operational." Jeffrey said. He lifted a tablet from a slot in the instrument panel. "Let's see what the spectrometer says. I'm guessing low four hundreds overall." He tapped an icon so the tablet mirrored the main view screen. He dragged a symbol onto the ball of reddish light that was Sedna Two.

"What've you got?" Nick asked. "I don't have a good feeling about this."

"Four-hundred fifty below, ambient." Jeffrey said. "Looks like the reactor is sitting around… wow; seventy-five below zero."

"Should be closer to six hundred *above* zero," Nick remarked. "That's not a good sign."

"Yeah; weird. The reaction has been inhibited somehow." He dragged another icon over the image of the planet on the tablet. "Even huddled around their reactor, they wouldn't last a week. I wonder how their partners are doing in on Sedna One." He dragged the two icons back to the side of the screen. He pulled his finger across the screen, rotating it. "It's in eclipse right now."

"Adjusting magnification." Nick reduced the magnification as they approached the planet to keep it from filling the entire screen. After only a minute, a bulge of light seemed to push out from the larger one, finally becoming its own round light. "There's Sedna; not seeing any heat there either."

Jeffrey dragged an icon onto the new object on his tablet. "No. Just as cold as her partner."

"Damn."

"I hope they're doing better on Ceres." Jeffrey said.

"They're definitely closer to friendlies than these folks were out here hundreds of millions of miles from anyone." Nick decreased the magnification again as they sailed by the two planets at four hundred-fifty million miles per hour.

Almost fifty years ago, the mega-planet Sedna Two and its close neighbor Sedna - the largest dwarf planet in the solar system were outfitted with massive nuclear reactors to melt their icy core, providing a ready supply of water which was then stripped into hydrogen and liquid oxygen for fuel. Several dozen technicians from various fields were stationed between the two to act as a convenient stop for outgoing ships and to assist any returning ships in trouble. Ceres- the largest planetoid in the Asteroid Belt had already been outfitted with a reactor, melting its icy core to add to its massive liquid subterranean layer to act as a starting point for ships leaving the system.

"I don't think it would have helped." Nick said. "Passing within hundred thousand miles. No change in temperature." He shook his head. "There were three hundred people living there. Families

included. No need to drop a ship there; it's cold and dead." Within a second- the time it took the ship to travel almost two-hundred thousand miles, Sedna One and Two were behind them.

"Maybe as we get farther in, our luck will improve."

The two sat in silence as the two planets quickly receded on the viewscreen- the ship covered the great distances between the planets relatively quickly but it wasn't actually apparent until they were near them.

"Adjusting view to forward." Jeffrey pressed a button on the console. "Well, now with Sedna behind us, Pluto puts us half way to Earth," Nick said.

"Roger. ETA to Pluto is one hour." Jeffrey said. He shook his head. "The distances out here at the edge of the solar system are staggering. Then the planets sort of pile up on you."

"It's like when I was stationed at Holloman Air Base. We'd fly to our beach house in Florence, South Carolina for long weekends. Theresa would always complain that half the flight was in Texas, then we'd blow past half a dozen other States real quick before…" Nick fell silent as he thought about his wife. "Before…"

Jeffrey looked at his friend. "You okay?"

Nick stared at the screen for a full minute. "I suppose so. She's dead, you know."

"When we get to Earth we'll know for sure." Jeffrey said seriously. "Don't jump to conclusions."

Nick exhaled loudly. "I know for sure. Now go get something to eat."

"Are you sure? Listen, I can stay here with you; it's no trouble."

Nick waved a hand at him. "I'm fine. Can't change the past. I'll keep an eye on things; you've been on shift for a good while already." Nick smiled at him. "I'm fine, really. Go."

Jeffrey stretched. "Okay then. It's going to be a long day, I imagine." He looked at his watch. "Is it day? I lose track after a while." He shook his head. "Crud; eleven hundred hours."

"Sounds like early lunch time." Nick suggested. "Go ahead; I had a late breakfast."

"Roger that, Chief." Jeffrey pulled himself up from the seat with a grunt. "This deceleration is getting old."

29

Nick sat at the controls, staring at the viewscreen. Several bright lights- the planets ahead of them- stood out against the far-off pinpricks lightyears beyond them. "I really need your help God." He said aloud. Self-consciously, he looked around to see if anyone heard him.

What am I supposed to do, God? He thought. *Can I get some sort of sign? Anything? Why did you have us come back here if the whole system is destroyed?* A feeling of guilt overcame him. He thought back to his interaction on Arcturus.

"Take the satchel with you," Tolen had said. "You will go see where your home was because you are doubters. Then you are to go to one of the other places and live there. I do not know where those are, but you do. You know where they are."

"Because we are doubters," Nick whispered. "Because I am." A verse came to mind. From the book of John where Jesus was talking to one of his followers after His death. *Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who believe without seeing.*

Nick closed his eyes. *I'm sorry I didn't believe, God. I should have just taken the crew to one of the other planets. We could have been settled there by now. Now I have dragged everyone thirty-six lightyears across the galaxy, risking their lives because I didn't want to believe Tolen. If we can find others to save here, people who will become believers, please help me do that. Then please help us get safely to another planet so we can start over.*

Nick sat still with his eyes closed and thought back on the stories in the Bible he had received through sleep induction.

A hand on his shoulder made Nick jump in his seat.

"Chief, if you were tired, you should have let me know," Jeffrey said. "I could have waited to eat."

Nick shook his head. "I wasn't sleeping." He looked around self-consciously again. "I was…" He lowered his voice. "Talking to God. And thinking about the Bible."

Jeffrey plopped down in his seat. He held out a wrapped sandwich. "Did you get an answer?"

Nick thought for a moment. "No, I can't say that I did." He took the sandwich. "Thanks."

"Well, sometimes prayer isn't always answered the way you expect it to be." He hesitated. "What did you pray for, if you don't mind me asking?"

A red light began to flash on the control panel between the two men.

"Huh." Jeffrey said. "Picked up a beacon."

Relieved he didn't have to answer his copilot, Nick flipped the switch below the light upward, toward the word 'Viewer'. If he had flipped it downward toward 'Pad', the message would have been sent to one of the two notepads for a more private viewing.

Both men looked up at readout as the message scrolled along the bottom of the viewscreen.

"Trapped on Burnell Station. Supplies Low. Temperatures Dropping." The message crawled slowly across the bottom of the viewscreen then repeated.

"How old is this message?" Nick asked. He looked over his shoulder toward the sciences section. "Brian! How old is this message?"

Doctor Sanderson shrugged. "How should I know?" He looked at the communications station. "What say you, Mister Mellow?"

Sergeant Mellow ducked back down below his station- everyone on the bridge had stood to read the message.

"Well?" Nick said loudly.

Sergeant Mello stood up again. "The tag on the message says it's been repeating now for four months, Chief." He looked back at the viewscreen. "Sorry."

Gunny walked up behind the flight deck. "What's our ETA for… where's Burnell station?"

"Saturn. About forty AU," Jeffrey said. "About another hour if we stop decelerating until we get there. Burnell station is on Titan; it's a little gas processing planet for terraformers. Probably not more than a dozen people there, tops."

"You been there, El Tee?" Gunny asked.

Jeffrey looked up at him. "Violet's Dad is a tech on the Mars terraforming team. They get their perfluorocarbons from Titan."

Gunny stared down at him. "Pero floro what?"

"Perfluorocarbons." Jeffrey smiled. "They mine gasses between Titan and Saturn to create Tetrafluoromethane there."

"Never heard of it."

"It's a really heavy inert greenhouse gas they are pumping into Mars' atmosphere. It won't float away like nitrogen in the low gravity because it's so heavy. It's what they are adding with the oxygen to make the thin air breathable." Jeffrey shrugged. "Or they did, I suppose. The station is named for Jocelyn Bell Burnell, an astrophysicist from the mid-twentieth century." Jeffrey shook his head. "Man; four months."

"Well, four months or not, I say we drop a ship there to see what there is to see."

"Roger that, Gunny. Make it so." Nick said. "We're not leaving anyone behind." He paused for a moment. "Thanks."

Gunny looked down at Nick and smiled. "You're welcome?"

Nick smiled back. "I was thanking someone else."

"If you say so." Gunny turned and returned to the operations station.

"Well, that's some good news at least," Jeffrey said. "There's a chance they figured out a way to survive." He looked at the monitor. "Pluto coming into view."

Nick looked at the screen. There was a brown blob to the right of center. "There's that dirty welcome mat." He reached down and increased the magnification. As Pluto became larger, it gained an oblong appearance. "That's weird," Nick said.

"Is that full magnification?"

"Not yet." Nick clicked the knob all the way clockwise. As the forward viewing ultra-definition cameras focused, Pluto took up the entire screen. "Oh hell."

Jeffrey sat back in his seat as he looked at the two halves of Pluto and substantial debris field. "What in the world happened?"

Nick tapped his commlink. "Telemetry."

"Captain Osborne here."

"Hey, Doc," Nick said. "Are you patched into the main viewer down there?"

"I see it, Chief."

"What hit it?"

There was a long pause then: "We think that when the rogue planet entered the system, it passed close to Pluto and tore the planetoid apart before hitting Uranus. I imagine there will be a substantial debris field when we pass that point."

"What a mess. Please keep me posted if you see something we don't. Out." Nick tapped his commlink. "Do you know if Violet knew anyone on that gas station?"

Jeffrey thought for a moment. "I'm not sure. We talked about her Dad's work on Mars and where their supplies came from. She assisted on the terraforming before joining the Marines, so she might."

"Well, once we get some news on that little station, you should let her know. Those might be the only people she knows that are still alive in the system."

"Right." Jeffrey said. "Another hour till we reach Saturn. This waiting is going to kill me."

"Once we reach Saturn, we'll blow through the inner system in half an hour." Nick adjusted the magnification down to half of what it was. "We'll need a longer burn before running around the sun, and we will need to be more oblique coming into the turn to handle the increased speed." He flipped two more toggles. "You want to give Telemetry the bad news since you're on stick?"

Jeffrey smirked. "I can do that." He looked at Nick. "I know I've said it before but I just want to say thanks for all you've done for keeping me in the driver's seat."

"Like I told you at our pre-launch briefing, I'm looking at retiring as soon as we get planetside. Sitting by a stream and fishing all day."

Jeffrey laughed. "How's that working out for you?"

Nick pursed his lips. "Yeah, well, it's a work in progress."

The pair watched the screen as Pluto passed by them quickly.

"I'm going for a walk. Be back in thirty," Nick said as he stood. "Can't stare at that screen or I'll go nuts."

"I got it, Chief. See you in thirty."

"Give me a shout in thirty, forty-five, El Tee."

"Roger that." Jeffrey gave Nick a nod.

Nick moved to the ladder that led down off the bridge. When he got to the bottom of the ladder, he sat on the edge of the shaft next to the cable, closed his eyes and prayed.

30

"Good talk, Chief?" Jeffery asked as Nick approached the Flight Deck.

"Walk, I went for a *walk*. Easy to confuse the two."

Once word spread around the bridge that Nick was sitting on the edge of the miles-long shaft with his eyes closed, no one dared to leave the bridge. It was a long forty-five minutes before Jeffrey felt he had to signal him.

"Yeah, sorry about that." Jeffrey smiled. "My mistake. Operation Walkabout?"

"No. What've we got going on near us?" Nick asked as he slid back into his seat.

Lieutenant Simpsons leaned over and picked up his tablet. After dragging several icons onto the screen, he whistled low. "We got a mess. There's debris everywhere. When Uranus went, it must have hit Neptune as it went by."

"Good thing we've got plenty of shield left. Anything sizeable?"

After a moment, Simpsons answered: "Nothing over fifty meters so we should be fine." The asteroids added to the Shield Farm were selected because of their iron content- the higher the better. The brittle bits of moon flying around the ship would be shattered as they impacted the mostly-iron, mile-wide asteroid in front of the ship.

"What've we got for laterals?"

Jeffrey dragged another icon to activate it. "It's crowded around here. Got a couple dozen pieces, under twenty meters that we need to take care of. Another eight... no nine. Nine that are thirty to fifty meters that are going to come for a broadside visit."

As the ship moved through the system - even at enormous speeds, there was always the chance that an object traveling along an intersecting course would strike Space Ten along its thirty-five-mile

spine. While most objects hit one of the shields, some actually passed in between them harmlessly. There were, however, some that would hit the ship causing catastrophic damage. To prevent this, thousands of weapons arrays were situated up and down the length of the ship. While they were too small to have any real offensive value, they fired explosive rounds that would pulverize incoming space objects under thirty meters in diameter. Objects larger than that required the ship to either speed up or slow down so the object passed behind or in front of Space Ten.

"Activating autocannons," Nick said. He flipped two toggle switches- one turned off the safety, the other activated the guns, connecting them with the navigation computer. "Up and running."

"Getting a view on Neptune." Jeffrey tapped his pad, switching the view to the main screen.

Nick exhaled loudly. "Holy hell."

The majority of the planet was still in place, and ostensibly still in some sort of orbit around the Sun. Almost a third of it was gone, however. "Judging by the cloud of debris surrounding it, a bit of the planet has been caught in its own gravity. In a thousand years, that will be a really pretty ring." Jeffrey said. He looked at his pad. "Over half the moons are gone too. Either knocked away or caught up in the debris field."

"What's Saturn look like?" Nick kept his hands on the controls.

Jeffrey moved several icons around on his pad. "Spectroscopy shows Saturn has its own troubles. Major disruptions of surface storms indicate large impacts. At least twenty moons are missing. Lots of gaps in her rings." He slid his finger from his pad toward the main viewer, moving the image there. "That Corvette's going to have some fancy flying to get to Titan."

"Excellent. Titan's still there," Nick said. "Yeah; flying there is going to be a mess. I'm going to give it a wide birth. That Corvette should be ready to drop." He looked over his shoulder toward Gunny. He tapped his commlink. "Gunny."

"Chief?"

"I'm going to swing wide on Saturn or we'll use up most of our ammo fighting off intersecting debris. Let's drop that ship here to take care of Titan."

"I was talking with telemetry and we were worried about that. I've got the Proclamation heated up and ready to go right now."

"Nice. Who's on stick?"

"Lieutenant Wick," Gunny said. He chuckled. "Got Stanstead as left seat."

"Oh boy; Coyote and Tails."

"If they need to juke and weave, they're the ones who can do it."

"That is true. Shove them off and I'll push them the flight data."

"Roger, Chief. It feels good to be rescuing folks."

Nick raised his hand and gave a thumb's up. "Out." He tapped his commlink to turn it off.

"Wick?"

Nick gave his friend a sidelong glance. "What?"

"You just said Wick does something best."

"Yeah, I did." Nick smirked. "I think it's walking down a corridor. She's damn good at that. Stops traffic."

"Chief."

"She's running that Corvette down to Titan to grab those folks. We'll meet up with her at the Shield Field."

The pair watched the viewscreen in silence for about ten minutes.

Jeffrey gestured at the viewscreen- it was a jumble of dust and rocks, all seemingly spinning randomly. "What a mess."

"Relax; she'll fly in and out quick and easy." Nick grinned. "Does this mean you're... concerned for her?"

"Well, I mean... we can't afford to lose a good pilot these days. We don't have that many to go around."

"Uh huh."

"It's a professional concern." Jeffrey tried.

"Sure, sure. I get it." Nick said. He looked at the young man. "Are you going to tell her to be careful?"

"Who me?"

"Yeah, you."

"Well I..." Jeffrey stammered. "Uhm…"

"You're too far away to give her a kiss, so you better do something."

"Space Ten, Proclamation is pulling on her clamps." Wick said over the speaker between the two men.

"Don't make me call you Flameout, Ground Zero," Nick said. He flipped the switch opening the channel between the two ships. "Read you, Proclamation."

"Waiting for the word." Wick said.

Nick looked at Jeffrey.

Jeffrey raised his hands plaintively.

Nick shook his head. "The word is given," Nick said. "Good hunting, Coyote."

"See you soon, Roadrunner," Wick replied.

Jeffrey grimaced. "Watch your six out there, Coyote, lots of debris flying around that might catch you off guard."

There was a long pause.

"I thought watching my six was *your* job, Ground Zero," Wick said. "You take care too."

Jeffrey stuck out his tongue.

Nick pressed the button, closing the channel. "That didn't hurt, did it? I swear; you two are like a couple of teenagers."

"It hurt a little now, but I'm sure it'll be worse later." Jeffrey said. He dragged an icon onto the image of the Proclamation on his pad. "Pushing telemetry to them."

"Adjusting course ten degrees to give Saturn a wide berth." Nick pressed the joystick to his left over slightly until the readout on the view screen showed a ten-degree change.

31

Lieutenant Wick's commlink chirped, startling her awake. Since she - and several other pilots- had been put on alert, she had been cat-napping on and off.

"Wick." She said after tapping the link.

"Way-kie, way-kie, El Tee," the Operations Sergeant said. "Got some flying for you."

"You know how to get a gal going, Uhlein." She sat up.

Sergeant Uhlein laughed. "You know it, Lieutenant. I've got you in the Proclamation. Taking a rescue party to Titan."

"Party on Titan. Sounds fun." She slipped on her boots and zipped them. "You made my day, Sergeant."

"Five personnel, take some EMSQUATS with you."

"How many am I going after?" Wick moved to the door and pressed the release to open it.

"Records say there's supposed to be eleven folks working at the station right now. It'd be nice if you found that many."

"Sure will be. On my way. When's drop?"

"Drop needs to be within fifteen minutes to keep your vector to Titan manageable; it's on the far side right now. Lots of junk between us and them."

"Sounds great."

"Good flying, Ma'am. We will expect you back on board shortly." The sergeant closed the communication's link. He returned to listening in on the chatter on the bridge so he could hopefully anticipate any other need for spacecraft- he had four other pilots on a short, fifteen-minute standby and two others in a thirty-minute reserve if needed. As the desk sergeant in Air Operations (called that even on space craft) it was his job to monitor the

need for ships and ensure that pilots and crew were where they were supposed to be.

Wick tapped the raised edge of her commlink. Communications links allowed anyone with one to speak directly to the communications station who could then connect them to anyone else. Much like an early 20th Century switchboard. Along with that ability, a separate button on the side of the link allowed a user to customize a call list of people they could contact directly. It was the military's response to individuals wanting to have their own personal devices for private conversations, and also freed up the communications station from connecting every single call. "Stans," she said, using the link's voice recognition to contact her copilot.

"Lieutenant." Staff Sergeant Stanstead said after a moment.

"We're hot. Taking the Proclamation for a ride."

"I'm en-route."

"Nice. Where you at?" A strange feeling came over Wick.

"I'm actually looking at the Proc' now. I was down here talking to Robert."

"Excellent. As usual Coyote and Tails are ahead of the game." Wick hesitated. "Got a weird feeling about this all of a sudden."

"You okay?"

The uneasy feeling continued. "I'm good. Start pre-flight." A thought occurred to her. "I'm...I'm going to grab a couple of EMSQUATS to bring along." Wick picked up a jog to reach the cable quicker.

"Robert said we've got some on board already. Standard complement."

"Yeah, I know. I just got a funny feeling all of a sudden." Wick stopped at the shaft and pulled a pair of flight gloves from her calf pocket.

"Well, my boss tells me that your gut will never lie to you and not listening to it will get you killed."

"You got a smart boss," Wick said as she smiled. "I'm going to swing by the depot and grab a couple more 'squats. See you on board."

"I'll have us pulling on our clamps when you get here."

Wick tapped her commlink then flexed her fingers. The launch bays were centrally located on the ship, a dozen decks below the mess hall. Once crews were put on a short recall notice, they moved down to ready rooms located a more-convenient three decks up from the launch bays. These rooms provided food, beds, as well as entertainment in case the crews had to wait an extended period of time. Wick reached out and grabbed the thick rope. As she gained her footing, she relaxed her hands and slid down to the next foothold. She continued to do this, moving considerably faster than she would have had she just held on and rode the cable down. In less than a minute, she stepped onto the expansive flight bay. After a moment to orient herself, she jogged to a nearby double hatch. "Hello?" She called.

A tired looking Marine stood from the desk he was sitting behind. "Lieutenant. How can I help you?" He yawned.

"Doing some shopping." She blinked at him. "You awake Uhlein? There's a drop sequence in progress you know."

The Marine nodded. "Roger that, Ma'am. I just haven't been getting much sleep lately. The Proclamation's ready to go." He pointed out the door toward where the ship was attached to the exterior of Space Ten. "It's willing to go. It's wanting to go. It's waiting to go."

"I'd like to take some muscle."

"Standard complement is five EMQUATS for a Corvette like the Proclamation," the Marine said. "Got two guns, two excavators, one hauler."

Wick tried to pin down the feeling in the back of her mind but couldn't. "You know, this is a rescue operation. Got anything rigged for that?"

"The hauler has a grapple and can deploy two stretchers if you need them. Excavators are set up with a thirty-gallon backhoe bucket and a jackhammer. What more do you need?"

A thought occurred to Wick. "Do you have any set up with plasma torches?"

The Marine eyed her for a moment. "Sure, sure do Ma'am. I've got a dozen set up for demolition. I put them together for when we reach Earth. You want one of them?" He considered it. "Yeah, one of them might come in handy. Plasma torch, cutting wheel, and a winch as well. Might be real handy."

"Then make it two."

"I'll toss in a welder to make it an even three." He gave her a smile.

"Outstanding idea." She raised her hand in a salute.

The Marine returned it. "Safe flight and good hunting."

Wick dropped her salute. "Thanks."

The Marine dropped his salute. "The mechs will be loaded under ten. Drop is in twelve."

Wick smiled at the young man. "I'll try to bring them back in one piece."

"I've heard that before, Lieutenant. Usually I just get bits and pieces and apologies after a mission."

Wick laughed as she turned and jogged toward the massive doors that led to the Proclamation.

The young Marine watched the fit lieutenant run off, thinking dark and violent thoughts about her. He glanced at the monitor. There were rows and rows of different colored icons organized on it. Without looking -he had long since memorized the placement of every EMSQUAT- he dragged three of them toward the square that had 'Proclamation' in it. As each icon moved to the square and disappeared a number flashed- two sixes and a seven. "And time to spare." With a nod and another yawn, he returned to his seat with the hope he could doze off for even a little bit before his dreams returned. All his dreams for the past few months had been of a large black lake that was aflame. And terrible screams.

Wick stepped through the small hatch set into the massive double doors onto the Proclamation, a three-hundred-foot, Corvette Class

light cruiser. Capable of both space and atmospheric flight, it had two sets of engines that could reach supersonic speeds in atmosphere and nearly the speed of light in space. It was also fitted with armaments of medium static plating and offensive ballistic weapons. As she turned the corner to climb the ladder up to the bridge, a man was climbing down.

When he reached the deck Wick was on, he stepped off. He startled as he turned. "Oy-yeh!" When he recognized her, he raised a thick eyebrow. "Ciao, Bella. It always does my heart well to see you." He smiled.

"Your heart?" Wick raised an eyebrow at the Italian doctor. "Somehow, I think it's something else, Doctor Caricchio."

"You used to call me Dominic." Now he raised the other eyebrow. "Yes?" He casually put his hand on the bulkhead. "So how are things?"

"We're about eight minutes from flying off, Signore Doctore." Wick said. "So, I need to get to the bridge. Va benne?"

"Your Italian is improving. Perhaps we can get together and improve it together." He waggled his now raised eyebrows.

"Seven minutes. We're on a rescue mission, you know." Wick put her hands on her hips. "Saving what's left of humanity."

Doctor Caricchio lowered his arm. "Saving lives is what I do the best." He winked. "Well, not-a really. There is something I do better…"

Wick rolled her eyes. "Mimo, I've told you before..."

He waved his hands dismissively. "Yes, yes; you are undecided. I have heard." He gave a short bow and gestured at the ladder. "Let us save the human race." His eyes smoldered. "And if we can't, we can make more, you and I. *A dozen of them*. Olive skinned with red hair. A master race, si?"

Wick grimaced. "I swear." She pushed past the doctor and climbed the ladder.

Doctor Caricchio watched her climb up. "Ma e proprio meravialioso." With a sigh, he headed toward the lower seating area where the rest of the crew was- next to the main hatch on the bottom of the ship.

Wick pulled herself into the steeply reclined pilot's chair.

"What kept you? Shopping for EMSQUATS?"

Wick shook her head. "That was easy. Getting past Doctor Caricchio was the issue."

"He wanted to chat me up as well." Stanstead laughed. "But I think that's just to be polite. He's really got the hots for you." She flipped a switch. "Five minutes. Ion engines are online and at two percent thrust. Ram-Jets on standby. We are ready to roll."

"Status on the EMSQUATS?" Wick looked over the flight controls- everything seemed in order.

"Two are loaded, last one is a minute out." A light on her side of the panel turned green. "No wait. There we go; all are onboard and locked down. Green across the line. We are greens and we are go. Buttoning up." She flipped a switch, closing the doors to the cargo bay.

Wick put her headset on. "Space Ten, Proclamation is pulling on her clamps."

Sergeant Stanstead covered her microphone. "Coyote and Tails- three minutes early."

Wick smiled. "Waiting for the word." She flipped open a yellow and black striped cover and hovered her finger above a large green button.

"The word is given," Nick said. "Good hunting, Coyote."

"See you soon, Roadrunner," Wick said as she pushed the button.

Separation jets fired, pushing the Proclamation away from Space Ten.

Wick frowned. "Huh."

"Figured he'd say something?" Stanstead grimaced. "Men..."

"Watch your six out there, Coyote," Jeffrey's voice came over the speaker. "Lots of debris flying around that might catch you off guard."

"There you go," Stanstead covered her microphone as she spoke.

Wick clapped her hands silently as she grinned wide. "I thought watching my six was *your* job, Ground Zero," she said. "You take care too."

"You two." Stanstead stuck out her tongue. "Separation confirmed," Stanstead looked at her pad. "Receiving approach vector for Titan." She touched a button and a head's up display superimposed on the view screen, showing the numerous nearby objects as well as ship's functions. A red crosshair showed their current trajectory while a moving green crosshair showed where they needed to be heading to intercept Titan as they both hurled through the solar system at incredible speeds. "Put it all in the green. You going to let the computer take us in?"

"Nah, I'm on stick," Lieutenant Wick said. "Been itching to fly something for a while now." She pressed down a button on the panel between her and her copilot. "Stay strapped in down there if at all possible. It's going to be a bumpy entry." She let go of the button and grasped the thick joystick that controlled the ship. "And we're flying, Tails. Let's see what there is to see." She eased the stick to the right, moving the red crosshair over the green one, putting them on course for Titan.

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Lieutenant Wick jerked the control stick hard to its forward right limit, making the ship dip sharply in that direction. A large piece of debris filled the view screen.

"Clearance?" Wick said.

"One meter." Stanstead said. "Now three."

"Good enough. Missed it by an inch, missed it by a mile."

The ship eased out of its dive, ducking under the massive rock by a mere ten feet.

"Beacon!?" Wick asked as she scanned the viewscreen for the next ship-destroying piece of debris. With a quick left jerk of the control stick, she avoided another tumbling boulder. With each she passed, the green and red call-outs for the object disappeared. Unfortunately, the closer she got to the tiny moon, it seemed for every one they passed, two more replaced them.

"Got it." Stanstead added a yellow diamond to the view screen. "Fifty miles, thirty degrees, relative." She pointed. "The lab is sitting at the base of a large cliff."

Wick pulled back on the stick, returning to a level flight. "What's ship's telemetry saying about this debris?"

"It's not going to get better until we get under fifty feet. Thanks to the moon's rotation, the cliff will shield us from it once we get there and put down. Just sit down tight next to it."

"Then I'll get us close to the deck." Wick said. "Let's just…"

A bright red light flashed on the screen as an until-now untracked rock suddenly appeared.

"Contact two seventy!" Stanstead shouted. "Hard right!"

Wick slammed the stick over as far to the right as it would go, pressing it against her thigh. "Turn you heap!" She leaned as if that would help.

"Firing!" Stanstead grabbed a smaller joystick that was between the two women and panned a blue crosshair toward the incoming rock. Streaks of tracer fire flashed across the screen trying to catch the crosshair.

"Too late," Wick said. She kept her control stick pressed hard to the right to try and minimize the impact. With her other hand she pressed the ship's intercom. "Hang on!"

The rock exploded as the rounds found their mark. The massive piece of debris broke in two. A larger piece spun away, the other continued tumbling towards the ship.

"Will we clear it?" Wick kept the ship in its right-hand dive. "Give me an inch!"

"Locking airtight doors," Stanstead said in reply. The lights everywhere on the ship flashed red twice, signaling that the doors were sealed and would remain that way until the bridge unlocked them. "Hell." She said as the thirty-foot across chunk of debris slammed into the underside of the ship's left delta wing.

Wick fought to maintain control as the ship was knocked into a flat spin by the impact. "Grab!" She shouted to the engines as they fought to fight the massive inertia caused by the piece of planet as it struck them.

The pair remained silent as the ship rotated less and less, finally leveling out less than two hundred feet from the surface. "What's not working, Tails?"

Stanstead pulled out her information pad and scrolled through the red messages. "Cargo hold three vented. Cargo hold four vented. Passageways…"

"Passengers compartments!" Wick pushed forward on the stick to resume the dive to the safety of the planet surface. "We lose them?"

"Passenger compartments are green. Uh oh."

The ship continued its decent but continued to try and roll onto its right side. "What's fighting me?"

"We're venting fuel from port tanks three through seven."

"I wish they'd empty so I can level this thing out," Wick continued to press the control to the left and down as the thrusters fired against the venting hydrogen.

Finally, the ship stopped fighting Wick. She pressed the ship intercom button. "Everyone alright down there?"

"What the hell you two doing up there?" A voice shouted back.

Wick released the button. "That's a 'later' problem. What's the 'now' problem."

Stanstead scrolled through the dozen and a half system's failures. "Fuel reserves down to twenty percent. Transmitter is out."

"Now problems, Tails." Wick looked at the viewscreen and put the crosshair on the yellow diamond. "Starting approach run. Anything I need to know that will get us killed?"

Stanstead nodded. "Port landing gear might not go down."

"Now you're talking. What else?"

"Port heat exchangers are destroyed."

"Eh" Wick shrugged. "Anything worse?"

Stanstead smirked. "Doctor Caricchio is still alive."

"Well that's some real bad news." Now Wick smiled. "What're we going to do about that landing gear?"

"Might. Might not." Stanstead flipped three switches. She watched as they went from red to yellow to green. "Forward gear port… starboard, check green both." The right landing gear light went to green. "Starboard gear check green." The remaining landing gear light stayed yellow. "Amber on port gear. Steady amber."

"Could be worse. How much we got on that thing?"

"Thirty percent extension."

"Huh."

"I'll start looking for an outcropping to kickstand on."

"We need to be close to that cliff or we'll get pounded." Wick pushed the control stick over putting them into a steep bank heading toward the five-mile-high cliff. "Hey; we got our own kickstands!" Wick flipped a switch on her side of the control panel. "EMSQUATs, report with function and designation."

"Battle configuration, Echo Five," came a rumbling voice.

"Disassembly and recovery, Mackerel Twelve," said another.

"Disassembly and recovery…"

"Stop, stop." Wick said. "Echo Five, report to deployment hatch." She looked at her copilot. "Got us a kickstand. Where you want it?"

Stanstead flipped through several screens on her pad. "Starboard hatch one-seven-one. Closest one that'll open."

"Starboard hatch one-seven-one," Wick repeated.

"Orders?"

"You are to augment port side landing gear. Deploy at ten meters, move under damaged port landing gear. Remain there to even out the landing gear."

"Complying." rumbled Echo Five, not programmed to care one way or another about its own fate.

Stanstead nodded. "That's probably good. Eleven feet of EMSQUAT added to fifteen or sixteen feet of landing gear should put us level enough to drop the ramp."

"As long as it doesn't get pushed in too deep." Wick flipped a switch. "Beginning landing sequence. Open that hatch."

"One-seven-one open." Stanstead flipped a toggle on her far right.

"Echo Five, report when you are in position." Wick put her hand on the throttle and eased it back as she brought the ship down slowly.

After only a few moments, the EMSQUAT said: "In position under port landing gear."

"Setting down." Wick lowered the output of the engines slowly as the ship settled first level, then began to tilt to the left.

"Two degrees." Stanstead said. "Five."

"Fifteen, baby." Wick said. "Under fifteen."

Thanks to the Corvettes' short landing gear, at more than a fifteen-degree angle, the safety mechanisms would prevent the main loading ramp from deploying. The ship could still land and the crew disembark even if none of the landing gear deployed but removing equipment and the other EMSQUATs would be time consuming using the much smaller -and not centrally located- exit hatches.

"Nine…. ten…" Stanstead continued to relay numbers from her pad.

"Just surprise me," Wick said. She feathered the throttle to zero output and the ship finally stopped tilting. She looked at her friend. "Talk to me Tails. Tell me some good news."

"If the ship needs to be shored up more on the port side, I'm sure you can use the Doc and no one would say anything."

"That *is* good news."

"But unfortunately, we're at thirteen degrees so we don't need to."

"Well crud." Wick rubbed her hands together. "Any landing you can walk away from, right?"

"Right. Man; the video of this landing will go over *great* back on the ship for the post-flight brief."

Wick stood. "Yeah, well, first we need to see who we can save and then figure out how we're going to get back to show it." She rubbed her hands together again. "Okay. How about you handle damage control, I'll handle rescue ops."

Stanstead held up her pad as she got out of her seat. "Have you seen these inop systems? You've got the easy job." She smiled. "But I got it under control."

"As usual." Wick gave a wave as she moved to the hatch at the back of the bridge. She stopped short and tried to turn the handle. It didn't move. She looked over her shoulder. "Uhm…"

Stanstead looked down at her pad and double tapped an icon. "Lockdown disengaged." She smiled. "Coyote and Tails Airlines appreciates your patronage; we know you have many choices for flight crew but we hope you're crazy enough to choose us again."

Wick laughed. "I hope there *is* a next time. See you in a little." Wick said as she pushed the lever down and pulled the door open.

"Roger that." Stanstead looked down at her pad, deciding what needed to be fixed first. "Impossible, difficult, done."

33

Wick pushed open the door to the cargo area and peeked in.

"What is going on up there?" A technician said angrily.

Wick stepped in. "Up where? The bridge? Nothing really. Just some boring flight stuff. Routine even."

"You could have gotten us killed!"

Wick put her hands on her hips. "Listen Hooper, I'm not going to have any kind of discussion about recent events. We're down safe and sound. Our next priority is…"

"Next priority?" Hooper put his hands on his hips. "Our next priority should be getting off this rock and back to the ship!"

"… to get to the gas processing station," Wick said as if she hadn't been interrupted, "locate any survivors and bring them back here so we can rendezvous with the Space Ten near Earth."

Hooper leaned to the side so he was upright according to the deck. "And the reason we're leaning is?"

Wick took her hands off her hips. She held them up like she was balancing on a tightrope. "Because we're not sitting level. Now shut up." She pointed at Doctor Caricchio. "Doc, you got your kit handy?"

"Si." The Doctor turned and picked up a large grey canvas bag from beside his seat. "I'm ready."

"Then suit up; we're heading out." She tapped her commlink. "Mackerel… whatever your number is."

"Mackerel Twelve," a deep voice responded. "Disassembly and recovery."

"Excellent. You and the other disassembling mech, and that one with the torch, the one painted yellow. Report to the base of the exit ramp."

"Complying." The voice said, ostensibly for the other robots as well.

"Hooper, you and McGrath're staying here to assist Stanstead in repairs."

"Got it," McGrath said. "But if you need help with demolition, let me know; I'm good at breaking things."

Wick smiled. "I'm hoping those mechs will be able to do the job but if I need an expert opinion, you're on tap." She moved to the top of the ramp and opened a locker. "Either suit up or head to the bridge because we've got a lot to do and I don't want to spend a lot of time doing it. I want to get away from this debris field of death as fast as I can."

McGrath moved up beside Wick, who was already donning her suit. "I think I'll take a quick walkabout to see firsthand what's going on with the ship. That was a pretty good hit we took."

The Doctor moved beside McGrath and opened another locker.

"What's wrong with the ship?" Hooper still hadn't moved.

Wick zipped up her suit. "Well, for starters, one of our engineers is going to be explosively decompressed because *he won't suit up or get out*." She turned to retrieve her helmet.

"Hey!" Hooper moved to the door. "I'm going to the bridge to see what needs done." He turned and looked back at Wick. "What's wrong with the ship?"

"Lots. Get with Staff Sergeant Stanstead; she's running repairs."

Hooper rolled his eyes as he pulled the door open. "*Stanstead.* Great. We're stuck here for sure."

Wick pointed a finger at him. "You give her any trouble and I swear I'll beat you to a pulp."

Hooper opened his mouth to respond.

"You can complain to the Chief about it and then I'll tell him how you were acting and then he'll throw you off the bridge and straight down to the other end."

"Hey!" Hooper complained. "I didn't even want to come on this mission!" he stepped through the door and shut it behind him.

"Are you really going to hit him?" McGrath asked.

"I'm not supposed to hit subordinates but mouthy civilians are fair game." Wick smirked. "He wouldn't be the first."

"I love watching your temper," Doctor Caricchio said. "Eyes flashing like that. The color in your freckled cheeks." His eyes widened. "Let your wild hair down, Lori!"

"Don't start with me, Doc; today's not the day." Wick ran her hands over her head, pressing down her hair to the band holding it in a tight bun. Her mid-back length, naturally frizzy hair did look wild while in low gravity and she was half tempted to remove the band. However, at that point, she wouldn't be able to put on her helmet.

"I see you want to, Cara mia." He looked at McGrath, "It is like a red halo around a fiery angel."

"Why I ever went out with you…"

"Come on! Really?" McGrath said. "Him but not me?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" The Doctor said.

"Well, what I think it means…" McGrath started.

"*Gentlemen*!" Wick interrupted. "We're down one half of our fuel tanks, check those first. I don't care too much about the landing gear, but we need those tanks repaired."

McGrath nodded. "I can stack dimes with the best of them."

"What?"

He smiled at Wick. "I can weld, Lieutenant. I'm pretty good at it." He patted his pockets. "Course, I don't have any spare hydrogen on me so you're just going to get nice empty tanks."

"This is a gas processing station." The Doctor said. "Maybe we can just fill up here?"

"Maybe, Doc. I grabbed an EMSQUAT that's rigged for welding, McGrath so you'll have company."

"Nice." McGrath said. "What type of welding equipment?"

"Welding stuff." Wick shrugged.

"Stuff?" McGrath grinned.

"Welding equipment. I don't know what. That creep in the hangar set him up."

"Uhlein?" McGrath asked.

"That's the one."

"He's got issues."

Wick took a helmet out of a locker. "Who doesn't?" She worked the helmet onto her head. "We need to get this show on the road." She tapped her communication's link as she twisted the helmet into position. "Tails."

"What'cha got, Ma'am?"

Wick looked around. "Everyone green on their suits?" When the two men gave her a thumb's up, she gave one too. "Ready to drop the ramp."

"Decompressing now," Stanstead said as she pumped the oxygen out of their room.

Everyone stood still as the precious air was pumped into storage tanks to be returned once the ship was sealed again.

"Hey, Tabatha," McGrath said. He was one of the many technicians on the ship who had not received a military rank when they were assigned to Project Arcturus. "I'm going to go on a walk around the ship, get a first-hand look at the problems."

"Sounds good, Bill. Start with those port side fuel tanks; those are the priority."

"I'll let you know what I see."

"Hooper's heading your way." Wick said flatly.

"Great. At least you're taking the Doctor."

"Hey, what's that supposed to mean?!" the Doctor said. He grinned wide. "At least I'm not a glass half empty guy like Hooper."

"Zero pressure," Stanstead said. "No, Doc; you're a glass full of wine kind of guy."

Doctor Caricchio laughed. "Well, wine in the bottle does not quench the thirst."

"The wine's on me when we get back, ladies and gentlemen." Wick pressed the button opening the hatch. "Hold on."

The thin atmosphere of Titan swirled roughly through the cabin. When the pressures equalized, Wick walked down the ramp.

"See you in a bit," the Doctor said seriously as he slapped McGrath's shoulder. "Stay safe, young man; no doctor likes having to work."

"Thanks, Doc."

When the trio reached the bottom of the tilting ramp, three EMSQUATs stomped into view. "Echo Five has experienced a catastrophic failure," said one of them, it's deep voice reverberating in the other's helmets. It pointed with a jack-hammer arm. "It will require depot-level repairs. We are not in range to submit the proper request."

"Noted," Wick said. She turned to McGrath. "Stay safe."

McGrath gave a salute then marched off toward the port side of the battered ship.

"It's you and me, Doc." Wick hesitated. "And the triplets of destruction of course." She gestured toward the dim lights of the gas refining station a hundred yards away. As she started to walk, another EMSQUAT walked over. This one was bright red with gold spatters on it.

"Another one? What are you doing here?" Wick asked.

"Protocol requires armed escort when possible hostiles are present."

"We're saving folks, not starting a fight. Scarlet and Red."

"Probabilities indicate a low chance that survivors will be found, ooh-rah." Scarlet and Red said.

Wick stared at it. "Well if there are no survivors, then there isn't anyone who could be hostile, now is there?"

"Probabilities of finding survivors is not zero. Probability that potential survivors could have hostile intentions is also not zero. Ooh rah."

Wick did a double take at the EMSQUAT then raised her hands. "Fine! Just follow along behind."

"Protocol dictates that…"

"Just provide cover from behind us!"

"That is acceptable." The EMSQUAT cycled its front weapons. "Ooh rah."

Wick shook her head. "Let's go save some people."

34

"It gets worse and worse," Jeffrey said.

"I've been praying that we find someone," Nick replied. "It's like you said I suppose; prayer isn't always answered like you expect."

"And nothing from Wick," Jeffrey said. "That worries me too."

Nick nodded. Since dropping the Corvette near Neptune, they had not heard anything from them. "I have to admit it's got me a little worried too." He looked at the Lieutenant. "But if anyone can keep a ship flying, it's Wick." He smiled. "I've been praying for her to make it back as well. Hopefully that one sticks."

Jeffrey scrunched up his face. "Nothing else has." He swiped his hand across his electronic notepad. "Nothing from Ganymede or Europa colonies." He sighed. "That's close to five hundred people between the two. Calisto's not even there anymore. Shoot; half the moons aren't even there anymore." He pushed the pad back into its slot roughly. "Mars coming up shortly. Fifteen minutes."

"Not sure I want a close look," Nick said.

"Well, I think we should drop a ship if it looks at all promising. I mean, there are a thousand people living on Mars. Another two hundred if you count the moons."

"Nah." Nick shook his head. "I'm not even going to worry about anything looking promising before doing something. Get a ship ready to go by the time we swing around the sun and get back to Earth, they will have a thumb's up or down for us."

"Roger that," Jeffrey said. He tapped his commlink. "Gunny."

"What's the good news, El Tee?"

"Jesus loves us." Jeffrey said.

"Well, yeah." Gunny laughed. "That why you called me? Gimme a quick pep talk?"

"No Gunny, sorry. We just thought we should drop a ship to give Mars a close once-over while we brake around Sol."

"Definitely, Sir. The Galileo is the next in line. I'll have Air Ops give her the ten-minute countdown then shove them off."

"Thanks, Gunny." Jeffrey said. He raised his hand and gave a thumb's up.

Gunny tapped his link off as he flipped a switch on his operations panel. "Air Ops."

"Staff Sergeant Ryan here, Gunny."

"Get the Galileo ready to rumble. Ten-minute drop for Mars."

"Outstanding; finally got some survivors!" The young man said excitedly. "Is it the Tharsis Colony or Eos or Ganges?"

"No. It's…"

"Ares Vallis?" Ryan interrupted. "Went there once on a rest and relaxation trip. Met a girl there. One of my better R and R's"

"*No*. We haven't had any communications with anyone on Mars or its moons."

"Oh, okay." Ryan said, let down. "So why are we dropping a ship?"

"We are being proactive and sending a ship to make a close run of the surface while we brake around the Sun."

"I suppose that's a good idea." The Sergeant didn't sound convinced.

"It's the best we got, trooper."

"Roger, Gunny. I'll kick some cots and get that ship ready."

"Thanks, Sergeant. Out." Gunny flipped the switch back down. He started to tap his communications link but decided to just walk to the flight deck instead.

"This is killing me, Chief. I mean, why were we even sent back here if there isn't anyone to save?"

Nick looked at the young man. "Sent here? We weren't sent here."

Jeffrey looked at Nick. "What?"

"Jeffrey, we…" Nick pointed at the young man then himself. "You and I, decided to come back to the system because we *refused* to believe Tolen when he told us Earth was gone. Doubting Thomases is what we are."

Jeffrey frowned. "Well, I…"

Gunny leaned over Nick's seat. "Just so you know, if either of you had just decided to run to one of those other planets without coming back here, I'd have lead a mutiny to get back here."

"Gunny, I'm being serious," Nick said.

"Nick, we've been friends for a long time. Longer than the young Lieutenant has been around even. I love you like a brother. And I tell you with my sincerest heart that if you just up and left for another planet without coming back to look here, I'd have a team of doctors give you both a psych eval." He kneeled between the two seats. "And while they were doing it, I'd have locked you two up and brought the ship back here myself."

The three sat in silence for a moment.

"You mean that?" Nick looked over at his friend.

"I do indeed." Gunny said. "In the state our minds and our hearts were when we were on that planet, there really wasn't any other choice we could make. Blind faith was not in our vocabulary."

"We're not going to find a single person, are we." Jeffery said.

"I don't know." Gunny chuckled. "I honestly don't know. But I do know that coming to look and having everyone on the ship *know* what happened here will make our break from our old life on Earth that much easier to do."

"I suppose so." Jeffrey said. "At least this way everyone will be on board with the new colony."

"Oh, I didn't say that," Gunny said. "I'm sticking close to Doc Sanderson and his algorithms of who to trust or not." He looked over

his shoulder. "My gut tells me that we're not out of the woods when it comes to folks not being pleased with our current situation."

"I know this gal that says that not listening to your gut will get you killed." Jeffrey remarked.

"Sounds like a gal with a good head on her shoulders." Gunny hesitated. "And probably a body to go with it. Fine pilot too, I'd imagine. You thinking about dating her, El Tee?"

"Not you too!" Jeffrey said. "You two are now tag-teaming the matchmaking?"

Gunny stood. "Listen, Sir; I'm too old to be dealing with infants that aren't grandkids that I can give back at the end of the day. You and your fellow youngsters need to start repopulating the species."

"That's what I told him!" Nick said. "See, it's not just me, Flameout."

"Flameout?" Gunny asked.

"I told him that if he cools his jets too long, there won't be anyone qualified to start them back up again when he's ready to do some flying."

"Nice, huh?" Jeffrey said.

"After all these years, I didn't realize you were such a romantic," Gunny said. "You should write greeting cards on the side." He patted both Nick and Jeffrey on the shoulder. "I'm going back to ops, make sure things keep moving…" He pointed at a red light that started flashing. "Nice; the Galileo's ready to drop."

As if on cue a voice came over the speaker. "Space Ten, this is the Galileo. Ready to go."

"Away with you, Galileo," Nick said. "Good hunting, Lieutenant Biggs."

"You too, Chief. See you at the Shield Farm." The red light went out as the ship detached and headed for Mars.

"I hope they have better luck than we've had." Nick said.

"I'll one better you Chief; I'll *pray* that they have better luck." With that, Gunny moved back to his station.

Nick nodded. "I'll keep praying that someone… anyone has some sort of luck."

Jeffrey exhaled loudly. "And that Lori makes it back safe and sound."

"Amen to that." Nick smiled.

35

Lieutenant Wick leaned against the rock as the two excavating EMSQUATs alternated between using their jack hammers and backhoes. They had been working for almost an hour. It looked like a good portion of the cliff had collapsed on the facility thanks to a meteor strike up near the top of it.

"Do you think that the facility's integrity is okay?" She looked up at the EMSQUAT. "Air is staying inside and all that."

The one with the plasma cutter stood back with her since at the moment there was only debris blocking the entrance. "There is no way to determine if there is still atmosphere within the facility," it growled.

"Any way you two can-a work faster?" Doctor Caricchio asked.

Without stopping what it was doing, the EMSQUAT painted black with gold stripes answered: "Increasing speed will not yield quicker results."

Wick looked at the plasma torch and cutting blade wielding EMSQUAT. It was painted pearlescent orange- in striking contrast to every other one she had ever seen it almost sparkled. "They just paint you?"

"I was coated with an experimental reactive polymer when my weapons systems were replaced with my current implements, Lieutenant Wick; I remain clean as I conduct my duties. Dirt and dust do not adhere to me. Leaving devastation in my wake, I remain clean."

Wick laughed. "You are really trying hard on those poems, aren't you, Nonstick. That's the first I've heard of that with an EMSQUAT." She blinked. "That was a poem, right?"

"That was technically what is called Free Verse." NonStick said. "It has no rhyme or rhythm, but still conveys an artistic expression. They are sometimes thought to be a modern form of poetry; however, they have been used for over six centuries."

"Why?"

"I do not know why they were invented six centuries ago. Records are inconclusive."

The Doctor laughed. "I think she means why are you speaking in poems and free verse?"

"I am endeavoring to add poetry to my language patterns."

"But… Why?" Wick asked again.

"It was originally suggested by an Arcturian and is currently being encouraged by the Marines. Their reactions indicate that it provides entertainment to them."

Wick shook her head. "Okay." She pointed at the other two. "Can you help them clear the debris?"

It raised its cutting wheel- it was a full three feet across. "This implement is not suited for cutting this debris." It raised its plasma torch. "My torch can reach twenty-eight thousand degrees Centigrade."

"Well that's enough to melt stone, right?" Wick asked.

"It is two thousand two-hundred forty percent higher than the melting point of these silicates however it is not suited for the debris impeding our progress."

The Doctor moved closer to the other two robots. "Hey, Army Colors, how long until the doorway is reached?"

"I cannot take into account any unforeseeable obstacles that may delay our progress, or environmental disturbances that can add to the debris pile. The cliff may deposit more debris increasing the time required. However, if constants remain the same, fifteen minutes."

"Hear that, Lori? Fifteen minutes."

Wick nodded at the Doctor. "Finally some good news." Wick watched the two EMSQUATS work for a few moments. "Hey, scarlet and gold, why do you look like you were the target of a paintball ambush?"

"It was part of my initiation to my squad."

"You let them use you for target practice?"

"I was informed that the rounds were not lethal so I allowed them to be fired at me to complete my Marine Corps color scheme. Ooh rah."

Wick looked up at the stone face of what she assumed was the main entrance- it was another fifty feet behind the massive pile of rock and sand the two machines were moving. "Fifteen minutes? How can that be?"

"Audio sensors indicate that the automatic seals for the main hatchway are trying to close on debris within six feet of our current location," said Black and Gold. "Unable to download specific schematics as the Mars Computer Network is not in operation, however downloads of similar facilities indicate that a long passageway leads from an initial airlock to the main structure."

"Huh." Wick moved closer to the working robots, next to the Doctor- they were both jackhammering large boulders and then picking them up and dumping them to their left and right respectively, clearing a neat path between them. "That's better than I thought." She tapped her commlink. "Tails, what's the word?"

After a moment, Stanstead answered: "The word is we're a mess."

"That's three words."

"There are more words to describe us, but none of them are helpful."

"So, the outlook is dire. How long then?"

"We should have repairs done in about four hours. That EMSQUAT is out there welding the fuel tanks. McGrath is welding the hull breeches, and Hooper is rerouting the lines for the fuel tanks because they were torn out."

"And in four hours we'll be able to fly?"

"I suppose so. McGrath says we've got a few hundred feet of welds to make."

"That much?"

"Well, the fuel tanks are ruptured so they need repaired and rewelded, then the tanks have a second insulating skin, then the hull over them needs to be repaired after that, so it's really welding over the same areas three times."

"Anything else?"

"The antenna assembly is a total loss; we can't push a signal more than a dozen feet from us."

"That's not going to make the nice folks on Space Ten very happy."

"Not at all." Stanstead said. "How are things there?"

"We'll be in in another fifteen minutes. Hopefully things aren't as dire here."

"I've been praying we find someone."

"Me too," Wick said. "Out." She tapped her commlink and turned to look at the two giant robots as they tossed human-sized boulders aside. The massive stone parapet that she thought was the front of the building was still forty feet away. "That's going to be a small door. Hey, Marine, do you know if you will fit inside this facility?"

"The Mark Three Multipurpose Sentry-Cordon-Quarantine Automated Turret Soldier is not designed to fit in standard corridors. The Mark Two Personal Protection Soldier is designed for that purpose."

"Well we don't have any PERPS aboard the Proclamation." Wick frowned. "Or even Space Ten, I don't think."

"Two are assigned to Chief Warrant Officer Five Hauser on Space Ten. To date, they have not been activated and remain in the depot."

"Should have brought a sidearm."

"Probabilities indicate that a successful rescue at this facility will not occur. A sidearm is unnecessary. With no one to save, there is no one to kill you. Your solitude protects you."

Wick exhaled loudly in her suit. "Maybe you should return to the ship, Orange Poet, since there's no threat."

The EMSQUAT remained in place.

Wick looked at it. "Well?"

"I am awaiting a definitive order. The addition of the adverb 'maybe' to your comment is not definitive."

The Doctor pointed at the robot. "Take thyself to the ship."

"Complying." The EMSQUAT turned and marched off.

"Hey, Army, Marines, how are you two coming along?" She looked at them.

They both turned.

"We have cleared sufficient debris to enter the facility, ooh rah." Said Spatter.

"Excellent. Wait here to help with any survivors."

"Probabilities indicate that…"

"Just wait quietly!" Wick interrupted Spatter. "Let's go, Doc."

Wick and the Doctor walked toward the main entrance- it was a large steel double door. When they got to the large rock preventing the two doors from pressing together, Wick bent down to move it.

"That is not advisable," Army said.

She looked up at the EMSQUAT. "Why not?"

"Power to the station is compromised. There may not be sufficient power to purge the air from the entry gangway to allow the main doors to reopen."

"Well, if there are people inside, I need to be able to help them." The Doctor said. "If the door won't open, we'll figure something out."

Wick bent over again and shoved the rock out of the way of the door. She quickly stepped in as the door closed. She turned and looked down the hallway- the power system did indeed seem to be malfunctioning because most of the lights were off and the ones that were on were flickering. She leaned against the steel doors as air automatically hissed into the corridor. "Hey, Marine, can you hear me?"

"You are still well within communication range," the EMQSUATs voice rumbled in her helmet- this time however, it was comforting.

"Keep the channel open." Wick said as she started to walk down the dimly lit corridor.

"Ooh rah."

When Wick reached the far door, she pressed the large red button to open it.

Nothing happened.

"Are you able to access the doors to this facility?" The Doctor asked.

"I am not programmed with the proper protocol to engage this facility's systems."

"Are you programmed with any protocols?" Wick asked.

"I am able to interact with the maintenance and supply subroutines of Space Ten's main computer system."

Wick frowned. "Well there's got to be a manual lever someplace." She stepped back from the door and reached up to turn on her helmet's lights, bathing the area in bright white light. "Well now, that's better."

The Doctor pointed at a small hatch set in the wall beside the sliding door. "Is that it?"

"Nice." Wick opened the hatch and pulled the lever out of the recessed opening, extending it to almost two feet. She began to pump the lever up and down, forcing the hydraulic fluid into the pistols that would open the door. After several dozen pumps, the door was open enough for her to fit through. "Let's go, Dom."

"I have a bad feeling about this," he said.

"Hey, Devil Dog, let me know if you can still hear me," She said as she sidestepped through the opening.

"If I am unable to hear your transmissions, I will also be unable to let you know you are out of range." The robot rumbled.

Wick shook her head with a laugh. "Well, that's hard to argue with. Ooh rah?"

"Ooh rah, Lieutenant."

Wick panned her powerful lights around the large room. A large tarp seemed to be covering a large portion of one corner of the room. Tentatively she moved closer to the dingy tarp. "Oh man. You still with me, mechanical Devil Dog?"

"I am receiving your transmissions."

"Dom?"

The Doctor moved to the tarp, reached down and slowly pulled the tarp towards himself. As it pulled back, a dried hand appeared. "Uh oh."

"Oh man. How many technicians worked in this facility?" Wick asked.

"Reports indicate eleven personnel were assigned to Burnell Station."

"What about families?"

"This is listed as a remote, unaccompanied assignment. No families are in this facility unless siblings were working as technicians together."

The Doctor pulled the tarp down farther, exposing more of the arm, then a shoulder, and finally the technician's face. His eyes were closed and his skin greyed from the freezing temperatures. He pulled the tarp away completely revealing the remaining technicians- they had huddled together for warmth as the facility's systems failed. "There's no one here, Lori." The Doctor said softly. "We should just go."

Wick sat on the deck in front of them. "No one's alive. Why isn't anyone alive?"

"Temperatures within the facility are below the habitable zone for humans," the EMSQUAT said. "Current temperatures are…"

Wick turned off her Commlink as she started to cry. "Why couldn't any of them be given the chance to read Your Word?" Wick stared at the pile of corpses for a long moment.

The Doctor stepped to the side, giving her some space.

"I don't understand, God. Why couldn't these people be allowed to live until we…" Wick was pulled onto her back as the air rushed out of the room, sliding over a foot before all the air had rushed by her.

The Doctor was tossed to the floor as he too was pulled toward the door.

The floor shuddered as Wick rolled onto her stomach and put her palms on it to felt the vibrations. "What in the world is going on?" She looked up at the door. Thanks to the lack of oxygen, there was nothing to carry sound waves. The shudders continued. "What's going on out there?" she asked after tapping her communications link.

"Lieutenant Wick, are you injured?" The EMSQUAT asked.

"No."

"Doctor?" It asked.

"No, I'm… we're fine. What are you doing?"

"I was endeavoring to reach your position to render aid."

Wick got to her feet and then walked to the door. Dust was swirling around outside it. "What are you doing out there?"

"Attempting to reach your position, Lieutenant Wick."

Wick walked down the entrance way to the exit, Doctor close behind.

The entire front of the entrance had been ripped off.

"Did you rip the front of this facility off to try and reach me?"

"After several iterations of our OODA Loop algorithm, we observed that the communication link between us was terminated and not because of a failure in our systems. We *oriented* our endeavors to reach you, *decided* the best course of action was to remove the entrance tunnel, and then *acted* upon that course of action." Said Army, referring to the centuries old military decision-making method.

Wick laughed. "I'm glad to see you two are looking out for us." A thought occurred to her. "Hey! What if I had removed my helmet?"

Spatter looked at his compatriot. Several terabytes of data streamed between the pair. After only two seconds, Spatter answered: "That variable was not added into the decision-making process because removing your helmet in the compromised atmosphere of the facility would have been fatal."

"But the facility re-pressurized when I closed the exterior door!"

"That information was not available to add to our decision-making process."

Wick thought back to her training at flight school. "Isn't the point of an OODA Loop to deal with uncertainty?"

"We do not know what we do not know." Spatter said.

"Now you're sounding like Orange Poet," Wick said. "You two could have killed us."

"Potentially self-destructive courses of action being pursued by Humans will be added to our OODA Loop algorithm," Spatter said "Ooh rah,"

Wick turned and looked at the facility. "I just don't understand why this happened."

"The facility experienced a catastrophic failure due to the collapse of the nearby geographical feature due to an impact from a large meteor. The lack of climate control resulted in the deaths of the employees."

"No." Wick looked up at the EMSQUAT. "What I mean is, I don't understand why they were allowed to die. Why didn't God save them like He saved us?"

"This is a theological question?" Spatter asked.

"It is," Wick said.

"Instances of individuals, cities, and entire nations being designated for elimination due to conflicting beliefs are referenced in the Bible," Army said. "The Canaanites, the Amalekites are two such groups."

The Doctor looked up at the robot. "So you believe the Bible?"

"I do not believe or doubt. The book in question has been categorized in the database as nonfiction. There is no reason to discount it." The robot paused for a moment. "Of course, some material is allegorical and as such should be treated that way."

"What?" Wick said.

"Metaphors have chapter titles using the synonym *parable*. These stories are told to convey a moral lesson and should not be taken as actually happening. However, historical incidents such as the instruction to eliminate the Canaanites and Amalekites should be taken at face value."

"I'll have to read about them."

"Exodus," Spatter said. "As well as Samuel, Deuteronomy, Numbers, and Judges reference the subject as well."

"Fine then…"

"The books of First Chronicles, and Esther also deal with the same group who were notorious for their actions against God."

Wick smiled. "I've got a lot of reading to do."

"There are three hours thirty minutes until the ship is repaired," offered Spatter.

"I think I'll wait until we are back on Space Ten." Wick pointed. "Let's go back and see what we can do to get us off the ground."

"Echo Five requires depot-level repairs," Spatter reminded. "I have not been able to upload the required requisitions due to a lack of connectivity."

Wick hesitated. She looked at the Doctor.

"It's up to you."

She was sure that Stanstead was planning on just leaving the disabled EMSQUAT behind- it was after all non-sentient and one of almost a hundred aboard the ship. But now she didn't want to leave it behind. "We'll figure out a way to get him loaded while the ship's repairs are going on. No one will be left behind."

"Ooh rah."

"My sentiments exactly, Spatter."

The Doctor put his arm over Wick's shoulder. "Let's get off this rock."

The pair started toward the ship, EMQUATS close behind her.

36

"Tanks are repaired and pressure tested. We're short a couple of bulkhead doors but I figured the tanks took precedence." Stanstead said. "All we need is fuel in them and we're home free. What can we get from this place?"

"Nothing really; this place is refining pluro-fluorocarbon something for Mars."

"What's that?"

"It's all inert greenhouse gasses." Wick answered. "We don't have any way to make the stuff burn."

"It's nice our luck is consistent." A smile played across Stanstead's face. "Good thing I have this idea…"

"Oh boy; I know that smile. What've you got in mind, Tails?" Wick stepped back and leaned on a console. "This should be good."

"Good as in it will get us to Earth?" Hooper asked. "That's the good we're looking for, right?"

"Well… Saturn has plenty of hydrogen in its atmosphere. Jupiter too." Stanstead said. "What I was thinking was a hard push off Titan, swing around Saturn to gain a bunch of momentum and burn hard to get us to Jupiter. Then do the same thing there."

"I'm no astrophysicist," Hooper said, "but with only twenty percent fuel, that won't get us anywhere near the speed we need to get us back to Earth this year. This thing guzzles fuel to get to speed. Space Ten will be long gone by the time we get there." He threw up his arms. "We're dead."

"Hooper, calm down. The slingshot around Saturn will give us a bit of speed and so will running around Jupiter." Wick exhaled slowly. "But, I have to agree with Hooper on this; that won't give us enough speed to get anywhere fast."

The smile played across Stanstead's face again. "Well sure, not with the fuel we have." She raised a finger, "but as I said, Saturn and Jupiter are

mostly hydrogen gas. And Jupiter is much, *much* denser than Saturn, so much so that Saturn would float if you put it in water."

"Fun fact for the day," Hopper interjected.

"So, we slingshot around Saturn at full throttle…"

"Burning up what's left of our fuel," Hooper said. "And coast leisurely to Earth a year from now."

"And with the speed we pick up slinging around Saturn," Stanstead continued, "we drop into Jupiter's atmosphere, shunt the RAM jets' intakes to force its hydrogen-rich atmosphere into our tanks."

"Until they rupture from the pressure."

"Hooper, I'm going to give you a sedative if you don't shut up," Doctor Caricchio said. He gestured at Stanstead. "Continue, cara mia."

"Anyway…" Stanstead shook her head. "The good news is that the scrubbers will pull out most of the methane so we can get a pretty high concentration of hydrogen. I figure a quarter of the way around in the mid-atmosphere, we can fill our tanks, then kick on the ram jets, power out orbit under atmospheric fuel, then when we're clear, burn about seventy percent of fuel to get up to a fiftieth of C."

"Point oh two Cee?" Wick asked. "You've run the numbers?"

"Yes. If we get to a fiftieth of light, we'll meet up with Sol in time to reach Earth. But it's a ten-minute window."

"That's going to be close," Wick said. "When does dust-off need to be?"

"Twenty-eight minutes. If we can leave in twenty-eight minutes, we will rendezvous with the Sun as it cruises across the galaxy at its leisurely pace of half a million miles per hour. We'll get there just in time to hard brake around it and skid to a stop by the Earth. It will be a great entrance."

"How long?" Wick asked.

"Thirty-six hours total." She smiled. "I can confidently say we are the fastest ship in the solar system."

"When you say it like that, it sounds exciting," Hooper said.

Stanstead smirked. "It'll be an exciting ride, that's for sure. But, between the Sun pulling on us and using the last of our fuel to slow down, a couple of hours after we go around it, we'll coast right up to Space Ten near the Moon."

"If that happens, I'm buying you a beer," Hooper said.

"Deal."

Wick shook her head. "Dropping into the atmosphere at those speeds."

"I've done it before on Venus. Ram jets *live* for that kind of thick atmosphere. Thrust galore."

"I've done it too. Sonic booms to wake the continent. Then you get all sorts of angry emails from local law enforcement." Wick rubbed her hands together. "*Man*; it's going to be a fun ride."

"Point of order." Hooper raised a finger. "I've flown with Miss Coyote here, in case you folks haven't. When she says it will be a fun ride, it really doesn't turn out to be a fun ride by any stretch of the definition."

"Wait." Wick startled. "When've you flown with me before?"

"I was *on* that ship to Deimos when you ran into those Tharsis separatists."

Wick looked at the ceiling as she thought back. "Oh yeah, right up the side of Olympus Mons."

"And into it."

Wick smiled. "Well we came out of it, if I remember correctly."

"If I remember correctly, the governor was not at all pleased that he had to send a rescue party for that other ship after it crashed on the bottom of that volcano."

Wick waved a hand dismissively. "This'll be completely different."

Hooper leaned forward, hands on his knees. "Why's that?"

"Jupiter doesn't *have* a governor."

"Hah!" Doctor Caricchio clapped his hands once. "Bella, I love your insanity so."

Hooper smirked. "Coming from a medical professional, that is a legal prognosis. Will you put that in writing, doc?"

The doctor shook his head. "She'd kill me in a fit of insanity."

"If you two are finished, we need to get this show on the road…" Wick hesitated, "but, I think I'd like to start with a quick prayer, if that's okay?"

"A prayer?" Doctor Caricchio said. "That will be a first, I think."

"Out loud it will be," Wick admitted.

"You're one of *them*?" Hooper said.

Wick raised an eyebrow. "Them what? You mean a female that tells you to get lost in a bar? Yeah; I'm one of them. You probably know a lot of *them*."

"You're *actually* believing that book?"

Wick nodded. "*Actually*, yes." She held out her arms. "What else explains what's going on around us?"

"Ignore him, Lori; go ahead."

"You too McGrath?" Hooper stood. "You're all a bunch of morons and I'm not going to sit here and listen to this."

"Well we're not leaving so I suggest you go someplace else, you blind idiot. How about one of the parts of the ship that's still in vacuum?" Wick stood as well. "Because I'm real ready to help you in that direction!"

"You people." Hooper stalked out of the bridge.

Wick took several deep breaths. "I'm sorry; I shouldn't have said those things."

"It's okay," McGrath said. "He gets under my skin as well."

Wick sat, "I wasn't apologizing to you." She closed her eyes and took several more deep breaths. Finally, she continued: "God, help us

get back to the ship safely and if it's what You want, let them have found some people to take along with us."

When she didn't say anything else, McGrath added: "Amen."

Wick looked at him and smiled. "Thanks. Doc, want to take the communications station?" She pointed at it. "And if you can take tactical, Bill, that would be great."

The Doctor raised his hands plaintively. "I can but I won't know what I'm doing."

"Get the ship on its way, ladies; I'll give the good Doctor a quick run down." Bill said.

37

The Doctor sat at the communications station, headphones on his head. He turned the dial absently as he listened for any transmissions on one of the several frequencies that Space Ten would be using.

"Fuel nominal," Stanstead said. "There's no time for lollygagging." She flipped several switches. "Ten seconds to launch."

"Course is laid in," Wick looked at the viewscreen- there was a yellow diamond hovering on the screen showing the direction they needed to go. "Punching it." She grasped the throttle.

"You going to warn Hooper?" McGrath asked.

Wick snorted. With her other hand, she pushed the button to turn on the ship-wide speakers. "Launching in five minutes." She turned and looked back at McGrath with a smile on her face.

"That's just plain mean." He said.

As Wick let go of the speaker button, she pushed the throttle completely forward. The massive ship obliged by rocketing off the surface.

Stanstead reached over and flipped the main switch to retract the landing gear- all but the one forward one cycled to green. Thanks to a great deal of effort by Wick and the three other EMSQUATS, Echo Five had been replaced by a pile of large boulders "Three greens on gear, one amber."

McGrath held on tight to the armrests of his seat. He turned to the Doctor. "You might have some work to do down there."

The Doctor shook his head. "He'll have to do some self-aid until my stomach is on the correct side of my spine."

Wick kept the throttle pushed forward as she fought to keep the red crosshairs showing the ship's direction centered on the yellow diamond. "That landing gear is sure causing some turbulence," She

said as the yellow diamond seemed to continue to jump away from the crosshairs.

"Exiting atmosphere now."

Even without the minor gravity of the planet, the force of the acceleration kept everyone pressed back in their seats.

"Come about to thirty-three mark seventy-five," Stanstead said. "Trajectory for Saturn, Bill?"

Bill flipped a switch and dragged an icon on the display in front of him onto the purple triangle. The triangle veered to the upper left of the main screen- thirty-three degrees to the ship's right and seventy-five degrees above its centerline. "New target!"

"Purple, McGrath?" Wick asked.

"Hey; it's my favorite color."

Wick pushed the control stick to the far left back of its stops, putting the ship into a steep climb. As it did, the purple diamond crawled back to the center of the viewscreen. "Got it."

"Nice, Coyote," Stanstead said. "Fuel within projected limits. Keep it at a hundred percent."

"What the hell is going on up there!" A voice shouted over the speakers.

Wick laughed. "Seems he's well enough to still be annoying, right Doc?"

The Doctor put his hand on his stomach. "Personally, I'm not well enough to do anything for him."

"Don't throw up on my bridge, Doc," Wick warned. "Just hang in there."

"Is the worst behind us?" He asked hopefully.

Wick laughed again.

"Doctor, that was the smoothest part of the entire trip. It goes downhill from here."

"Mamma mia." The Doctor closed his eyes.

"Got the trajectory for the Saturn slingshot ready to go," McGrath said.

"Roger, that," Wick said. She concentrated on keeping the crosshair in the center of the diamond. "That landing gear is going to be an issue when we're back in an atmosphere. There's got to be something we can do about it."

"There's nothing we can do about it," Stanstead said. "It's not going back in and we can't get rid of it."

Wick nodded. "Well, you know what they say…"

"Problems you can't fix might as well be ignored," Stanstead said.

"Exactly."

The ship continued on its arc around Titan heading for Saturn. Even though Saturn's gravity was not much more than Earth's, it was still massive at almost ten times its size and as such, allowed the space craft to interact with its gravitational pull for much longer than it would around Earth.

"Ship's acceleration matching computer simulations." Stanstead said.

"What're we at?"

"One point three mil" she said, using the acceptable shortening of millions of miles per hour. "We need ten mil after Jupiter to reach the twenty-five mil we need to get to the Sun on time."

As the ship's arc continued, Saturn came into view. It was still small as the planet was over three quarters of a million miles from Titan.

The Doctor removed his top.

"Two point six mil." Stanstead said.

Saturn steadily grew larger as the ship increase speed, closing the gap between them.

"How far out do we start to sling?" Wick kept her eyes trained on the crosshairs- since there was no atmosphere interfering with the ship's aerodynamics, keeping it centered on the yellow diamond was now easy.

"Three point nine. Outside the G Ring, a hundred eighty-seven thousand miles. Four point two mil." As the ship moved toward Saturn, it's gravity helped increase the ship's speed.

"How long are we staying at a hundred percent?" Wick asked.

"Till we get three quarters of the way to Earth."

Doctor Caricchio tied each of the long sleeves of his flight jacket into knots, near the wrists.

"Well then." Wick locked the throttle forward and rested her arm.

"You got the sling, Bill?"

McGrath nodded even though the two women couldn't see him. "Thirty seconds." Saturn now loomed off to the right of the center of the viewscreen, its massive rings at a slight tilt to the ship's perspective. "Looks like we're within one percent of where we need to be."

"Do we need to make a correction?"

"We'll make it between Saturn and Jupiter. Got a half billion miles and three hours to do it."

"Five point two. Saturn's helping out nicely."

"Ten seconds," McGrath said. "Sending new trajectory… now."

The purple diamond moved to the left edge of Saturn, slightly above the rings.

"Got it." Wick leaned in her chair as she maneuvered the red crosshair to the center of the diamond. "Easy peasy."

"I'll be interested to see what you think of Jupiter."

"At these speeds, we won't be in the atmosphere more than what- three seconds?"

"A long five, but who's counting?"

The ship dove in above Saturn's razor thin rings- while they were nearly two hundred thousand miles across, they were only about a half of a mile thick.

Everyone on the bridge leaned as Saturn's gravity tried to pull the ship closer to it- increasing its speed even more.

"Wow." Wick said. "Heavy."

"Fuel down to twelve percent." Stanstead said.

"Are we saving it or push through?" Wick's hand hovered above the throttle.

"This is a one-way trip; push through," Stanstead said. "It's not like we've got enough left to do anything with. If we get to ten mil, we're right in the middle of the simulations. Seven point five."

"We need something to make that coarse correction. Save me a couple of drops, will you?" McGrath said.

"We're on a one-way trip; can we just vent atmosphere for it?" Wick asked, hand hovering above the throttle.

"I just need a little nudge. Yeah; we can do that." McGrath smiled. "Unless you're going to send up another prayer to correct our course."

Wick looked over her shoulder. "Who says I ever *stopped*?"

"Touché," McGrath said. "Gah- this gravity's getting annoying." He pointed. "Wow; that's a sight."

Wick turned to look at the viewscreen.

Everyone sat in silence as the raging storms of Saturn seemed to reverse direction as the ship rocketed by the planet faster than it was rotating. Slowly the planet edged its way off the screen completely.

"What are we at?" Wick finally broke the silence.

"Ten point oh one," McGrath said. "Nicely done, ladies." He pushed himself out of the chair slowly- since the ship was no longer accelerating, there was no gravity. "Hey, Doc, you going to check on Hooper now?" He looked at the Doctor. "Doc?"

Doctor Caricchio was holding his jacket by the armpits. "I need to jettison my jacket first, I think."

"You throw up on my bridge?" Wick picked herself up over the back of her chair and looked back. "Doctore…"

"Twice, I am afraid to say." The Doctor said meekly.

"If you want to get cleaned up, we've got a three-hour flight before we start up again. Maybe you can eat something?"

"I don't know…"

"Eat something colorful, Doc; at least that way you'll have something pleasant to look at." McGrath smiled wide.

"I might just sit right here. Really still."

McGrath got up and floated to the communications station. "I'll get rid of the jacket, Doc. Maybe in a little I'll bring you some tea."

"Grazie, Guillermo," The Doctor handed over his jacket and put his head on the console.

Stanstead pushed out her lower lip. "Aww, Doc. I'll go check on Hooper for you." She lifted out of her seat. "He needs to help me get the scrubbers set up anyway."

Doctor Caricchio raised a hand and waved it at her- he did not move his head.

"McGrath and I will go over the numbers." Wick said. "We're almost right where we need to be to make our target speed. Maybe we can tweak a little more out of our next slingshot."

Stanstead shook her head. "Anything point oh one five over or under twenty-five mil will have us miss our rendezvous with the Sun as it zips along. We're already a little fast as it is."

"Or we'll just play cards for a while," Wick said without missing a beat.

Stanstead pushed off her seat and glided to the hatch. "Bill, if you don't listen to anything else I tell you, listen to me now: do *not* play cards with the Coyote."

"She'll take all my money?" He glanced sidelong at Wick. "You think so?"

"You won't even have *clothes* when she's done with you."

McGrath grinned wide. "Well if you put it *that* way."

"Va benne. Maybe one hand to settle my stomach," the Doctor said without raising his head.

"If we don't have numbers to go over, I'm going to get something to eat," Wick said. She looked toward the Doctor. "I'll bring you a tea in a little bit, Dom."

"Grazie." The man still didn't raise his head.

38

"How are we looking, Gunny?" Nick said as he approached the Operations Station.

"Personally? We're okay. Everyone else in the system? Not so good." He gestured toward the other station with his head. "Talking to Comms, we're not getting any sort of signal from anyone anywhere." He spread his arms out. "We're a loud race, Chief. Sending messages, music, movies, reports all over the system." He dropped his arms. "And only the smallest part of it is encrypted so we should be hearing all sorts of chatter." He lowered his voice. "But we've got nothing, Nick. It's like the whole Human race just stopped transmitting."

"Well I've got all our transponders on full, so maybe someone'll notice us."

"I wish I could say something hopeful but no one's squawking out there, Chief."

Nick exhaled loudly. "Well, maybe folks just can't get signals out." He looked at the viewscreen. There was a tiny blue dot in the center of it. "Maybe when we go by we'll hear something. Or when we go down to the surface."

"Maybe," Gunny said sounding unconvinced. "Hopefully."

"Prayerfully," Nick added. "That might help." He patted his friend on the shoulder then he walked to the Flight Deck. "What've we got, El Tee?"

"Nothing. No response to Te-Kas at all."

Nick moved to the seat. "Yeah, Gunny told me already. Earth is quiet."

"So are all the other spacecraft that should be in the system."

"Well…" Nick said. "Maybe they…"

"Nothing from the Proclamation as well." Jeffrey interrupted.

"They probably can't get any sort of message to us with all the debris that's…"

"Got a burst transmission from the Galileo."

"Oh." Nick looked over the control panel. "What did they say?" he asked, even though he didn't want to hear the answer.

"Everything was pounded away. No buildings. No ships. No survivors. No nothing."

"Right."

Jeffrey put his hands on his knees. "At least they're okay and on their way back."

"How long?"

"Seventy-five hours."

"Sounds about right, those Marauder Class ships are real pigs. But that works I suppose; by then the first shield will be off and the new one going on."

Jeffrey looked over at Nick. "How long will we give them?"

Nick looked at the young man. "You said they'd be here in a little over three days."

"No. Not the Galileo." Jeffrey stared at Nick. "The Proclamation."

"They'll beat them here. Even from Jupiter. A Corvette's hard to beat for inter-system cruising."

"How long, Chief?"

"Listen; they're in a Corvette. I expect them to make it here before the Galileo does. Corvettes are fuel hogs. Really just massive fuel tanks shaped like a delta wing with a tiny living space and heaps of weapons. But they'll scream across the solar system with full tanks. And that's what the Proclamation has. They'll come roaring up to us on fumes." He smiled. "So, stop worrying; they'll be here."

"And if they don't?"

"We give them a little more time."

"How long?" Jeffery pressed. "A week? Two? How long are we going to orbit Earth before we head out?"

"We're here for a week ourselves. At least. I think you're getting all worked up over nothing." Nick leaned toward the man. "You need to have a little faith that they will be back safe and sound."

Jeffrey laughed.

"Jeffrey," Nick said. "I'm being serious. All we can do is pray and leave the rest up to God."

Jeffrey shook his head. "I'm not laughing at you; it's just the fact that you are lecturing me about faith. When it was me doing the same thing to you earlier."

Nick smiled. "Sometimes folks need to be reminded of their own good advice." He reached out and put his hand on the Lieutenant's shoulder. "They will make it back. *She* will make it back."

"How are you so sure?"

"James, chapter one, verse six."

Jeffrey thought for a moment then frowned. "Chief, you're going to have to refresh my memory."

Nick smirked. "But when you ask you must believe, and not doubt. Because he who doubts is like a wave on the sea, blown and tossed by the wind."

Jeffrey exhaled loudly. "Fine, fine." He pointed at the viewscreen. There was now a fairly large blue ball of light on it. "We've got Earth coming up hard. Then forty to the Sun. Six hours before we're back. I think we're a pig as well."

"This thing wasn't built to be maneuverable. We're a straight-line racer."

"Yeah, I know. Still we'll be passing pretty close to Earth. Won't have to maneuver at all."

Nick nodded. "We'll take a quick look as we go by. Then when we get back, we'll go take a longer look."

"When you say 'we' who do you mean exactly?" Jeffrey looked back at the screen.

"Me and you." Nick said. "Since all the family we had, we brought along, we can scout around. See who's who in the zoo."

"Are you going to let everyone go their home towns? We don't have that many ships."

Nick thought about that for a moment. "Huh. Look at that; a problem for the second in command to deal with." He winked. "You're going to stay real busy if you keep saying things like that. Going to get you promoted to Captain even."

Jeffrey kept his eyes on the viewscreen "Steady as she goes, Chief. Trajectory for solar braking are confirmed and imputed." A smile played on his face. "Captain sounds good. Not that other stuff though."

"It's too late for that, El Tee. We need a plan for getting folks down to the surface." Nick grinned wide. "That means I'm on stick for a change so *you* can put together a staff meeting to solve the problem."

"Oh, I hate those things."

"We've got a good seven, eight hours before we start dropping ships. We need a plan in place so it doesn't take a month for everyone to check their home towns."

Jeffrey smiled. "A month?"

"The Proclamation will be back long before then and the crew will be more than ready to get going to our new home. Remember that's another four or five months of flight time in this tin can. Folks'll start getting antsy just sitting around."

"That's true I suppose." He waved his hand dismissively. "Fine then, you have fun flying and I'll do the behind the scenes work." He looked at the viewscreen. "Here she comes."

"Quick look is all we've got, people." Nick said. "So what've we got?" He looked at the viewscreen as the moon moved quickly across it, disappearing behind them. He had a worried feeling. Earth, even with the current level of pollution, still looked mostly blue from outer

space. The ocean's deep blue and continents' browns and greens were always contrasted against white clouds.

Until now.

"Wow," Jeffrey said. "That looks terrible."

Huge grey splotches reminiscent of the view of the moon dominated the land masses where massive asteroids had struck. Even the clouds had a grey tone to them.

"Are we getting any signals from anyone?" Nick asked.

"Negative, Chief," Sergeant Mellow said. "Just static."

"Infrared as we move by?" Nick asked as the Earth moved to the side of the viewscreen and disappeared.

"Adjusting," Jeffrey said. He rotated a large dial, changing which cameras were displayed on the main viewscreen. Now the ultra-definition cameras on the side of the ship took turns showing the Earth as the ship flew by.

The image shimmered from its real-color look to a swirl of bright colors. The image should have been mainly yellow with the continents greener and blue splotches spread out along the deeper parts of the oceans and light blues at both poles. Now the image was uniformly light green with only a mild transition to blueish at the poles.

"What am I looking at, Doc?" Nick asked.

"Overall temperatures on the planet are in the low seventies." Doctor Sanderson looked down at the screen at his station. "Seventy below, I mean. Lots of debris in the atmosphere. Lots. Nuclear winter effect going on. The Earth wasn't even this cold sixty-five million years ago when the dinosaurs were wiped out."

"That took thousands of years, Doc; this is less than one year." Sergeant Mellow said. "Maybe the debris in the atmosphere is keeping any transmissions from getting through?"

Sanderson shrugged. "Possible." He looked up at the main viewscreen. Earth was now disappearing from sight as Space Ten headed for the Sun. "We'll know when we get back and get a closer look."

Jeffrey switched the main viewscreen to forward. Now the sun dominated it. Usually, thanks to the camera's filters, while the sun was imposingly large and yellow, it was not blinding to look at. Now it was dark with bright streaks across it as if large yellow rivers were flowing over it.

"What in the world?" Jeffrey said. He looked down at his control panel. "Filters aren't even having to kick on. Seventy below, Doc?"

"That's what I'm reading, Lieutenant."

"How is the Sun's mass? Are we still okay for our braking maneuver?"

Sanderson ducked down as he looked at his monitor. "It's lost fifteen percent of its mass. I'll send an adjusted trajectory to make up for the lower gravity. We're still okay."

"Got it." Nick said as he adjusted their course, moving the sun to the left of the viewscreen. "Coming around in five minutes." He looked at Jeffrey. "Thrusters online?"

Jeffrey nodded. "All in the green. We've got that going for us at least. Here comes Venus."

A grey blob panned across the screen as the obviously battered planet moved by.

"Oh man." Sergeant Mellow said. "I had a bunch of friends on Venus. I was going there on leave but got tagged for this mission instead."

Doctor Sanderson looked over at the young man. "Lucky you."

"I guess."

The bridge crew sat in silence as the now dim sun grew in size on the viewscreen.

Nick looked over at Jeffrey. "So…"

"So?"

"So I'm on stick now."

Jeffrey exhaled loudly. "Fine, I'll go get that meeting set up." He pulled himself out of his seat. "Hate those things."

"It's all part of being an officer, future Captain." Nick jerked a thumb at himself. "I'm retiring, remember? Civilians don't go to staff meetings."

"There'll be civilians at this one." Jeffrey smirked. "Lots of them."

Nick looked forward at the viewscreen. "Ahh, flying." He pushed himself back into the leather seat. "Make sure you let me know how the meeting went."

"You'll be the first to know." With a wave, Jeffrey moved toward the communications station to decide who he wanted at the staff meeting.

39

"Where are we now?" Wick shouted over the vibrations. The ship was shaking so badly, it was difficult to see clearly.

"Northern Temperate Zone," Stanstead shouted. "Tropical zone is moving in our direction so we'll smooth out for a second!"

"Scrubbers online," Hooper shouted. "Tanks are fifty percent!"

Wick had both hands on the control stick, trying to hold the bouncing crosshair on the diamond- which she could barely see due to the vibrations. "Stay with me, baby!"

The ship seemed to calm down slightly.

"Almost done?" The Doctor said. He was leaning back in his seat, head pressed tightly against the head rest.

"Sixty five percent full," Hooper said. "Minor Helium and ammonia levels in the tanks won't be an issue."

"South Equatorial, brace yourselves!" Stanstead shouted.

The ship lurched as the planet's four hundred mile per hour winds once again switched directions.

"Come *on*!" Wick said as she fought to keep the ship on its trajectory. "Why would anyone live here?"

"No one does!" Stanstead shouted back. "They live on the nice quiet moons!"

Wick smiled at her friend. "No neighbors? Maybe I'll drop a summer home here."

"Eighty-five!"

"South Temperate Zone's last!" Stanstead said. "Winds're going with us again."

The ship once again smoothed out slightly as it traveled in the same direction as the violent bands of winds that traveled around the planet were once again moving in the same direction as them.

A high-pitched whistling echoed through the bridge as the tank's pressure release valves opened to prevent the tanks from rupturing.

"Hundred percent!" Hooper turned a dial, swiveling the large baffles on the front of the engines out of the way, allowing the atmosphere to now travel through the compression chamber. "Wick; punch it!"

"On yeah! Ignition!" Wick flipped a switch on the control panel turning on the massive quad-ram jets along the leading edge of the ship's wings. With the baffles out of the way, the planet's thick atmosphere was fed directly into the combustion chamber where a small amount of fuel was burned to heat it. The expanding gas then pushed its way out the back of the engine at the rear of the wing, providing thrust. The faster the ship went, the more atmosphere was crammed into the engine, increasing pressure and heat and creating even more thrust. "Get up on it!" Wick said as the ship picked up speed.

Several sonic booms rattled the ship as the ship rocketed forward. As it left the atmosphere, the shuddering stopped.

"Exited atmosphere!" Stanstead said. "Come to new heading one five seven to slingshot." She tapped an icon on her pad. The yellow diamond disappeared as a purple one appeared almost near the edge of the viewscreen. "Chasing purple." The viewscreen had several other icons and call-outs on it displaying wind speed, debris, as well as ships functions giving it a cluttered look.

"Chasing purple, got it." Wick muscled the control stick to the left as the ship banked hard around the planet. The delta wing glowed red from the friction with the thinning atmosphere as it gained speed. "What've we got for the belts?"

"We'll pass through the Main and Gossamer Rings. Nothing substantial enough to worry about. Entering."

A sound much like gravel being thrown against the hull of the ship rang through it.

"Main ring." Stanstead explained.

Wick looked at her. "And the Gossamer?"

Stanstead looked down at her pad. "Through it. Told you it would be nice and easy."

The Doctor didn't pick up his head. "I don't think your definition of easy and my definition of easy are the same thing."

"What's our speed, Bill?"

McGrath looked down at the readouts. "We're sitting at Eighteen-point five mil." He looked down at his panel. "Tanks are at ninety-eight percent. Picked up a leak in tank seven." He flipped several switches. "We'll run that one dry first and then the others in order." He looked up. "We're fine on fuel. By the time that tank's empty, we'll only have lost fifteen percent of it. We're well within the green."

Wick craned her neck around to look at him. "Nice, Bill. Real nice." She looked forward at the viewscreen. "Anything else we need to worry about?"

"Nothing. Just push hard for Earth. Acceleration is within parameters. We'll hit twenty-five mil in three hours."

"How much fuel will we have left then?"

"Thirty percent." Bill said. "Then we coast to the Sun nice and leisure like."

"This thing goes through fuel like a sailor on leave." Stanstead said.

"Locking in our course." Wick flipped a switch and let go of the stick. "Easy peasy, right Hooper?"

The man rubbed his hands on his face. "Okay, I have to admit that wasn't as bad as I thought it was going to be."

"Thank God," Stanstead said.

Hooper shot her a look. "I don't think so." He let the force of the acceleration push him back in his seat. "So what's next on the agenda?"

"I was under the impression, we were going to play cards." The Doctor said. "Si?"

"Well, the acceleration is going to give us a good bit of Gees, so getting around is going to be a workout." Wick said. "I'd suggest waiting to get something to eat once we're coasting. We can relax for about thirty hours before we get to the Sun to be busy again." She paused. "Then once we park this thing, it's going to be a long day of docking with Space Ten, debriefing, and helping with whatever rescue missions are going on."

"You think they're going to find people on Earth?" McGrath asked.

Wick shrugged. "Honestly I don't know. I hope Earth looks better than Titan did."

"Maybe you should pray to your benevolent God to save everyone there," Hooper said.

"I want you off my bridge, Hooper," Wick said. "For good." She pointed at the door. "You can sit down in the Pax Bay until we get docked."

Hooper struggled out of his seat. "The last thing I want to do is sit around you people for the next thirty hours." As he stood, the inertia of the ship pushed him toward the back wall of the bridge. He half stumbled, half slid to the wall. When he got there, he put his hands out onto it and shuffled to the door. "Stinking lousy believers." He muttered as the door swung open and he stumbled through it. Without even trying to close the door, he muscled his way down the ladder.

"After watching him, I think I'm going to just sit here for the next three hours, then get something to eat." Stanstead said. "I don't think I'd be as graceful as he was."

"I'll wait too," the Doctor said. "Bella?"

"I'm not that hungry to risk getting stuck on that wall until we shut down the engines," Wick said. She cringed when she realized she answered to 'beautiful' instead of her name.

"Then it is a date. We will dine together." The Doctor closed his eyes. "Until then, *Bella*."

Lieutenant Wick fought to keep a smile from her face as she answered: "Buona notte, Doctore."

40

"What've we got, Chief?" Jeffrey said as he stepped onto the Flight Deck.

"A whole lot of nothing." Nick looked up at him. "Except static. Plenty of static to go around."

Jeffrey slid into his seat. "No other ships?" He looked at the viewscreen. Earth was off center but large. "Nothing at all?"

"Well." Nick shrugged. "There is that." He pointed at the screen as he rotated a dial, shifting the forward cameras. "Not that we need it."

As the Earth moved off the right side of the viewscreen, a large asteroid moved into view from the left. There was a thin shaft connected to it. As the cameras panned across it and reduced magnification, a twenty-five-mile-long craft similar to Space Ten filled the screen. Its parking lights illuminated the entire length of the ship and the inner portions of the asteroids. Thanks to the bright parking lights, even without any instrumentation or augmented cameras, it would have been visible from twenty miles way- a safety feature all ships had.

"Wow." Jeffrey remarked.

"Seems that's the Admiral DMS. All dressed up and nowhere to go."

"Are you sure?" Jeffrey leaned forward as the cameras panned across the ship. Much like Space Ten, at least a dozen smaller craft were attached to it amidships. "What's it doing here?"

"Nothing. It's not even rotating like we are to create inertial gravity. Just sitting there all pretty."

When LINACs sat at the null-gravity point, they would rotate on their central axis like a baton, creating an inertial gravity that pushed crewmembers toward either end with the equivalent of three-quarters of the Earth's gravitational pull. This was done to assist with moving

around the ship while it sat still. Crewmembers would then reconfigure their cabins depending on which end they were on to create their own 'up' and 'down'.

A thought occurred to Jeffrey. "Hey, we should also…"

"Already did it, El Tee." Nick said. "We're lit up too."

"What's it doing here?" Jeffrey repeated.

"Looks like it swapped over new shields and was waiting to head out." Nick chuckled. "Once we gave the all clear to come to Arcturus, I suppose."

"Where is the crew?"

"Maybe they went down to Earth when the system started to fall apart? No one is answering on any freq. It's a ghost ship."

"Really? You'd think they would have left *someone* on board the fleet's flagship. I mean… It's the flagship."

"I agree." Nick said. "But the DMS is dead in the water."

The ship had been named for the preeminent Admiral – Derek Michael Sanderson who had risen through the ranks as he put down revolts across the planet. He also was the strongest proponent for incarcerating religious people, establishing the Vesta Colony to create a single location where they could all be sent. He had declined naming the colony after himself, choosing the Roman goddess Vesta instead.

"You want to swap ships? That thing's got hundreds less light years on it than we do."

Nick shook his head. "It would take longer to swap over all the crews' personal gear and all our food stores than just swapping the shields."

"Really?"

"Truth be told, probably not- it would be about the same. But I think the Dee Emm Ess needs to stay here in the system. It's not the kind of history I want to take with us."

"Oh, okay." Jeffrey sat back in his seat. "Yeah; that makes sense."

The pair sat in silence for a long moment looking at the lit-up ship.

Finally, Jeffrey spoke: "Are we settled in on the Null Point?" He asked, referring to the place in space where Earth's and the Moon's gravity cancelled each other out.

"We're nestled in nicely. Engines are offline. Reactors are online and operating. We can start swapping shields within the hour." Nick flipped a switch, turning off the viewscreen. He looked at the Lieutenant. "All that's left to do is implement whatever plan you set up for folks to head to the surface." He raised an eyebrow. "There is a plan, right?"

Jeffrey nodded. "We came up with one. We've got all the coordinates for the adults on the crew and have set up seven routes to get everyone back on Earth for about four hours or so."

"Only seven?"

"Well, we have several families that are here with no one left on Earth to go search for. And we've got about a dozen people who were from one of the colonies that we know are destroyed or completely missing. They don't need to go down either. And we've got a couple of crew that aren't interested in going down at all. All told we have twenty-one not needing to leave the ship which leaves a hundred three that do. And we've grouped them geographically and that makes seven routes with two or three drops each. Some drops have only four or five people, others with up to twenty." He looked at Nick. "Are you making it one oh four?"

"I'd like to run down to Topeka just to check. I really need to. How many you got going to Central North America?"

Jeffrey thought for a moment. "Twelve, I think it was. There's definitely a drop off in Topeka for several folks. The smallest group is going to Japan; that's the group of four. Biggest is going to the regional capital in Denver. That's twenty-two if I remember right."

"When's dust-off?" Nick pushed himself out of his seat. "Think I might want to see if the kids want to go with me."

Jeffrey looked at his watch. "You've got… as long as the Chief needs to get there, I think." He smiled.

"I'll try to not keep them waiting." Nick patted his friend's shoulder as he moved to the ladder. "See you in a bit."

"Stay safe, Chief," Jeffrey called after him.

41

Jeffrey switched through the various communications channels, receiving nothing but either dead air or static for his efforts. "Come on," he said again. "Something. Anything."

He sagged back in his seat and put his feet on the console. After a few minutes, his eyes began to droop.

Several proximity warning lights on the instrument panels flickered from green to red. Since his eyes were closed he didn't notice.

A klaxon sounded, jolting him from the beginnings of his nap. "What the!" He sat upright. The lights on the bridge flashed from white to red and back again several times.

"Lieutenant," the Marine at the Communications Station said over the bridge speakers. "We've got contact six o'clock!"

Another Marine- who had been at the Operations Station, ran forward and sat in the copilot's seat. "Orders?"

"Get the autocannons operational!" Jeffrey looked up. "And shut off those alarms so we can think." He reached forward and began panning the ships cameras to search for the attacker. Sitting at a dead stop, Space Ten was incapable of any sort of evasive maneuvers. "Scramble the Corvettes," he said as he continued to look for the interloper. Or interlopers.

"Canons operational," the Marine said. "For what they are worth." He put his hand on the flight stick. "We going to sit here, Sir?"

Jeffrey looked at the Marine. "I hate to say it, Sergeant Pastis, but we're thirty miles long and our engines are offline and we're spinning in place. We're not making any evasive maneuvers."

The Marine was still looking at the viewscreen when he pointed. "There! You passed it! Go back!"

Jeffrey looked forward- there was only an empty starfield on the screen. "What? Where?"

"Left, go left!"

Jeffrey turned the nob counterclockwise. As the camera he was operating stopped at its left-most limit, the next adjacent camera took over, continuing to pan with only a momentary flicker on the screen to show it happened. A large ship came into view. It was facing backward, firing its engines to decelerate.

"Which ship is that?" The Marine asked.

"Oh man!" Jeffrey leaned forward even more. "It's the Proclamation!" He wiped a tear from his eye. "Thank God, it's the Proclamation!"

The ship continued its trajectory across the bow of Space Ten with Jeffrey keeping it on the viewscreen.

"No hails from her," Sergeant Pastis said. "Still trying."

As the ship passed across the forward shield it executed a barrel roll putting its belly toward Space Ten.

"Wow. That's some ugly skin. I wonder what they hit." Pastis leaned forward. "That looks like a bulkhead door welded to her." He pointed. "There's a hatch! What a mess."

The pair watched as the ship rotated around into a level flight along Space Ten. Finally, when it was near amidships, its momentum stopped.

"Anything?" Jeffrey asked.

The ship rotated again, showing its damaged underside to the viewscreen.

"She's beat up bad. I hope they all made it. A lot of those had to be complete hull breeches"

"What've you got, Pastis?" Jeffrey said testily.

"Nothing, Sir. She's not putting out any signals." He pointed again at the screen. "What the- did they have an EMSQUAT shaped hole in it?"

Jeffrey looked at the ship for a long moment. An EMSQUAT appeared to be welded in place beside the rear port side landing gear. "Never seen that before."

"No signals at all. Someone's got to be flying it though."

"Well, the antenna array for that thing runs along the middle of the belly. And with how it looks, I suppose they aren't able to transmit at all."

Staff Sergeant Pastis raised his hand and started to wave, then caught himself. Jeffery looked at him. "What are you doing?"

"Sir, I swear that EMSQUAT just waved at us."

Jeffery looked at the screen. He rotated the dial, zooming in on the large robot. It was indeed waving one of its arms. "Hey, swap over to their internal freq."

Pastis turned a dial, changing the frequency he was listening to.

"Five. Do you read? This is Echo Five. Do you read? This is…"

Pastis pushed the transmit button. "This is Space Ten, we read you Echo Five." He looked at the Lieutenant. "That's just weird."

"The Proclamation has sustained heavy damage, Space Ten," Echo Five said. "The ship is unable to dock. All passengers are safe," it said, as it commenced its pre-planned transmission. "The ship will need to transfer its passengers via a transport shuttle. Port Fifteen has been activated and is ready to accept the shuttle."

"Is everyone okay?" Jeffrey asked.

"All passengers are alive, Lieutenant Simpsons," Echo Five said. "Communication channels are down. The lower hull shielding of the Corvette Class ship hampers localized suit-transmissions so you will be unable to speak with anyone aboard the ship until they are brought aboard Space Ten."

"Staff Sergeant, get a transport fired up and over there," Jeffrey said to Pastis. He pressed the transmit button again. "Echo Five, were there any survivors from Titan?"

"Negative, Lieutenant Simpsons," the robot said. "Also, Lieutenant Wick instructed me to order you to remove me from the

exterior of the Proclamation before it is abandoned. I am in need of depot-level repairs; however, I have not submitted the requisition yet."

Jeffrey smiled. "Are you sure she told you that and you're not just making that up yourself?"

"I was instructed by Lieutenant Wick to inform you that any response other that an affirmative would be met with physical retribution once she is aboard Space Ten. Can you confirm that your response was negative or affirmative, Lieutenant Simpsons?"

"Geeze. That sounded like that EMSQUAT just threatened you, Sir."

Jeffrey nodded at his copilot. "I'm sure Wick programmed it that way." He pressed the button again. "Absolutely positively affirmative, Echo Five. You are our first priority. Please make sure you relay that to Lieutenant Wick."

"Localized communications are unable to penetrate the heavy shielding of a Corvette Class ship, Lieutenant Simpsons."

Jeffrey shook his head. "EMSQUATS; smart and stupid all at once. Get a repair ship out there to remove that thing before Wick punches me in the head."

"I'm pretty sure that's not how relationships are supposed to work." Pastis smirked. "But, roger that, Sir; sending requests for a transport and repair ship." He looked at Jeffrey. "Are you going to wait here for her, or go down there to meet her?"

Jeffrey shrugged. "Well, it's a forty-five-minute trip to get to the landing bays. By the time I showed up, they'll already be unloading. I think I'll just wait here."

"Lieutenant Simpsons," Pastis said. "You outrank me and all, but I've been married for five years now. And I'm *telling* you that you really need to get yourself down there so when Lieutenant Wick gets off that battered and beaten ship that looks like it has been through Hell, she sees you right away."

"What?"

"You need to be there when that hatch opens and she gets off that ship, Sir. No if's and's or but's."

"Well…"

"I've got this, Sir." He smirked. "We're sitting still, remember? Go kiss that woman." He raised his hand and saluted. "See you later, Sir."

"Wow. Dismissed from the bridge." Jeffery returned the salute and pushed himself out of his seat. He looked down at the other man. "Are you working for Chief Hauser?" Jeffrey narrowed his eyes at the man.

"Last I heard, we all were." Pastis said matter-of-factly as he returned to looking at the screen.

"Huh." Jeffrey turned and left the bridge.

42

Nick sat on the landing craft between his kids, head tilted back onto the headrest. Eyes closed. He had assumed this position as soon as the ship had pushed away from Space Ten. Instead of sleeping, he had spent the twenty-minute transit to the surface praying. It was something he had done a lot of lately.

The ship jostled as it settled onto its landing gear.

"You awake, Dad?" Samantha asked. "We're here."

Nick opened an eye on her side. "I'm awake." He pressed the large red button on the center of his safety harness and it flopped to his sides. "Let's go see who's who in the zoo."

Samantha looked around the ship. They had started with twelve others on the ship not counting her family- one Marine had changed his mind at the last minute and rushed off before the hatch closed. The ship had stopped and dropped of all but one passenger not including the Hauser family. "Are you ready?"

Nick pushed himself out of the seat and turned to open the overhead bin. "Yup. We've got four hours to look around. Maybe a little longer but not much." He nudged his son with his foot. "Up and at 'em, Nikki."

Nikki startled awake. "We there?"

"Yes, we're there." Samantha said. "I don't see how you could sleep."

Nick unlatched his safety harness and stretched. "I tried to stay awake but the droning of the engines just knocks me out. Same with cars."

"Me too," Nick said. He pulled a rifle out of the bin and offered it to his son. "Here you go."

Nikki reached up and took the rifle. He used it like a cane to get out of his seat.

"Dad?" Samantha said. "Are we expecting trouble?"

Nick held a rifle out for his daughter. "Always. *Not* expecting trouble is how you get into trouble."

Nikki slapped a magazine into the rifle then pulled the charging handle back on his rifle, pulling a round into the firing chamber. "What's the saying? Failing to prepare is preparing to fail." He winked at his sister. "Benjamin Franklin said that."

"How profound."

Nick waggled the rifle back and forth.

Samantha let out a sigh. "I'd rather not."

"I'd rather you did carry it and not need it than the other way around." Nick said. "You know what's better than two guns in a firefight?"

Samantha rolled her eyes. "Three guns, Dad." She took the rifle and slung it over her shoulder. "Three guns is better than two."

"That's my girl." Nick said as he pulled a third rifle and an ammunition pouch out of the bin then shut it.

"We expecting trouble, Chief?" A Marine asked.

Nick looked down at his rifle. "Not at all. But you know that saying 'there's one in every crowd'?"

The Marine smiled. "Yeah, I've heard it, Chief."

Nick pulled back on his charging handle and let it snap forward. "It usually turns out to be me."

The Marine patted his holster. "Well… give a shout if you need any help." He looked toward the hatch. "I don't expect to find my sister… but... you know... I have to look."

"I understand completely. That's why we're here, Private Durant; to see if we can bring any family along with us to our new home." Nick smiled. "Good luck out there."

Private Durant gave a salute. "You too, Chief."

"Helmets on, folks. The air is even more nasty than normal out there. Particulate levels'll have you chewing as you breathe," the pilot said over the speaker. "Give me an all green and I'll open the skin."

Nick, his kids and the Marine all retrieved their helmets from a high shelf. Nick reached into his helmet and turned on the microphone. "Thanks for the smooth ride, Fangs Out."

"I'm saving fuel so I can make the loop twice without having to refuel if I have to." Lieutenant Biggs replied. "Saves me a trip back to Space Ten."

Nick gestured at the hatch. "After you, Devil Dog."

Private Durant pushed the button opening the inner hatch. After it slid out of the way, he stepped into the ten by ten airlock then worked his helmet on. He looked at Nick and the others as they did the same. When they all gave him a thumb's up, he turned on his microphone by glancing at the icon on his helmet's head's up display. "We're all green, El Tee."

As soon as the inner door closed, the lights turned red and the outer door slid upwards revealing a ramp that had extended to the ground.

Durant marched down the ramp and skidded to a stop when he reached the bottom of it, staring at the sky.

Nick was looking down at the ramp and bounced into the back of the Private. "Hey, what're you doing?" He looked around and froze.

The bustling city that used to be Topeka was obscured by a brown and grey haze. The street in front of them was practically impassable with debris from toppled skyscrapers.

Nick looked at Durant- he was still staring up. Nick looked as well and was taken aback. The sun, even with the normal pollutants in the sky, was always bright and yellow. Now there were only streaks of yellow light spiking out from its brown mottled surface. Even without his visor turned down, he was able to look directly at it. "What in the world?" He said.

"Where are we?" Nikki asked. "I can't even tell what street this is."

Samantha eyed an icon to bring up a street map on one corner of her visor. Four tiny red dots indicated where they were standing. She pushed her way past her brother and her father. "We're on Tenth Street." She pointed to her left. "That's Quincy. The Ministry of Defense is over on Tecumseh Square the other side of the space port by the river," she jerked a

thumb over her shoulder. "The river's behind us so our house is straight ahead." She pointed into the forest of toppled skyscrapers ahead of them.

"Never Lost Samantha," Nikki said with a chuckle.

"Quincy and Tenth?" Durant said. He finally looked away from the Sun. "That means my sister's on Topeka Boulevard, other side of the capital building." He pointed to his right.

"Everything good to go?" Lieutenant Biggs' voice said in everyone's helmet.

"Sure thing," Nick said. "Just getting our bearings. We'll be out of your way in a sec."

"Sounds good, Chief. I'm heading to check on my neighborhood then I'll be back in four hours to pick everyone up. You're last so probably four and a half hours. You need me sooner, just give a yell. I dropped a couple of repeaters on my route so comms are up."

"Got it." Nick said. "We're heading that way," Nick pointed where Samantha had. "See you in a bit, Marine."

"Roger that, Chief." Durant marched off toward his sister's apartment building, knowing in his heart that neither she nor it were there anymore.

"Let's go, kids," Nick said. "We need to give him a little room to dust off." He started walking in the direction he had pointed.

"Well there's plenty of dust for that around here," Nikki said as he fell in step beside his father, Samantha close behind.

Once they were thirty yards away, the ship powered straight up one hundred feet to keep from knocking anyone over with his exhaust. Once he was clear, Biggs pivoted the ship north and flew off, dipping his wings as a final farewell.

"What a mess." Nick said.

"We're not going to find anyone, are we." Nikki said.

Nick turned to look at his son. "No, son; we aren't." He spread his arms wide. "And I don't think anyone else will either."

Samantha stepped up next to her brother- she had been lagging behind. "Then why are we even here, Dad? We should have just gone from Arcturus to whatever new colony was decided on."

Nick sighed. "Because if we just left without coming here, folks would have wondered what was back here. No one would be able to focus on our way ahead." He gestured around. "We need to make a clean break from all this."

"To follow God?" Nikki said.

"That's it exactly, Nikki." He put his hand on his son's shoulder. "This will give the crew closure. So they can focus on their future. Having regret about what happened here is much better than always wondering if they left someone behind."

"What if they get angry with God for what's happened, Dad? What if they don't want to go to a new planet?"

As the pair spoke, Samantha walked away.

"Everyone is free to make their own decision. I'm sure not going to take anyone along against their will. That's just asking for trouble." Nick said. He hesitated. "What do you think, from talking with the young troops, Nikki?"

Nikki thought about it for a long moment. "From what I've read, I understand why this happened. Other guys feel that way too. But we're not happy that all the people I knew on Earth are gone. I mean… why were we given a chance and not them?"

"I honestly don't know." Nick looked up. "Maybe if we make it back to Arcturus, Paramus can find out for us."

"Who?"

Nick smiled. "Someone I met on the planet. A priest." Nick waved a hand. "Never mind." He turned and looked into the maze of skyscrapers. "What a mess."

Nikki turned. "What do you think…" He did a complete circle. "Samantha?"

Nick looked at his son and realized his daughter was missing. "Sam?" He called nervously.

"I'm over here," Samantha said.

Now Nick did a full circle. "Where? We can't see you. You need to stick close, Sam."

"At your eight o'clock," Samantha said. "Don't worry Dad; I'm armed, remember?"

Nick turned to look behind him. Samantha was standing on a large pile of rubble. "What are you doing?"

"The Ministry of Defense is still standing." She pivoted and pointed over her shoulder. "All of it. Look."

"Huh." Nick considered that. "Well, it was a heavily reinforced building. If you flew a jet into it, you'd just piss off the painters that would have to touch it up." He looked again in the direction he had been walking. "Hey kids, how about a change of mission?"

Now Nikki looked back and forth between where their home was and the ministry. "What kind of change?"

"I've got an idea." Nick said.

"Well, if our place was still standing, we'd be able to see it from here. Easy." Nikki pointed to where their home should have been reaching up a hundred stories into the sky.

Samantha nodded. "Yeah. We're not going to find anything useful there, Dad."

Nick nodded. "Agreed. So, let's go to the MOD and see what's left to scavenge. When Fangs Out gets back, he can make the short jump there to load up whatever we can find."

"What are we looking for?" Nikki asked.

"Whatever the R and D department was working on. Plus things that will make setting up a colony that much easier." Nick said. "Remember, we were supposed to take over Arcturus, keep as much of the infrastructure in place, and stay put until the main colonization effort showed up. The 'we're here to build stuff' people were the second and third waves." He frowned. "Building wasn't what we were sent there to do."

"We've got equipment on board," Nikki said. He looked back toward where his home had been.

"Portable generators? Solar panels? Equipment to *build* solar panels? Fission material for those portable generators? We can't take apart Space Ten because that's our only interstellar ship and we sure aren't set up to build another one. The Research and Development department is what we need."

"We're going to bring nukes with us?" Nikki said.

"It's the safest, cleanest power we've got." Nick said. "Even a couple of generators would go a long way. They'll give us a hundred years of power while we work on other things."

Samantha started walking toward the building. "In that case, we need to get started. That place is like five miles away and with these stupid suits, it's going to feel like an uphill walk the whole way."

Nikki started walking too. "I'm afraid to even ask what floor we're going to find this stuff on."

"Yeah; don't even ask that, Nikki." Samantha said. "Let it be a surprise."

Two sonic booms ripped across the sky in quick succession.

"What the?" Nick looked up even though he knew whatever ship had just passed by was traveling much too fast to be seen. "Who's hot dogging?"

"Maybe it's Lieutenant Biggs," Nikki said. "He likes to fly everything like it's a fighter jet."

Nick laughed. "I've been guilty of that myself. I'll ask him when he gets here, but I thought he was saving fuel."

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Nikki leaned against the pile of equipment. "Okay. I have a suggestion."

"Shoot," Nick said. He was leaning against a large crate.

"When we build a Ministry of Defense on that new planet, we put the research and development folks on a single-digit floor." He looked up the building at the makeshift boom protruding from the thirty-fifth floor. "I mean honestly."

"Well the thirtieth was better than the hundred thirtieth," Nick offered. "We'd still be climbing up there, I think. You should appreciate it was just thirty floors up."

Samantha let go of the rope. "If at some point you could give credit where credit is due, I'm sure *that* would be appreciated."

"Great job, Nikki." Nick deadpanned. He clapped slowly. "Well done, first born son of mine."

"What?"

"Thanks, Dad." Nikki took a short bow. "It was nothing, really."

"What!"

"All I needed was my brilliant sister to come up with a way to make it all happen." Nikki finished quickly.

"That's better." Samantha let go of the rope that ran from the ground to the window-washer boom, just over four hundred feet up. Thanks to her ingenuity, almost everything the trio wanted was now on the ground.

"If only there was a way to get that fabrication machine out of that window." Nikki said, looking up. "Maybe when the ship comes to get us?"

Nick shook his head. "That thing's not coming off that floor in one piece. We'll be better off just building a new one." He tapped his helmet. "Got the schematics right here."

"You memorized them?" Nikki said. "Wow."

"No, Nikki," Samantha said, exasperated. "He's downloaded the entire database to bring back to the ship. All we need is the raw materials and we can do it."

"You're rolling your eyes at me, aren't you?" Nikki said.

Samantha clapped slowly.

Nick looked at a corner of his viewscreen. "Got about ten minutes before he gets here."

"Dad," Samantha said seriously. "Should we get the Lieutenant to fly by our place… just to make sure Mom isn't there?"

"Samantha," Nick said. "Mom's not there. You have to believe me on that."

"How do you know, Dad?"

Nick shrugged. "It's hard to explain. But… I feel it. That she's gone." Nick pushed himself off the crate. "I've prayed about it and the feeling I get is that she's dead."

"But Dad." Samantha began.

"It's just the way it is, Samantha," Nick said. He held his arms out. "Everything here is gone. Every*one* here is gone. The slate is wiped clean." He held up a hand. "And no; I don't understand why we are the ones who were spared. I have no clue at all. But I am going to use that second chance I've been given to live a better life. Be a better father, a better husband, and a better friend."

Samantha moved forward and hugged her father. "I miss Mom."

"I do too in a way." Nick admitted. The sound of engines made Nick look over his daughter's shoulder. "Fang's early."

Samantha let go of her father and turned to look. "Well that's probably good with how much we have to load. What we need is an EMSQUAT."

"That would help, but I am pretty sure standard load on that ship includes a forklift."

"Ooh, Dad," Nikki said. "I've always wanted to run one of those!"

"Maybe when we get to the new planet," Nick said. "Right now, we're on a time crunch. Other ships are going to be heading back to Space Ten and their arrivals need to be coordinated so there'll be a line. And I need to get back to the ship." He eyed the communications icon on his head's up display. "El Tee?"

"Biggs here, Chief. What's cooking?"

"Your fuel, it seems." Nick said. He looked up as the large ship passed overhead, heading toward where they had gotten off it.

"What?"

"Nothing. We're not at the rendezvous point. After you pick up Private Durant, head over to the MOD. We're at the…" He looked around. "West side of it. Grabbed a bunch of stuff from the Research and Development labs."

"Ahh, nice. Good thinking, Chief." Biggs said. "I'll drop in on Durant and be at your location in five."

"Roger that," Nick said. "We'll make sure we're ready to go to keep on schedule." He looked across the cityscape as the ship disappeared from sight as it landed. "You got a forklift on board?"

"Sure do. You must have gotten a lot of loot if we need to break that thing out."

Nick looked at Samantha. "Thanks to my brilliant daughter, we've got a very respectable pile of loot to take back."

Now Samantha gave a short bow.

"See you in three," Biggs said. "Setting down now. I'll get Durant to power up the forklift. We shouldn't be too far off schedule."

Nick nodded. "Right." He eyed the communications icon again to deactivate it. "Okay, Durant is going to run the forklift. Sorry Nikki. We'll stay out of the way. You know the old saying…"

"If you fail to prepare you prepare to fail?" Samantha said.

"No; too many Chiefs spoil the soup." Nick said.

"I don't think that's how that saying goes," Samantha said.

"Too many chefs and not enough Indians?" Nikki tried.

"You two." She looked over her Father's shoulder as the landing ship came into view. "But I agree." She pointed. "I'll be over there."

"Wait with her, Nikki," Nick said as the ship passed overhead, putting them in its shadow. He ducked down as the dust and dirt -and small rocks- flew around. "And I think I'll join you until he shuts those engines down." With that, he scooted over to where Samantha had retreated to the side of the building while the ship landed.

After only a few moments, the engines whined down and the ramp extended again from the ship, Nick approached it. When the outer hatch slid out of sight, Private Durant stomped into view.

Durant was harnessed into a fourteen-foot-tall exoskeleton with two massive claws for arms.

"Man, I want to get in that thing," Nikki lamented as Durant walked down the ramp, heavy flat feet banging on the metal.

"Men." Samantha said. "What is it with you and heavy equipment?"

"Those things are indeed fun to run," Nick admitted.

"That's true," Biggs said. "You should give one a try and you'd see," he said to Samantha.

"After I've had a chance," Nikki said.

As Durant walked by, he raised a massive claw in a salute to Nick.

Nick returned it and stepped out of the way as the Marine moved to the equipment that had been piled up.

"You've been busy, Chief," Biggs said as he strode down the gangway.

"Yeah. I figured we could use some supplies for our new home." He looked up. "So you got in some hot dogging after all?"

"Who me? I'm flying like a first-time cadet to make sure I could do the whole mission on one fueling." He put his hands on his hips. "Going to make it too."

"I guess you have a twin."

"Why's that?"

"Someone blew past little bit ago, leaving sonic booms in their wake."

"Maybe I've got a clone I don't know about." Biggs smiled wide. "There should be more of me to go around. It's sad that I'm a one-off."

"Right? I think the same thing all the time." Nick said. "Three of me would be a constant party."

"Even when you're not cloned, you pilots all think the same." Samantha said.

"Well it's hard to be humble when you're perfect in every way."

"Benjamin Franklin?" Nikki asked.

"Probably." Nick said. He looked up again. "Still, someone blew past here in a hurry."

Biggs gestured toward the ship. "We can go in and ask. No sense in standing around watching the ship get loaded." Biggs tugged on his suit. "And we can get out of these sweat bags."

"Good idea." Nick said. He gestured up the ramp. "Then we can see who's burning fuel for the fun of it."

44

Violet sat in the jump seat, trying to not make eye contact with any of the other passengers on the drop ship.

All told, she had eight of her compatriots on board, the other fourteen people on the ship actually did live near Denver. She had initially been worried that such a large group from one area would raise eyebrows, but it seemed that either no one had noticed or the massive size of the Denver Regional Capital Area made it seem likely that so many residents would be on board.

When the word was put out for everyone to indicate where on Earth they wanted to go to look for friends or family, she had immediately called her own last-minute meeting. Then, thanks to a last-minute staff meeting held by her former fiancé, she had come up with a plan to get away from Space Ten and back to the surface with a ship. The plans changed again when she was told that there was another LINAC equipped ship sitting at the shield farm. Instead of occupying a dying Earth, they were now going to start anew on one of the other planets.

The total number of people who had decided to join her was twenty-one- a number larger than she expected to agree to the task at hand, but she was glad for it- they now included several engineers as well as two medics.

Violet stole a glance to the man beside her- he was not in her group.

He caught her looking and smiled wide. "I am sure I'm going to find my brother. I can just feel it."

"Sure you will," she replied. "God has probably been protecting him this whole time. He's all safe and happy in his house." She rolled her eyes at him. "Idiot."

The man's smile faltered then he looked away.

She closed her eyes. "All of you are."

"Five minutes to touchdown," the pilot said. Both the pilot and copilot were with Violet. "Get your helmets on, folks."

Dutifully, everyone stood and shuffled to the storage locker. The technician Violet had spoken to pushed past her to grab a helmet before she did. "I will find my brother." He said to her as he moved back to his seat. "Just wait and see."

Not wanting to start a commotion, Violet didn't answer the man and instead put on her helmet before sitting down so they couldn't even make eye contact. She was content knowing that unless Space Ten sent another ship down to get the actual residents, they would be stranded on Earth.

"Setting down," the pilot said after what seemed like a long five minutes. "I'm landing in the residential area north of the capital building. Let me know if that doesn't work for anyone and I can do a hop to where you need me."

Violet already knew that this location was centrally located for the actual five passengers on the ship. With a smile she moved back to her seat.

Once the door opened, everyone filed out of the ship while Violet waited for the pilots.

"Well? How do things look?" Violet asked the co-pilot.

"Not too good." He answered. He gestured over his shoulder. "Tom'll fill you in. I'm going to make sure those people move away from the ship so we can head out right away."

Captain Tom Miner stepped through the small hatchway that led to the cockpit of the ship. "Step one done," he said. "Get those Pax back in here, Ernie," he called out the hatch to the co-pilot.

"What's wrong?"

Tom shrugged. "Well, wrong is a strong word. Tight is more like it."

"Tight?"

The pilot nodded. "We swapped plans from staying on Earth to loading up on the Admiral Sanderson."

"That thing is huge. It will be the opposite of tight."

"Sure, but Space Ten is sitting right beside her and I can't imagine they're going to be happy about us taking it." He smirked. "And it's not like you can make a fast getaway with a LINAC. They'll be able to see us moving away for a good hour even if we turn off all the lights."

"What do they care?" Violet put her hands on her hips. "I don't see why it's any of their business what we do!"

Tom brought his hands up. "It's not, but I'd like to avoid the discussion if at all possible." He leaned toward the hatch even though the outer door made it impossible for anyone outside to hear him. "Ernie, move it!" He shouted into his microphone.

Violet startled at his shout. "Calm down, Tom. What's the problem?"

"We were one of the last ships to leave. The first ones were on the ground a few hours ago." He pointed out the hatch. "Right now, there are dozens and dozens of crewmembers still here on the surface, to include Hauser. If we can pick everyone up, get on board the Admiral Sanderson and get it fired up before they get everyone back on board, we won't have to deal with a confrontation."

Violet frowned. "I don't know; I'm all for a confrontation."

"Yeah well, not when we're outnumbered four to one and outgunned." He pointed at the seat. "So, get ready for a hard take off." He turned toward the hatch. "EARNIE!" He roared.

Violet flinched then moved to the seat.

The inner door closed as the outer door opened. After a whoosh of air clearing out the air lock, the inner door opened again. Ernie stepped into the ship. "Calm down, Tom." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "They turned into a bunch of sightseers out there." He turned as eight of the crew shuffled back onto the ship. "Everyone get buckled up; we're going to make a couple of quick jumps to pick up the last of our crew and then we're heading out."

The inner door closed again to repeat the cycle as Tom gave a curt nod. "When we get to the Sanderson, everyone needs to get on task to get us out before Space Ten decides what they want to do about us." Without another word, he turned and worked his way through the small hatch. "Get up here, Congo, they can buckle their own belts!"

Ernie removed his helmet then gave Violet a smile. "Tighten those straps, folks. It's going to be a thrill ride."

Violet smiled back only because she knew she needed an ally that could fly a ship. "Okay," she said sweetly.

The ship lifted off as Ernie worked his way back to the co-pilot seat. "I hope we make it."

"We'll make it," Tom said. "They won't see us dock unless they're looking. Once we fire up the LINACs, they'll get a radiation warning but by then we'll be moving."

"Hopefully moving toward an actual target if I can work out where we're going." He pulled the belts across his shoulders and latched them at his chest. "Fly fast but keep it smooth." He leaned over and took a pad from its slot. "Calculating routes to Proxima Centari."

"Why that one?"

"It's either that or Luyten's Star and I don't feel like living with the extra gravity of a super-planet even if it has more water."

"Whatever." Tom said. He flipped off the transponder, removing any chance of Space Ten tracking them. "You just better be right."

"Proxima's better because it's farther from Arcturus. They'll go to the one closer to be one big happy God family or something. Hopefully that means they'll never bother coming out to us. You know what we really need is..."

"*Whatever*." Tom pushed the throttles forward and the ship accelerated in a steep climb. "Listen Congo, you've got about thirty minutes before we're on that ship," he interrupted. "Now get that math locked down. Once we're heading out of the system we can talk the little details."

"I'll have the numbers." Ernie snapped. "Just get us there in one piece."

When Tom reached a thousand feet, he rolled the ship to its side and increased power heading east toward the National Capital Region that encompassed all of the State of Washington D.C. and several square miles of neighboring Virginia, leaving sonic booms in its wake.

45

Jeffrey loosened his grip, sliding to the next set of footholds twenty feet below. He had performed the maneuver- one he had seen Wick do- over a dozen times to try and get to the docking stations before the transport.

At first, he had just held on to the cable, riding it down to the middle of the Space Ten to the docking stations. But as he did, he thought of Lori, after what was obviously a harrowing mission, returning to an empty cargo bay. Actually, he had thought it would be worse than empty; it would be bustling with crewmembers who were there only because it was their job. It was then that he realized he absolutely needed to be standing there waiting for her -specifically her- when she got off the transport. So he had started letting go of the cable, sliding foothold to foothold. Since he hadn't planned on the maneuver, he didn't have gloves to protect his hands. He already had several blisters because of it thanks to the inertial gravity caused by the ship's rotation. It was only at the very middle of the ship- on the axis it was spinning that there was no gravity at all.

Even so, Jeffrey continued down the cable, watching the numbers increase as he went- into the twenties, then the fifties. When he reached the triple-digits, he still did not slow his pace- he was sure that he would be late and resorted to using his elbows to hold the cable, saving his hands as the padded elbows of his flight suit dealt with the friction.

Deck one hundred-fifty passed as he tightened his bicep on the cable, slowing his fall. He had only ten more decks to go.

After he fell to the next foothold, he checked his watch again- something he had been doing more frequently. A full fifteen minutes had passed since he started his decent. His heart sank- the odds Lori hadn't come aboard already were extremely low. The cable moved painfully slow the final three decks. With a long jump, Jeffrey made it to deck one hundred sixty. He shook his hands as started to run to the docking station. After only several steps, he skidded to a stop. Jeffrey tapped his comm link repeatedly.

"Lieutenant Simpsons, what's wrong?" A voice said.

"What cargo bay are the survivors from the Proclamation being brought in to?"

"Bravo Twelve, Sir. They are starting…"

Jeffrey tapped his link to turn it off as he turned and sprinted in the opposite direction- to the large double doors with CB 12 in large red letters on it. He put his hands out and caught himself on the doors as they slid away- again painfully slow.

"Come ON!" He said as he turned and sidestepped through the opening when it was wide enough. He looked around the massive area- it was a full ten decks high and spanned a quarter of the radius of the ship; each of the cargo holds on this level- Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, and Delta were pie shaped, just like the other dozen holds spread out along the middle of the ship. "Deck Officer!" He shouted to no one in particular. "Deck Officer!"

"Lieutenant?" An older man called as he raised his hand from twenty yards away. "Is there a problem?" He started walking toward Jeffrey- slowly.

Jeffrey ran to close the distance between them.

The man- a civilian load master- looked around. "What's wrong, Sir?"

"Mister Piper." He smiled sheepishly. "Sorry, I was just…" He looked around. "I'm just."

The man put his hand on Jeffrey's shoulder. "Sergeant Pastis let me know you were coming; we slowed down the recovery operation just a little bit to give you more time."

Jeffrey looked up. "He did, huh? Listen Tom…"

"Don't worry, he explained it to me, Jeff. Important stuff you're doing." He gestured at the large doors set on the curved outer skin of the cargo hold. "They're docking now. You made good time."

Jeffrey looked at his red and blistered hands. "Sorry you made them wait."

"Oh man, you need to have those looked at." He smiled. "That gal's going to appreciate what you did to be here for her."

Jeffrey shook his head. "I don't know. We kind of have a love to hate kind of relationship. I'm not sure she's going to be all that appreciative." He hesitated. "I'm not even sure I should have come down, all of a sudden. Maybe I'd…"

"I've got almost sixty-five years of marriage under my belt." Tom interrupted him. "You two kids'll be just…"

"You've been married to Beth for sixty-five years?" Jeffrey gaped. Even with long lifespans, marriages that lasted that long were uncommon.

"It's not in a row," Tom admitted. "My first wife died after we'd been married nineteen years. In the Tampa tsunami." He sighed. "Took me a while to get back in the game, but when you find the right person, you find the right person." He patted Jeffrey's shoulder again. "And you do not let them go."

A klaxon sounded twice in the bay, letting everyone know that an exterior door was opening.

Both men turned to look. "Get over there and greet your gal." Tom said. "I'm getting back to work. Gonna haul that Corvette alongside us and strap her down till we get to where we're going. Hate to lose a Corvette. Only two left in the inventory and it'll be years before we can build another one."

"See you later, Tom," Jeffrey said. "And thanks." He turned and jogged toward one of the smaller hatches nestled in the massive one- it had red flashing lights above it showing it was active.

"Show her your hands!" Tom called after him.

Jeffrey gave a thumb's up, then stopped when it hurt too much. He stopped almost twenty feet from the hatch.

"And who are you here to meet?" A voice said to him from behind. A shoulder bumped into his.

He turned and smiled. "Doctor Hawking. What brings you here?"

She blinked at him. "It's my job. What brings *you* here?"

Jeffrey looked at the deck. "Well… It's my job?" He tried when he looked up at the doctor.

Rebeca smirked. "Yeah, sure. I didn't realize you were the morale officer as well. You going to shake everyone's hand when they come off?"

Jeffrey looked at the door. "Sure?"

"First you better kiss that girl." Rebeca poked him in the ribs. "How romantic."

Jeffrey held his hands up plaintively. "Is everyone on the ship in on my relationship?"

"Wow, you need to come by sickbay so I can treat those blisters. Did you do that rushing down here?"

"Maybe."

She considered the young man's earlier question. "Yeah; everyone's in on it. I mean, everyone else sees what's going on between you two. It's only you two who don't."

The latches on the hatch clanked open and the two halves of the door slid apart.

"You two really need to just get some time alone to work out…"

"Excuse me, Doc," Jeffrey said as he walked toward the opening hatch.

"… what everyone else sees?" Rebeca finished. "Make sure she sees your hands!"

Jeffrey stopped as Doctor Caricchio stepped out of the hatchway. He had his arm over Bill McGrath's shoulder.

"Doc, glad you're okay. You too, Bill." Jeffrey said with a smile. "Looks like you've been through the ringer out there."

Bill nodded. "Definitely wasn't a pleasure cruise." He smiled. "Thanks for coming down."

"It's my pleasure," Jeffrey said. "We were worried we'd lost you." He looked over the men's shoulders.

"Thanks. Really, thanks." Bill put out his hand to shake Jeffreys.

Jeffrey held his hand out, palm up. "Maybe later?"

"Wow. You're a mess too. That just happen?"

"Well, I kind of…" Jeffrey stammered. He glanced toward the hatch.

"Come on, Guillermo," Doctor Caricchio noticed the glance. "We are keeping the good Lieutenant from greeting the other crewmembers." He gave a wink to Jeffrey. "Si?"

"Si, Doctor." Jeffrey said. "Grazie."

Jeffrey stepped to the side to let the two men pass. His stomach was in knots. Two technicians carrying a stretcher brushed past him to enter the hatch, making him take another step to the side.

Oh no, Jeffery thought. *I asked if everyone survived, not if anyone was injured.*

Stanstead shouldered Wick as they stepped into the thirty-foot airlock connecting the transport to Space Ten. "Think there's a welcoming committee?"

"It was a routine flight," Wick said. "There's other ships out running the system looking at all the empty moorings. Folks have got better things to do than come see another successful flight by Tails and Coyote."

Stanstead nodded. "Yeah, you're probably right. I mean, once you've seen us come aboard after surviving one impossible mission, you've seen it every time. Right?"

"Right." Wick said as they approached the end of the airlock.

"Huh." Stanstead said. "That's weird; it does seem there's a Ground Zero waiting for the Coyote."

"What?" Wick looked out into the cargo area. "Where?"

As they stepped through the hatch, Stanstead pointed to her left. "Over there to the side. Aww; he looks worried too."

Jeffrey saw Staff Sergeant Stanstead point in his direction then Wick looked. A huge smile spread across her face.

"Jeff!" Wick smiled wide and started toward him.

Jeffrey sprinted the dozen feet between them then caught Wick up in his arms, hugging her close. "I worried about you the entire time," he said as he spun her around. "Oh, Lori I was praying so hard you'd make it back."

"Jeffrey!" Lori said as she was spun around. "You're causing a scene." As she was spun around, she noticed that people in the hangar bay were looking at them.

"I don't care, Lori." He stopped spinning her and lowered her to the deck, still holding her against him. "I do not care. I love you and I don't care who knows."

"Jeffrey Ground Zero Simpsons." Wick said tersely. "Let go of me this instant!"

Jeffrey let her go and took a step back. "What?"

"So, it took me almost dying for you to love me?" She put her hands on her hips. "*That's* what it took?" She cocked her head to the side.

More people in the bay turned to look- Wick's temper was well known. And the verbal sparring between her and Jeffrey were also well known.

"Well?" Wick fumed.

The pair stared at each other for a long moment.

"Yes." Jeffrey said finally. "It took you being away from me for me to realize how much I loved you. It took me thinking that I was going to lose you forever before I realized I needed to tell you how much I loved you."

"Loved?"

"Loved and will love. I love you, Lori Coyote Wick." Jeffrey said. "Forever."

Lori leapt forward, wrapping her arms around Jeffrey's neck and legs around his waist, and kissed him.

Several of the crewmembers watching applauded.

Jeff put his hands on her shoulders gingerly and kissed her back.

After the applause died down, Lori let go of Jeffrey and took a step back. "Oh, Jeffrey," she said as a tear rolled down her cheek. She stepped back again and took Jeffrey's hands in hers. "I'm so glad." She hesitated as Jeffery grimaced. "What's wrong?"

He pulled his hands from hers. "It's nothing." He moved his hands behind his back.

Lori's hands went to her hips. "Did I embarrass you just now? Is that it?" Her eyes flashed.

"No! No, that's not it at all!" Jeffrey brought his hands from behind his back. "It's just that in my rush to get down here…" He held up his hands. "I kind of… well."

"Oh, Jeffrey!" Lori gently took his hands in hers. "They look awful." She looked up at him. "You know, they have this great invention called gloves that protect hands."

"Yeah, well, I was in a hurry." Jeffrey looked around the hold. "I didn't have time to go by my cabin."

"Because you luu-ve me," Lori sing-songed as she swayed her and his arms back and forth. "Jeffrey luuu-ves me." She shifted her hips back and forth as well "He wants to kiiiiss me. Because he luuu-ves me."

"I'm not going to hear the end of that song for a long time, am I?"

Lori looked up at the ceiling as she did some quick calculations. "Well, let's see. You're Twenty-four, I'm twenty-six… Things'll be peaceful on the new planet…fresh food…" She looked into his eyes. "About a hundred fifty years."

Jeffrey leaned in and kissed her again. "Okay, if it's only that long, I'm okay with that."

"Then let's get you to sickbay." Lori gestured to the exit. "So you can get those hands looked at."

As the pair started to walk towards the exit, hand in hand, several other crewmembers clapped.

Jeffrey held his hand up, bringing Lori's with it. "Thank you, thank you; you've been a wonderful audience. We'll be here all week. Make sure you tip your servers."

More crewmembers clapped as they walked past them heading out of the hangar.

"You're absurd," Lori remarked.

"And you're stuck with that as well."

"Deal." Lori said. She glanced up at him. "There better be an engagement ring presented in the very near future."

"Once I ask Chief's blessing." Jeffrey gestured through the open hatch into the central part of the ship.

"To marry me?"

"To use some gold and diamond from the resource bins."

"Some? Just some? Not *a lot* of gold and a huge diamond to assemble a respectable ring?"

"That's what I meant, dear." Jeffrey deadpanned.

"Now we're getting along." Lori put her arm around Jeffrey. A smile played across her face. "Want me to hold onto you while we ride the cable to sickbay?"

"I'll manage." Jeffrey assured her. "You've got some post-flight briefs to attend to." He smiled. "See you at dinner?"

"For the next hundred fifty years." Lori answered.

46

Hooper dashed out of the hatchway into the large hangar area. He tapped his comm link furiously. "Violet," he said as he walked quickly to the exit, hoping he wasn't garnering any unwanted attention. "Sergeant Whiddon?" He tried again: "Serra!"

Hooper stepped into the large area where the cable ran. "Fields?" He said worried. When no one responded, he tapped the center part of his comms link. "Comms?" he said.

"Comms. What'cha need, Mister Hooper?" A voice asked.

Hooper's insides tightened. "Can you connect me to Violet Wilds?"

"Hold one." The voice said.

While he waited, Hooper walked to the bulkhead and peered out the thick viewport. There was a large LINAC ship sitting very close to Space Ten. He watched as it seemed to pinwheel in space thanks to Space Ten's rotation. "Weird," he remarked as he waited.

"Mister Hooper," a voice said.

"Yes?"

"There's no response. She's probably got her comm link off. Showering or something. Been busy around here you know."

A landing ship caught Hooper's attention. It seemed to be heading to the other LINAC. "Oh no!"

"Well, folks have to shower you know. Or maybe she's sleeping. Folks do that too." The voice said.

"No, not you, you idiot!" Before the voice could answer, Hooper tapped his link, turning it off. "Oh no!" He said again. He pressed his hands against the viewport as he watched the large ship. He slapped his hands against the glass. "Don't leave me!"

In a panic, he backed away from the glass, and spun in a circle. "Think!" He looked up. There were several other landing bays above and below him. Without hesitating he moved to the shaft and grabbed the cable running down.

As he rode the cable down at its infuriatingly slow pace, Hooper worked on a story to use on any technicians he would encounter. *I need to check the telemetry and guidance routines for the upcoming trip.* It was fairly vague and definitely something that fit into the scope of his duties aboard the ship. It would also give him access to a cockpit. While he wasn't trained as a pilot, his work with guidance systems had given him a fairly good understanding of the procedures required to pilot a ship. He did not however, have any practical experience flying.

As he reached the next deck, he stepped off next to a technician who was reading a clipboard. The technician looked at him with a bored expression. "Mister Hooper. Can I help you?"

Hooper grabbed the man and flung him into the open air of the shaft. It wasn't his plan to kill anyone- in case he didn't make it off the ship- but his panic made him act without thinking.

The man dropped out of sight, toward the top of the ship, screaming as he fell.

Hooper turned and walked through the hatch with a large 'A' on it. Still panicking, he half ran, half bounded across the hangar toward one of the outer bulkheads.

"Can I help you, Sir?" A voice called out to him. The hangar was only manned by one crewmember since everyone was up one deck, dealing with the Proclamation. "Hey, what are you doing?"

Hooper ignored him and continued to run toward one of the hatches.

"Hey!" The crewmember yelled as he started toward Hooper. "There's no maintenance scheduled today!"

Hooper slid to a stop at one of the smaller bulkhead doors- he knew that the smaller doors led to the smaller ships- this one was a mere hundred-foot landing craft. Much like the one that had originally landed on Arcturus.

"Stop!" The crewmember said as he closed the distance between them. "What are you doing, Mister Hooper?"

Hooper turned to face the young man, his hands out in front of him. "Get back!" He balled up his fists. "Get. Back!"

The crewman skidded to a stop. "What? What are you doing?" He asked again.

"I'm getting off this ship," Hooper said. He glanced over his shoulder and hit the button that opened the hatch. "I'm not staying with you people."

"What people?" The crewmember said. "You can't just leave the ship sir." He reached up to tap his Comm Link. "I need to talk to…" He was cut off as Hooper punched him in the face.

"Shut *up*!" Hooper screamed. As the crewmember staggered back, Hooper stepped through the hatch and closed the door. He thumbed the safety latch and turned to get his bearings. "I have to get out of here!" He shouted as he ran toward the cockpit.

47

Nick stood at the airlock as his landing craft approached Space Ten. He had been standing there since the ship took off from Topeka. He tapped his comm link. "El Tee?"

"Chief," Simpson answered. "I'm tracking your E-T-A at ten minutes."

"Sounds right. Any updates?"

"Since ten minutes ago?" Simpson laughed. "They seem to have all the important systems running. Acceleration is within acceptable parameters. They seem to know what they're doing. Does that help?"

"No, El Tee. It doesn't. Any updates on that commandeered landing craft?"

"It's heading toward the other ship. The guy piloting that thing doesn't really seem to know what they're doing. Real sloppy. He'll be lucky if he doesn't crash into the Sanderson as he tries to catch her."

"Hooper, huh?"

"Yeah. That's what Fitzsimmons said when we got him out of the chute. Wick said he was…" Jeffrey wasn't sure what term to use for the man. "One of the nonbelievers?" He chuckled. "So good riddance to bad blood, right?"

"I'm glad you're finding humor in this." Nick put his hands on the bulkhead. "Now we're down a landingcraft and it's not like we can just request a new one from the depot."

"That's true. We still got three others though, Chief."

"We can't start being lackadaisical with our assets, El Tee. We're completely on our own for that."

"Well, we do have a little time before we head out. Maybe we can find another ship close by to plug into that open landing bay?"

Nick nodded even though Jeffrey couldn't see him. "True. Put the word out we're in the market for something."

"Something fast and sporty? Like a captain's yacht? A runabout even?"

"Stay focused El Tee. Got a trajectory for the Sanderson yet?" Nick smirked. "Since the last ten minutes?"

"Hey, yeah, we got that," Jeffrey answered. "Well, it's early but the odds are they are heading to Proxima Centari with their exit trajectory from the Solar System. You know, this is good news."

"How so?"

"All the crazies are heading in a different direction that we are getting ready to go. I mean, we're down a landing craft, but the way I see it, our problem with the OneGen and anti-God crewmembers is solved. I mean... I can't imagine they didn't take everyone who wanted to go with them. Hooper seemed to be the last one and he got left behind because he was with Wick on that mission. Everyone else had a plan to get off Space Ten."

"That is true." Nick said after a long moment. "I suppose."

"Right? And everything seems to be in good working order over here, here so they didn't sabotage anything on their way out. Probably because they didn't have time to, now that I think about it."

"More good news, El Tee." Nick said. "How're things looking for our own push-out?"

"Got a new rock already on the way over. The shield will be installed in thirty-two hours. We'll stop our grav-spin in three more then the LINACs will come online right afterwards." He looked down at his hands- they were in a clear polymer second-skin to protect them while they healed. "There's something else I needed to talk to you about when you get back."

"Uh oh."

"No, it's not anything bad. It's…" He cringed. "I wanted to talk to you about Lieutenant Wick."

"Lieutenant Wick?"

Jeffrey scrunched up his face again. "Lori."

"Now it's Lori. Nice. Sure thing *Ground Zero*. I'd be glad to sit down and talk out the logistics of the… relationship?"

"Wedding."

"That's music to my ears, El tee. I'll be up on the bridge as soon as I possibly can."

"You don't have to be so smug about it."

"Nowadays, I take my victories where I can get them. See you in a few."

"Sure thing, Chief."

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Nick put his head back onto the headrest and closed his eyes. The past two days had blazed by with preparations for leaving the solar system for the last time. Numerous jump ship missions had run back to Earth, the Moon, and Mars to search for components that would come in useful on the new planet. A great many were found and brought back. He and Rebecca had had four meals with Jeffrey and Lori- planning their upcoming nuptials. After dinner last night, Nick had even proposed to Rebecca.

Hello God. Thank you for everything you have done to get us to where we are now. We are ready to start a new life on a new planet. And to start new families to follow you as well. Can we have an uneventful trip to this new home we're going to?

He sat still, hoping for a reply like Tolen and Paramus apparently got routinely.

Amen?

After a few minutes of sitting quietly, Nick found himself walking along a forest path. He looked up at the multi-colored leaves. The bright yellow light streaming down through them felt warm on his face in contrast to the chill that was carried on the breeze.

This must be what Autumn is like he thought as fallen leaves crunched under his feet. Enjoying his dream, he continued to walk, hands in his pockets against the cold.

After a minute or so, he realized that the sound of his steps began an instant before his feet actually landed on the forest path.

Weird.

With a shrug, he looked ahead at the straight path that seemed to disappear in the distance and continued to walk, enjoying the colorful forest path and occasional bird sounds.

Apprehension hit him as he realized the sound of the leaves crunching before his feet hit was actually someone else walking beside him- with a slightly longer and slower gait, feet striking a split second before his. He started to look then caught himself.

No one looks upon the face of God, of course. Paramus' jovial voice echoed in his head.

Nick skidded to a stop, frozen in place. He took several deep breaths of cold air, sending a shiver through his torso.

Is that You? He stared straight ahead, still unable to look to his side. He considered what he wanted to say next then decided that all he needed to say was: *I want to walk with You, Jesus. I want you in my life.*

The steps beside him started up again. Nick quickly started walking as well. After a while, he returned to enjoying the scenery around him, listening to unseen birds in the trees and feeling the crisp breeze on his face.

He was unsure how long he walked along the never-ending path; it could have been minutes or even hours. Or days. Time seemed to not matter as he walked along listening to his footsteps and the ones that came just a moment before his, enjoying the silent company that seemed to warm him from the inside out. So much so that he took his hands from his pockets, letting his arms swing free, hands feeling the cold yet not affected by it. Warmth and peace filled him as tears of joy streamed down his face.

If this is Heaven, can I just stay...

Nick jolted away as a hand grabbed his shoulder.

"Chief?" Jeffrey said, his worried face right in front of Nick's. "Are you okay?"

"What?" Nick said testily, upset to be brought out of his dream. "What?"

"Are you okay?" Jeffrey looked around then bent closer. "You were crying in your sleep." He said in a whisper. "What's wrong?"

Nick brought his hands up to his face and wiped at his wet cheeks. "It's... Nothing's wrong." He smiled. "Absolutely nothing is wrong. It's more like everything's right."

Jeffrey straightened. "You sure, Chief?"

Nick smiled wider. "Oh yeah, I'm sure. God is with us on this trip. Leading the way. Just a split second ahead but right beside us the whole way." He pointed. "Right out there."

"Right out there?" Jeffrey looked at the blackness of space on the viewscreen. Pinpricks of light from distance stars stood out brightly against the black sheet. "Chief, you were dreaming."

"No, I wasn't." Nick said with conviction. "I'm sure of it. It's God. He's here."

Jeffrey looked at the view screen again. "He's everywhere, so I suppose I can't argue with that, now can I?"

"Nope; you can't, El Tee." Nick leaned back comfortably in his seat. "I know in my heart that God is with us and everything will be okay." He looked up at the young man. "And there's the name of our mission."

"What's that, Chief?"

"Operation Immanuel."

The End

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About the Author

Robert P. Wills is a retired U.S. Army, Chief Warrant Officer Four. He and his long-suffering wife have retired to Clermont, Florida where they are spending far too much time walking around the various theme parks in the area.

Robert misses being the Army at times. Especially when he wants to dress up as a Spartan and wander around. Oddly enough, his Home Owner's Association is less sympathetic that Afghans.



He plans to continue his writing antics with several very different books in the works. Book seven in his wildly popular Tales From a Second Hand Wand Shop series, *Killing Grimbledung*, will be published in late-2018. Along with unstable Gnomes, a rollicking pirate story *The Sailings of Pirate Nonn* and a wacky visit the world of L. Frank Baum's land of Oz, should be ready for publishing by mid-2018. To make matters worse, he is starting a new cozy mystery series *The Summer Schauers Mysteries*, book 1 will be titled *Pulling the Trooth* and take place at a dentists' convention. His wife doesn't know he's writing this new series, so please don't mention it.