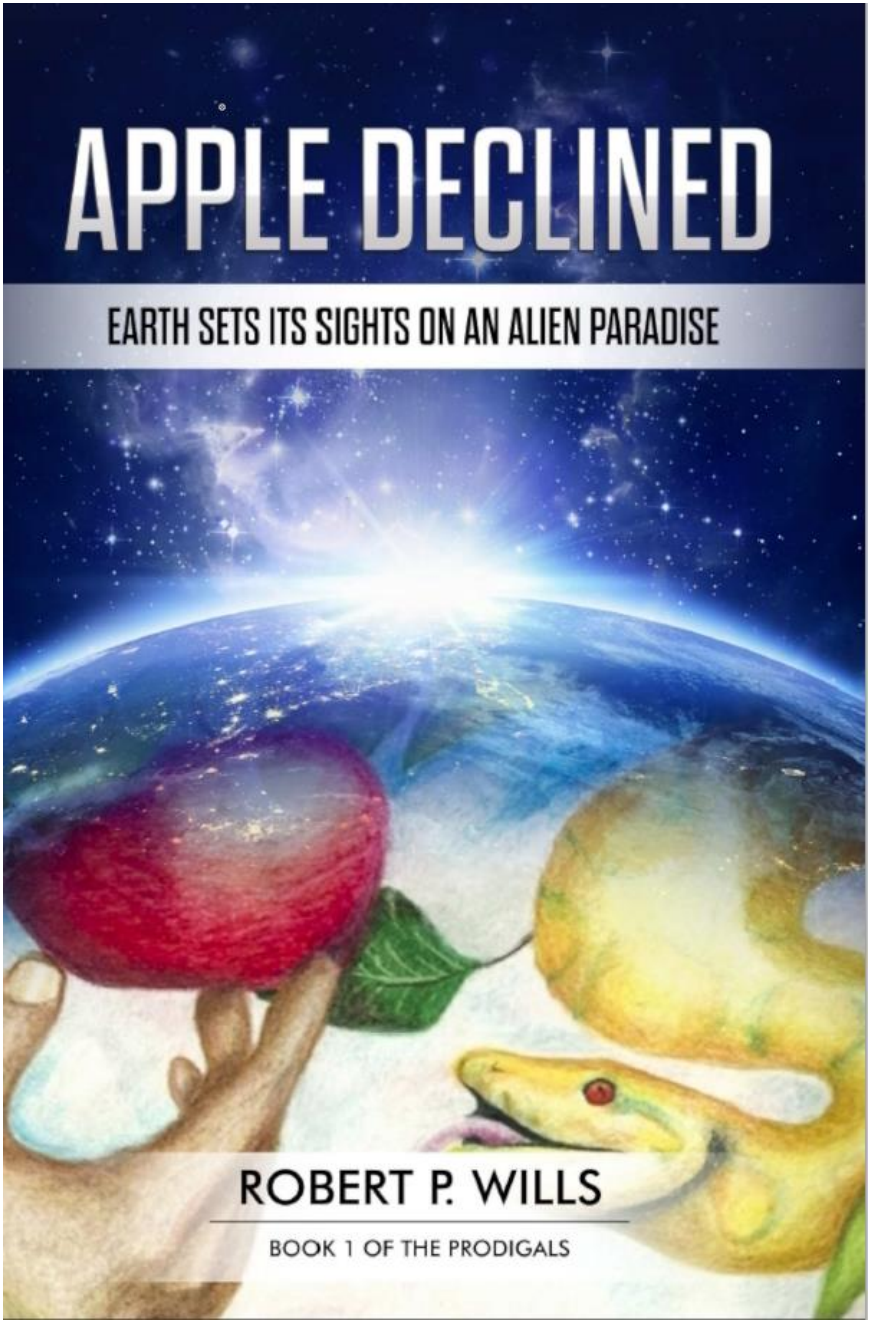

APPLE DECLINED
EARTH SETS ITS SIGHTS ON AN ALIEN PARADISE
ROBERT P. WILLS
BOOK 1 OF THE PRODIGALS

Apple Declined

Book 1 of The Prodigals

By Robert P. Wills

Cover art by Sara Allen

Thanks for the edits, Marilou

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"I have made the earth, and created man upon it: I, even my hands, have stretched out the heavens and all their host have I commanded." – Isaiah 45:12 (KJV)

Chapter 1

Nick Hauser pivoted out of bed and let his feet hang down- they just barely hovered above the floor. *Because Theresa wanted one of those old fashioned, high beds.* Thinking of his wife, he looked over his shoulder. She wasn't there. *Probably worked late at the lab and just slept there.* "Keep telling yourself that, Nick," he said out loud.

He hopped onto the tile floor and padded to the bathroom. He looked at himself in the mirror. He was still as fit as a soldier would be expected to be. He flexed, pectoral and latissimus muscles hopping out. "Toughest sixty-five-year-old there is," he said with an approving nod. He ran his hands through his hair- more grey than black now, but it still covered his entire head- or at least as much as he allowed it to with the regulation flattop haircut he had maintained for the past 42 years. "You are a handsome devil," he said to himself. He looked back over his shoulder toward his bed, or more specifically the unused half of his bed. "You might just have to kill someone today, handsome devil."

After cleaning up and getting dressed in his flight suit- with over 40 years of service, he didn't feel it was necessary to wear anything besides his flight uniform. 'How about we just leave the medals and shiny brass to the Generals; that's what they do best. Flying is what I do best', he had snapped, the last time someone had suggested he wear his dress uniform to a meeting. The general who suggested it frowned but didn't press the issue. When all was said and done, there really wasn't much he could do to a Chief Warrant Officer Five; demotions took the approval of the Senate *and* the Secretary of the Military, and since there was no higher rank, Nick

didn't even receive performance evaluations. To add to the issue, there was a severe lack of senior pilots.

The attack had been planned perfectly, catching a conference of a hundred senior flight officers while they watched a demonstration of a new propulsion system for fighter jets. The large hangar they were in contained most of the blast, limiting the carnage to the attending officials, four technicians, numerous aids, and of course the young, impressionable lieutenant who was wearing almost fifty pounds of C-28 High Explosive around his entire torso. Nick had missed the conference only because he had been leading the defense of the Macapá spaceport in the state of Brazil. The 'spaceport of the middle of the world', as it was known, had come under attack from Brazilian separatists trying to commandeer a ship to the colonies of Mars. Like Nick's cohorts, none of the separatists survived the day.

Nick walked into the main living area of his apartment- it took up most of the skyscraper's floor. In the middle of the space was a massive wood staircase that led to an equally large area above. It was in fact, another apartment that he had acquired when the tenants had moved out. Thanks to a rapidly diminishing population, housing was abundant. Thanks to Nick's threats, the occupants left before they were, as he had said 'added to the rapidly diminishing population.' Since he was armed at the time, they even left all the furniture, taking only clothes and personal effects. The staircase was ordered and assembled by microbots over the course of two days. Nick immediately gave his two children - Nick junior and Samantha full run of the top floor. Being seventeen and sixteen, respectively, they were ecstatic. Had his wife been around more often, she would have objected. As it was, it was almost three days before she saw the staircase, and by then the teenagers had completely moved in. When she did finally notice it, a day-long argument made him try to appease her by disabling the entranceway of

the upper apartment so that the children would have to enter and exit through the main entranceway. The next day that his wife didn't come home, Nick gave Nikki and Samantha the code.

"Coffee," Nick said to the kitchen as he sat on one of the stools that surrounded the large island. "Toast and eggs." He ran his hand across the black top of the counter, turning it on. He read the news as his breakfast was prepared from a bin of organic components and ultra-filtered water.

"Make two servings," said Samantha as she came down the stairs. "Morning, Dad."

"Two servings," he said. Nick turned off the display with another hand swipe. "Morning, Samantha." He had stopped calling her 'Sam' when she turned thirteen and had declared 'I am Samantha!' He had enough conflict in his life as it was, so he immediately switched, with only occasional instances where he slipped up. They were sporadic enough she didn't correct him. Nick figured he could continue to call his sixteen-year-old daughter 'Sam' about once a month without drawing her ire. So he did.

"You're up early. Got a meeting or flying somewhere special?"

Nick stood to retrieve the two plates from the bin as the cover rolled back. "Meeting unfortunately." He made no bones to anyone that flying was one of the few remaining joys in his life. Breakfast with his daughter was also at the top of the list. "Big things going on at the em oh dee."

"There's always big things going on at the all-powerful Ministry of Defense, Dad." She smiled as she passed him a fork from the canister on the counter. "But it's got to be real important to bring you to an actual meeting." She smiled. "They promise you you could fly once it was over?"

"I'm going to do that no matter what." He eyed his daughter. "When did you start drinking coffee?"

"Since we took a trip out to the dairy factory for our health class."

Nick stuck out his tongue. “Ignorance is bliss, I think.” He handed her a cup of coffee. “Sugar at least?”

She nodded as she slid a spoon across the counter at him. “Chemicals I can deal with.” She started. “Those cows are just...”

“Eating. We’re eating. We are *not* discussing the current state of affairs over at the Ministry of Consumables.” Nick looked at the stairs. “Nikki up there?”

Samantha shrugged noncommittally. “I didn’t check. Probably, since it’s a school day.” She made a face as she drank her coffee. “More sugar, I think.”

Nick didn’t press the issue; with his son being seventeen, he allowed him quite a bit of freedom. “Want some creamer? That’s made of nice, wholesome chemicals.” He held up the brown canister. “Not a bit of milk in it, guaranteed.”

Samantha nodded. “I think so.”

He passed the canister to her. “How’s school going?”

Another shrug. “Fine, I suppose. We’re all getting hammered on biotech and agriculture.” Samantha dropped her voice to an official tone. “So you young people will all be vital assets when the colonization process begins. Remember that everyone must do their part for humanity to endure. Would you like to know more? Click here.”

Nick laughed. “We tell the young troops the same thing. Don’t let it get you down.”

“How much time do we actually have left?” Samantha asked, suddenly serious.

Torn between telling her the truth, and what the OneGen publicized, he decided to go with the former: “About ninety years.” He smiled. “We’ll be long gone from this rock by then.”

"You sure?" She took a tentative sip of her coffee. With a nod that she had finally put enough creamer in it, she turned to her eggs.

"Yep. That's what this meeting is about. I think we've got another candidate to have checked out."

Samantha pushed her eggs to one side of her mouth. "That makes what, five or six?"

"Something like that. I was told last night that this one might be big."

Samantha raised her eyebrows. "A mega planetoid? How could we live on that?"

"No, no; a planet that we could *all* move to instead of spreading out across half a dozen planets. It's supposed to be ideal."

Samantha frowned. "No one lives on it now?"

Nick took a long sip of coffee to buy himself time. It was highly classified that they had already eliminated two undeveloped sentient races from planets as part of the colonization process. One was pre-Stone Age; they were hardly more than animals living in caves and speaking a rudimentary language. The other seemed to have a very intelligence insect life. Or at least it did. He had not heard of any intelligent indigenous species on this latest planet. "Not that I've heard," he finally said as he put down his cup. "We're probably going to have to fly out there and confirm what the survey probes already saw. Get things ready for the main push."

"Just to be sure?"

Nick nodded as he finished his coffee. "Just to be sure." He put his cup down. "Can you pitch these in the washer? I need to get going. Thanks to those OneGen nuts blowing up the station at the em oh dee."

"Sure, Dad."

"See you, Sam," he said with a wave to his daughter.

As soon as the door clicked shut behind him, a boy peeked down from upstairs. "He gone?"

Samantha nodded at him. “Yeah, he’s gone.”

He moved to the food processor. “Eggs, bacon, waffles. I thought he’d never leave,” he added sourly

“If he caught you here, Pete, you would never leave.”

“Whatever,” Pete answered as he put Nick’s cup under the dispenser. “One coffee. Heavy milk, sugar.”

Chapter 2

Nick rode the train to the Ministry of Defense. It was never crowded anymore since the city had less than a tenth of its original population. He rode in silence, an entire bench to himself as the train alternated between traveling on the surface between lanes of traffic and underground. The train arrived at the stop before the MoD. The stop directly below the building had been closed two weeks ago - since the explosion by OneGen operatives.

The OneGen group was intent on the human race dying off as punishment for their actions in destroying the Earth. They calculated that within one generation (about 95 years) the Earth would be uninhabitable, so if they were able to stymy any colonization program for that long, the Earth would lose its most dangerous and polluting species and begin a long-deserved road to recovery.

OneGen's calculations were however, wrong. According to several top secret committees, 95 years was about forty years longer than the Earth had- which was why the MoD had been ordered to give colonization top priority.

Nick exited onto the dingy- yet uncrowded city street. There weren't enough people left to create crowds of any significance or to complain about the lack of cleanliness. He looked up at the sky through his personal respirator- it was also dingy. A more-than-slightly acidic rain fell regularly from a constant overcast sky. Thanks to several dozen nuclear explosions, the atmosphere was filled with particulates- both radioactive and acidic.

After ten minutes, Nick reached the massive double doors of the Ministry of Defense. Four guards stood on either side under a large awning

that protected them from the hazardous elements. Their weapons were at the ready, respirator hoses slung over their shoulders so they were out of the way. As he approached, the front two raised their weapons and began to track him.

"Chief Nicholas Hauser," he called to them. He held up his hand to display his palm.

A Marine on the far side brought her weapon to her cheek and sighted at his hand.

Nick stopped walking. Having been on guard duty innumerable times, he knew that the bouncing hand of an approaching individual was sometimes difficult to scan. This caused the guard force to think that the individual approaching didn't want to be scanned due to nefarious intentions. On many occasions, he had configured his weapon to full automatic as he tried to scan an approaching bobbing hand, mentally giving the approaching person only a few more steps before opening fire. More often than not, the individual would stop once the weapon 'clacked' out of safe mode. On those other occasions, the humming of the firing mechanism coming online as he partially squeezed the trigger made the approaching person -or persons- stop dead in their tracks.

The Marine gave a curt nod of thanks as she aimed directly at Nick's palm. "Chief. Welcome aboard," said the Marine as she lowered her rifle.

"Glad to be here," Nick replied as he once again started to walk. When he got closer to the Marine, she offered him a salute.

Nick obliged with one of his own. "Carry on, Devil Dogs." And as he had started doing back when he went over thirty years of service, he added, "Thanks for your service".

The Marines nodded, knowing that among all the officers that they heard that particular catch-phrase from, Chief Hauser's appreciation was sincere.

Once inside the building, Nick slipped off his respirator and walked across the empty foyer, giving a nod to the woman behind the desk as he went. Only an occasional ministry employee walked here and there- it wasn't that the MoD was working with a skeleton crew -it was the largest employer in the district- it was that it was still early. Nick pressed the button on the elevator and waited. It was a universal constant, he mused, that no matter what technology was crammed into them, elevators were never on the floor he wanted them to be on. He took that on faith since he had had yet to encounter a similarly advanced race as Humans.

When it arrived, he stepped in and it sped him to the one hundred fiftieth floor, the numbers scrolling by in a blur. With a slight feeling of weightlessness, the cabin came to a stop and the doors opened to a small foyer. There was only one door. Without knocking, he opened it and entered the massive floor-wide research laboratory. Spotting his friend on the very far end of the lab, he took up a jog and moved to him quickly.

"Getting your exercise in when you can, Nick?" Chuckled his long-time friend.

"Keeps you healthy," Nick replied. "You should try it sometime," he added as he pointed at his friend's paunch. "Before you completely lose sight of your feet."

Theodore stared at Nick.

The silence drew close to the limit that would have been uncomfortable, so Nick broke it: "So. There's a new planet to check out?"

Theodore nodded. "Yeah. A little farther than the last one but still not that far out."

"Anyone there already?"

Theodore put his hands on the workbench he was leaning over just a moment before. " 'Fraid so."

"What firearms are we going to carry?" Nick moved to the workbench. It was covered with various weapons and magazines.

"Top of the line" answered Theodore as he spread his arms wide. "Top of the line."

The two had met at an advanced weapons training camp over two decades ago- Nick as a student, and Theodore as the armorer. The two had been close together in age - unlike the mass of cadets who were also training- and had bonded quickly. After several vacations together, even their families were friends now. As Nicholas moved through the military ranks, Theodore moved up the research and development hierarchy at the Ministry of Defense. Now he ran R&D for the ministry.

"That's not a brand I'm familiar with. Never heard of Top o' the Line Incorporated making anything for the military. They a new startup to replace Lowest Bidder Amalgamated?" Nick gave a smirk.

"These are brand new weapons, Nick," Theodore said testily He put his hand on a formidable rifle. "I've been tweaking them myself, you know."

"Well truth be told, there's no one's better." Nick patted his friend on the shoulder. "But still, a Mark One of anything is never as good as the Mark Four or Five; the glitches aren't out yet."

"There're no glitches," his friend replied smarmily. "In case you haven't heard; I don't leave glitches behind." He raised an eyebrow. "No loose ends. The closets are shut, drawers pushed in and my toothbrush is in my back pocket."

"That sure sounds like no loose ends," agreed Nick. "But still...here in the lab there aren't any, but out on some muck covered planet up against angry 'digeonous critters, glitches pop up and get you killed." He startled. "Hey, how big a population are we talking about here? Not like those bugs where there's millions of them?"

Theodore hesitated for the briefest of moments. "Heard it's around twenty thousand. Twenty thousand five."

Nick whistled. "Nice. I'm going down to be outnumbered... What? A thousand to one with glitchy weapons?" he frowned. "You whip up some of those MANPAD nukes like you did for that Buenos Aires operation?"

"Can't very well nuke our future home, now can we?"

"I suppose that didn't work out for our present one." Nick sighed. "What've you got for the old Chief today, Teddy?"

Theodore picked up the three-foot long rifle his hand was resting on. "It's the latest in case-less weaponry. This is the Mönchshof Seven oh Three." He narrowed his eyes, "*Not* the Mönchshof One."

"Heard of the Mönchshof." Nick took the rifle in his hands.

"Then you know they make a tight weapon. It's an upgrade on their current line so it's not all new tech."

"What's different from this and the five? Never had a six before. Got a five back home. Good for keeping the neighbors in line." He smirked. "Or making them leave."

Theodore lapsed into his military-pitch voice. "The Mönchshof Seven Zero Three is a marked upgrade over the six, and a vast improvement over the five." He took the rifle back. He pressed the magazine release and let it drop onto the table. With one smooth motion he pulled the bolt back and peered into the firing chamber. "Clear" he said out of habit as let go of the lever. With no magazine, the bolt remained back. Tilting the weapon, he continued: "The six went to case-less ammunition from the five, increasing magazine capacity to seventy-five rounds." He handed the magazine to his friend. "The seven takes it a step farther by increasing the length and width of the magazine by fifty percent and adding a roller feed mechanism to stack rounds nose to tail. This coupled with a decrease in ammunition size to three millimeters pushes magazine capacity to one hundred fifty."

Nick peered at the magazine. "This has a hundred fifty rounds in it?" He hefted it. "Doesn't weigh more than the five's and I can only fit fifty in that." He eyed the tiny round sitting at the topmost position in the magazine. "Still; three millimeters?"

Theodore smiled. "Modern technology, Nick. You should embrace it." He cradled the rifle at his elbow and reached over to snap a round out of the magazine. It was tiny at three millimeters across. "These three by fives are top of the line."

Nick took the round from Theodore's hand. It seemed tiny between his fingers. "Top of the line for what; killing rats?" He turned the round and sighted down it at his friend. "Seen kids with bigger things stuck through their noses on my way here."

Theodore shook his head. "It's small so that a lot fit in the magazine, but it reaches just over a thousand meters per second." He smiled. "And the explosive nestled half-way down it makes it mushroom out on impact to just over ten millimeters. One will knock down an unarmored human-sized target. If they're in armor, you just turn off the explosive and punch a bunch of holes in them and the folks behind them."

Nick shook his head. "From my experience, we don't come across human-sized targets on other planets." He handed the magazine back. "They're ten feet tall, made of plants, smart bugs covered in bone-armor or thick fur, fast as lightning, small as jackrabbits and overall as mean as vipers. You name it. Something the size of a human would be a refreshing break."

"Well then you're in luck," said Theodore. He put his arm around his friend. "You'll see in the mission brief that you'll be dealing with humanoids that are the size of a kid."

"A kid? A kid what?"

"*Human* kid. Well, maybe teenager really. Their average height is a hundred twenty-five centimeters." He held his hand to chest height.

"Nice. How many legs? Are they covered in hair, bony plates? Have poisonous spit?"

"They're bipedal, Nick. With a slim build. This thing will be like a *cannon* on them," Theodore assured him. "Regular, olive-skinned looking that'd not get a second look from you if you passed one on the street and they were in regular clothes. Hell, you might think a group of them were short tourists from New Calcutta. Language sounds the same too."

"Sounds the same? It's…" Nick leaned forward. "It's the same?"

Theodore shook his head at the implication. "Now don't go getting your panties in a wad, Nick. They aren't some lost tribe of Humans like those science fiction stories. These are straight *aliens*, Nick. Aliens that have a language that just sounds like Hindu because of its rhythm. That's it. Primitive, Iron-Age aliens who are inconsiderately occupying our future home world."

Nick raised an eyebrow at the man. "What's the downside?"

"There is no downside." Theodore put the rifle down and pointed at a side door. "Get your brief from Doc Valencia." He patted him. "Then you'll be all warm and fuzzy about the mission. We've got a pretty good handle on their language so you and some key leaders will be able to download basic vocabulary on the trip so you can corral them easier." He pointed at the far door. "Go get that warm and fuzzy feeling."

Nick turned to leave, over his shoulder he said: "I haven't been warm and fuzzy since I was a wobbly one and had pimples on my butt."

Chapter 3

Tolen swung his legs off his bed, feet hovering over the hard-packed dirt floor. He stretched his arms over his head, back cracking in several places as he did. He stifled a yawn. Looking over his shoulder, he smiled at his still-sleeping wife. She rolled over groggily, snatching his still warm pillow and pulling it to herself. He slipped out of bed and out of the room, closing the door quietly. He padded down the stairs- avoiding the ones he knew creaked- and into the living area. Like most all the houses in the city, his was a two-story affair of wood and stone. Bedrooms were on the upper level to take advantage of evening breezes, with gathering and food preparation areas downstairs. As with most of the other houses, its flat roof had been turned into a terrace with several colorful awnings where meals could be enjoyed with a view of the town and a chance to talk to neighbors.

Moving to the kitchen, he stoked the fire, bringing a small flame into existence. As the fire crackled, he added water to a small pot and set it on the stove. He left the lid off to prevent the whistling it would have made when it boiled.

"Sneaking a cup of tea?" A voice behind Tolen whispered. "Without even offering your wife one?"

Tolen turned with a smile. "Well, the word was that my dear wife was still fast asleep. Lounging even."

"Lounging?" She crossed her arms playfully. "Lounging was it?"

"Well, maybe that's a strong word." He added more water to the pot. "How about basking?"

"Now I am a lizard?" She put her hands on her hips. "This gets better and better."

"I believe I shall make breakfast." Tolen said as he moved quickly to his wife. He grabbed her around the waist, pinning her arms to her side. "How does that sound, Loren?" He made several snaps at her neck as she squirmed.

"I accept the apology." Loren smiled at her husband.

"I was just describing current events." He kissed her on the neck. "What's to apologize?"

Now she tried to bite him. "I'm getting cleaned up. The word seems to be that a full breakfast is supposed to act as an apology."

"Well, if that's the word, who am I to argue?" Tolen nipped at her nose as he let go of her.

"No one, that's who." Loren turned and left the room.

"Breakfast..." Tolen looked around the kitchen, rubbing his hands together. "Boiled eggs and bread. That's breakfast, right?" He gave a nod. "And it's nothing you can burn, Tolen." He picked up a hammered metal pot. "Most likely."

By the time Tolen had breakfast prepared, his three children had come downstairs to join their parents.

"Boiled eggs and cold bread. Thanks Father," said his oldest. "We always enjoy your attempts at breakfast," said the sixteen-year old boy.

"Attempts?" Tolen feigned offense. "Attempts? I assure you, Argus, that those eggs are cooked to perfection. Perrr- fection."

"And the cold bread?" Now it was his middle child- a thirteen-year old daughter. She prodded the pile of bread in the middle of the table.

"I'm glad you asked, my dearest Creta, I'm glad you asked. It is cut to perfection, of course."

Loren laughed. “Well, with an endorsement like that, how can we resist eating any longer?”

Tolen nodded at her. “Well, then let’s commence to eating this fine feast.” He looked at his youngest- a son of six. “Will you do the honors, Parton?”

Parton smiled wide as he bowed his head. He had just recently taken on the task of blessing meals. Although he was still working on the wording. He thought for a moment.

Thanks for the food!
Have it make us strong and smart
from the day’s beginning until its end.
He sang.

“Well said, son,” said Loren.

“Three sentences now. That is an improvement,” offered Argus as he picked up an egg. It was still hot so he bobbled it between his hands. “You sure made sure they were cooked, Father,” he said with a headshake.

Tolen straightened up in his chair and posed. “I even opened the jellies myself.” He jutted his chin at the ceiling. “All three of them.”

“Mother?” Creta pleaded.

Loren nodded at her. “Tomorrow I shall make breakfast.” She raised an eyebrow. “Actual cooking will take place.”

“Well, I never,” said Tolen.

“Exactly!” laughed Parton. He held out his hand until his brother put the pealed, blue-speckled egg in it.

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After breakfast, the children cleared the table as their parents got dressed.
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"What is on the agenda today?" Loren asked. "Anything important?"

"Well, the harvest will be soon so we need to make sure that we have enough volunteers for the dividing."

"Always important." Loren nodded.

"Always. We have a delegation from Itkob coming today. They are wishing to build a school on the temple."

"Oh? A new one or a bigger one?"

"I think it's a little of both because they're in need of some masons."

"A growing community is always a blessing. Will you be home for lunch?"

Tolen nodded. "I believe so. I was going to stop by the temple this morning and speak with Paramus about the addition to Itkob's temple to make sure it is properly sanctified."

"Equally important," said Loren with a smile.

"Itkob is growing so I think this may be the first step in them building a larger temple. It's getting crowded, it seems."

Loren moved close to her husband. "Well if anyone can make sure things run smoothly, it's my fine husband." She put her arms around him.

"Well, with that vote of confidence, I think I'll go to my duties." He kissed his wife.

"Bring Paramus with you for lunch if he's available," offered Loren.

With a final kiss, Tolen left for his office located next to the temple. He wasn't the oldest in town by any means but even so, he had been selected as the leader through the casting of lots. He endeavored to take care of day to day issues of the town, and also dealt with the elders of the other eleven towns when issues arose. It was a fulfilling job that took a bit of his time but he still made time to accomplish some woodworking projects here and there.

Tolen walked down the street- it was still early so it wasn't crowded yet. Soon his town of Rudens would probably begin building new houses as well. It wasn't something that needed a conference with other town leaders, but if Itkob was in need of masons, he might have to divvy up his artisans.

"Morning, Tolen," said a woman as he walked. "How are you this fine day?"

"Very well," he replied to the woman. He was not sure of her name- there were, after all close to four thousand living in the town; he couldn't be expected to know them all by name. Being the town's elder however, everyone recognized him. Even so, he held out his hand. "How are you?" He left the end of his question hanging.

"Mara," she said with a smile. "Taking some breads to the market." She turned to show the large square basket she was wearing on her back. It was lined with a bright blue cloth that also folded over the top to keep the bread warm.

"They smell wonderful," he remarked.

"Thank you," she gave a short bow. "A good day to you, Tolen."

"A fine day to you, Mara," he said as he put his hand on his heart.

Tolen smiled as he started to walk again. He interacted with over a dozen citizens of the town as he went, always taking the time to speak with them. It was almost an hour later before he approached the large white stone temple that marked the center of town. Broad steps led to the arched doors that were, baring inclement weather, always open. The main worshiping area was open to the public; a side room that was half the size of the public worship area was reserved solely for the temple priests and acolytes. Through that room was an even smaller worshiping area- it was reserved for the High Priest alone.

On the opposite side of the temple was his office. It was not very large, or grand, but it suited his needs as a humble leader to his people. If he

needed to address a large group, it was done either on the temple steps, or in the main worshiping area. As he arrived at the top of the stairs, Paramus called to him from the side entrance to the priest's worship room. "Tolen! Do you have a moment?"

Tolen moved to his friend with a smile. "For my oldest and dearest friend? How could I not?" Tolen grasped his friend's forearm with his hand, the other moving to cover his heart as they exchanged a traditional greeting. He smiled at him. "How are things?"

Paramus's welcoming smile faltered. "I'm... I'm not sure. It seems we are going to be tested in our faith. Do you have a moment?" He gestured to the main worship area.

"Of course," Tolen said as he also took a serious tone. "Tell me everything," he said as the pair moved inside.

Chapter 4

Paramus gestured to the padded seats that lined the walls of the large worship area. "Let us sit."

Tolen sat in one of the large padded chairs that was normally reserved for the elderly worshipers. "What is happening Paramus?" He leaned toward his friend.

"We are to be tested in our faith."

Tolen stared at his friend. "Tested? But." Words escaped him. "But, how?"

Paramus shook his head. "I do not know."

"But why?"

The Paramus sat back and didn't answer.

"Paramus?"

The two stared at each other for a long moment. Finally, the priest spoke: "It has been explained to me." He gestured in the direction of the large garden that started at the back of the temple and snaked through the town, twisting this way and that, finally encircling the entire town. It was laid out in a similar fashion as the other eleven cities. "But I do not completely understand it. It seems that the Father has other... children."

Tolen nodded. "Of course; the other cities."

Paramus shook his head. "No, besides them." He gestured at ceiling. "He is the Father of everything, after all."

Tolen looked at the ceiling. It was painted with murals of prophets and scenes from their holy scrolls. "That is true, I suppose." He didn't understand how other children of the Father were in the skies. "There are children of the Father? Our brothers are in the skies like the birds?"

The High Priest smiled. "This is just as my conversation went with the Father." He put his hand on this friend's shoulder. "There are other places like Sivulliik, Tolen." He pointed at the ceiling. "Other planets around other suns."

"And they are children of the Father?"

Paramus laughed. "How could everyone *not* be the child of the creator of everything?"

Tolen laughed as well. "I suppose that is true now that I think about it." He looked up again. "It is just that it has never occurred to me to think of that." He smiled. "Well that is exciting to meet other brothers that don't come from one of the other cities, yes?"

Paramus shook his head. "One would think that, but..." His voice trailed off as he became serious again.

"We are to be tested."

Paramus nodded. "We are to be tested by these brothers." He thought for a moment. "We need to explain to them about the Father so they believe."

"How could someone not believe?"

"I do not know." Paramus looked toward the garden again. "It seems He no longer walks among them."

Tolen gaped at his friend. He had regularly walked in the long gardens, speaking with his Father as he moved through it. They would walk for hours, conversing freely as they went. "What?"

"We are to welcome them when they arrive and show them love."

"Wait," interrupted Tolen. An alarming thought came to him. He leaned forward. "Do they *look* like us?"

"Somewhat."

"Somewhat?"

"That's what the Father said when I asked Him."

Tolen looked at the ceiling again.

Paramus put his hand on his friend's knee. "The best I could understand was that it seems they will probably not listen to us because that is what they have done in the past." He shrugged. "But we are to try. To give them a chance."

Tolen nodded then stood. "Well then that is what we shall do." Another thought occurred to him: "Should we tell others?"

Paramus stood as well. "We could but we would have very confused citizens as word spread. I don't think it would really help."

"What do we do?"

"Do what we always do and trust in our Father." Paramus shrugged. "And be hospitable when they arrive."

The pair walked out of the temple. Tolen looked at the skies. "When will they get here?"

"During the harvest festival, it seems."

"Then these new brothers will join us for the festivities! How wonderful."

Paramus didn't answer his friend. That was not the impression he had gotten from his conversation. Even so, he didn't want to worry his friend. "That would be nice."

Tolen patted his friend's shoulder. "It will be. Thank you for letting me know." He clapped his hands once. "Oh! I almost forgot; Loren asked for you to join us for lunch."

Paramus raised an eyebrow. "If Loren is the one cooking, then I gladly accept."

"Well I may help just to keep you on your toes." He shoved his friend playfully. "I will come by to walk with you by then."

"I'll make sure I'm ready to go." Paramus put his arm around his friend. "And we can explain it all to Loren."

Tolen nodded. “That sounds like an excellent lunch plan.”

Chapter 5

Nick entered the briefing room- an imposing 'U' shaped, artificial wood table filled it. Chairs were situated around the outer edge of it. The middle was used for presentations or speeches. There were only three other people in the room; one was Doctor Valencia. The other two were Marines that Nick did not know. They were sitting side by side. "El Tee" he said to the young lieutenant. "Gunny," he offered to the weathered Gunnery Sergeant. "Good morning to you both."

"Not sure what's so good about it," responded the Gunnery Sergeant in typical gruff, senior enlisted Marine-speak.

The Lieutenant looked at the pair nervously then gave a smile. "Morning Chief."

Nick sat in a chair on the opposite side of the table from the pair so they could all look at each other without having to turn their heads back and forth. "Hey Doc, what's the scoop? Teddy says this is a simple bug hunt."

Doctor Valencia moved to the large chair at the head of the table. "Well, bug may be the wrong word." He shifted nervously in the seat. "These things're more like Humans than anything else we've encountered." He hesitated.

Nick looked around the table. "Oh! Sorry Doc. Let's wait until everyone else gets here so you don't have to repeat yourself."

Valencia shook his head. "No, no; this is it."

"This is it?" Nick looked across the table. "No offence meant, Marines. Really. But what kind of Op only has three in the head shed?"

"I've got a good chain of command for my grunts, Chief; they'll be in line," the Gunnery Sergeant said, "but I gotta agree with you." He looked at the doctor. "Where's the Executive Officer, science folks, wrench turners?" He smirked. "Squints?"

"Who's my copilot?" Nick added in.

"That'd be me, Chief," said the Lieutenant. "Simpsons is the name. Jeffrey Simpsons."

Nick grimaced. "On a deep-space Op?" He shook his head. "How many more flights before they take the wheels off?" He looked at Valencia. "Hell, Doc; if I met him anyplace else, I'd think he was coming over to ask to date my *daughter*."

"You have a daughter?" The Lieutenant offered with a wry smile.

"Oh, I can see we're going to get along just fine."

"Listen, Nick," began Doctor Valencia, "this is a very sensitive mission and we're keeping a lot of it under wraps until we it get underway. You have an XO, science officer, engineer, and several lab techs." He nodded as the Gunnery Sergeant, "Like Gunny here asked about. They're just not going to be read on until you're underway."

"And the kid?"

"I am a *Lieutenant* in the Americas Marine Defense Forces and I outrank you."

Nick looked at the Gunnery Sergeant who only shrugged back. Technically it was true that regular line officers outranked warrant officers, however when experience was taken into account, RLO's (as they were called) tended to defer to their Warrants. "Who's right seat?" Nick asked Valencia, purposely turning away from the young lieutenant.

"You're right seat, Nick."

Emboldened, the Lieutenant leaned forward in his chair. "As the senior ranking officer aboard..."

"Shut up, Simpsons," said Valencia. "As the head of the Ministry of Defense, I say who is in charge and unless you want to find yourself dusting beaches..." He let his threat trail off. Although an important job, spraying counter-radioactive particles onto the beaches was looked down upon by pilots as hack-work left to fliers who didn't have the skill for anything more refined. "Got it?"

"Yes, Sir," said the Lieutenant. He leaned back in his chair. "I got it."

"As I asked earlier; why the Lieutenant?" Nick reiterated more politely.

Doctor Valencia nodded. "Simpsons is good behind the stick. Top of his class. No Derogs. *And* he's good behind the stick."

"That's all you had to say, Doc." Nick nodded at his friend. They too had come up the ranks together and had gotten very close through the years. "I'll get a bunch more hours under his belt." He gave the young man a nod. "Good, flying hours, El Tee."

The Lieutenant nodded at the Chief. Oftentimes, senior pilots would not allow their junior copilots to handle any part of the mission -especially hazardous parts, making it difficult for them to gain valuable hands-on experience. "Thanks, Chief."

"What've we got here that's so damned sensitive?"

Valencia tapped the table in front of him as he stood. "I'm not so glad you asked." The lights dimmed. With anther tap of an icon on the table, a holographic image sizzled into existence in the open 'U' of the table. "Arcturus Four." Valencia gestured at the ten-foot wide blue and green planet as it rotated slowly. "Is just slightly bigger than Earth. Its climate and atmosphere are also very similar as well. Maybe a little thinner, but nothing that a couple weeks of acclimation wouldn't take care of." He gave a shrug. "As far as we're concerned, we'll all be living at ten thousand feet. It is actually the moon of a sub stellar body that is nearly four times the mass of Jupiter. Gives it some massive tides. Typical seasons; cold and hot with

gradual changes that could be called spring and autumn. If we call north the same direction it is here on Earth, then the sun's a west to east path." He looked down at his notes as they scrolled across his palm. "This sub stellar body is in the Earth's orbital zone. The sun is a gas giant that'll probably die off in a couple million years so there's no need to get worried just yet. Six other planets make up the system so there's a little room for expansion."

"How far?"

"Thirty-six light years away, and within ten of the other planets we've found already. It'll be a nice cozy neighborhood. The planet has a fairly quick rotation so days run about ten hours, nights the same. 'Course, the sub stellar's got a slow orbit around its sun so a revolution takes about three of our years."

"Twenty hours and three years? That'll get confusing."

Doctor Valencia nodded at the Lieutenant. "The locals are, as I said, typical bipeds and have what we would consider an extraordinarily long lifespan."

Nick and the Gunnery Sergeant smirked. Thanks to advances in genetic engineering as well as medical treatment, they were both in their sixties with at least a hundred more years ahead of them. The lack of recessive and disease-prone genes was to thank for most all of those years. Medical techniques ensured that humans reached the mid-hundreds, keeping average lifespans high. Accidents notwithstanding. "What're you calling extraordinary?" Nick asked.

"Nine hundred years from what we can figure." He paused. "Converted to Earth years that is."

"Up near quadruple digits, huh? Very nice. I hope some of that rubs off," offered the Gunnery Sergeant. "Right, Chief?"

"Absolutely."

Being only twenty-three, the Lieutenant kept his comments to himself.

"We can always hope," said Valencia. Nods from the three men had Valencia continue as he moved through a narrow gap in the conference table to get closer to the floating display. "The planet has two large land masses connected by a narrow land bridge; basically one large continent meandering along the equatorial, tropical, and temperate zones. Few islands of various sizes here and there. Warm waters finally transitioning to ice caps north and south, relative. Weather also seems to be mild with similar seasons to ours, just a lot slower." He stood beside the hologram. He reached into it with two hands, grabbing a small portion of it and then spreading his arms wide, zooming in on that area. "There are twelve large communities with a total population of just fewer than fifty thousand."

"Fifty?" Nick looked toward the door. "You don't say." He turned back to look at the hologram as olive-skinned bipeds could be seen moving around a fairly substantial town. They wore brightly colored clothes of various loose-fitting styles. None of the buildings were over three stories tall and seemed to be either stone, or wood and mud construction. Beasts of burden and wagons came in and out of view until the doctor clapped his hands together, returning to the overall view of the planet. "No real flight capability; some recreational gliders. Nothing too hazardous as far as lower life forms go. You can eat almost anything that grows. The population has a complex language, form of government, and religious system. They are what we would consider Post Iron-Age as far as advancement. They are ahead on some things..."

"Here we go" said Nick. "They're all telepathic. They spit poison. They have a taste for human flesh."

Doctor Valencia stared at him. "*No*, Chief. They have indoor plumbing and fairly advanced irrigation techniques. And, from what our probe has determined, flourishing arts and sciences. In fact, their

astronomers with their mirror telescopes probably noticed our probe by its second orbit."

"Poisonous claws?" Offered Nick.

The doctor shook his head. "I think you've read too many science fiction books."

"I think I've visited too many planets," corrected Nick.

"In any case, they seem to be about as normal as people on Earth were around eight hundred Common Era."

"Eight hundred? They're stuck as primitives?"

Doctor Valencia exhaled loudly. "Don't you start up, Lieutenant. The Chief's enough of a problem as it is. *No*; *they are not stuck as primitives*. As far as comparing them to where Earth was, they are at about the year eight hundred. They are not *stuck* there. Carbon dating by our probe shows they're moving along on about the same arc as Earth's development, minus what I've already mentioned where they're ahead. I'd venture a guess that in thirteen hundred years, they'd be as advanced as we are now."

"You can relax, El Tee; we've got few centuries before they ruin our neighborhood." Nick grinned. "Until then, they're just as tranquil as can be. Ignorance is bliss, you know."

Doctor Valencia nodded. "More for some than others. Chief." He shook his head. "As I was saying…"

"What; we're to make contact for cohabitation?" Interrupted the Lieutenant. "Seems like we'll be able to integrate with them without any issues with how hospitable they are. Right?"

Valencia ignored the question and moved on with his briefing. "As I was saying, they have well developed irrigation so farming is profuse. They also have well designed sailing ships for coastal fishing. With one large landmass circling the planet, they don't have blue water exploration

aspirations so it's mainly coastal and island-hopping sailing. The probe saw large ranches as well as hunting parties, so meats round out their diet."

"Sounds like a place I'd want to retire," remarked Nick.

"*And*," continued Valencia once again ignoring the interruption, "there does not seem to be any unified military."

"That's music to my ears, Doctor Valencia," said the Gunnery Sergeant. "What've we got to deal with; local militias?"

Valencia shook his head. "No. There are no armed groups at all, Gunny."

"None?"

"Well, not if you don't count the organized hunting parties, or individual hunters. As the planet started to look better and better, we decided to just park the probe in a counter-rotation orbit to have it gather as much information as possible instead of moving to the next system on its agenda. It'll keep gathering Intel until you get there so you'll be up to date on happenings planet-side before you go down. Even after several hundred orbits, it never picked up any sort of altercation anywhere." He shrugged. "They're peaceful as lambs, it seems. Even the government is about as lax and uninvolved as it could be and still be called a government. Festivals and celebrations seem to be the order of the day. They don't even seem to have the equivalent of a police force."

"Well, we should still be able to deal with them since they do have a government." The Lieutenant smiled. "It's always easier when you only have to deal with the leaders and have orders trickle down, right?"

The other two looked at the young man, then to Valencia.

"Your mission, Lieutenant," said Valencia finally, "is to get rid of the indigenous population and prepare the planet for immediate colonization."

As the truth sunk in, the young man's shoulder's sagged. "Oh."

"You are to leave as much of the infrastructure as possible of course, as well as domesticated animals and farming intact for our initial colonization. We'll upgrade things after we're settled but that's a lot easier than starting from scratch." He shrugged. "Hell, some folks might just keep their homestead the way it is and start a simple life." He pointed at the Lieutenant, "But the indigenous population will not be part of that life in any way."

"A bug hunt."

"I suppose so, Nick." Valencia looked at the young man. "Is there a problem with the mission parameters?" Valencia had read the evaluation and psychological reports on the young man- he seemed to be a good fit for mission. Still, paperwork and tests could sometimes be incorrect. If the young officer was not up for the mission, Doctor Valencia was prepared to eliminate him immediately to keep the security of the mission intact. He waited as the young man unknowingly decided his fate.

After several long moments, the Lieutenant sat up. "No sir. Prepare the planet for colonization. Got it."

Valencia nodded.

"How long do we have?"

"That is a really good question, Gunny." Valencia returned to his chair. He swiped his hand across the table, turning off the display as he went. "You are going to have three weeks to make it happen."

"Three weeks?"

"Three weeks. The trip'll take six months. Movement of all inhabitants of Earth is going to take five to ten years. That leaves us about ten years of a buffer zone in case anything goes wrong."

Now Nick sat up. "Hold on there, Doc. All the reports I've seen have given Earth fifty years before it is unviable. What's this twenty-year time hack all of sudden?"

Valencia put his hands on the back of his chair. "Well, it's not a hard and fast hack, Nick. It's a downward curve and in about ten years, the food will be reused too much, the atmosphere so poisoned, that local resources are going to become very, very taxed. At that point, panic and riots break out." He looked at Gunny. "Thugs form militias. Things go south quickly."

"Buenos Aires," offered Nick.

"Hated that place," agreed the Gunnery Sergeant.

Doctor Valencia slipped around the chair and sat in it. "And those last ten years might just be the rest of us leaving them to it because we won't even be able to organize any sort of orderly emigration plan." He shrugged. "Personally, those last few hundred thousand are probably not people I would want living in my neighborhood anyway."

"What about the other colonies?" Asked the Lieutenant. "What's their plan?"

"They're practically ready to bug out at a moment's notice. As soon as we give the word that we've set up a bridgehead on a viable planet and told them where it is, they'll all beat the rest of us there. That's about ten thousand combined that will be on their way within a month of us securing the planet. We'll still be trying to build ships to get everyone there at that point. Remember, El Tee, we are sitting at around two million people left on Earth and we're only going to be able to move about five hundred per ship across a six-month journey with a month's turn-around time at each end."

"Only five hundred?"

Valencia nodded at the Lieutenant. "You can't just sit folks in a seat for six months, kid. They'd be jettisoning themselves out into space after a month. You have to have places for them to go and sit, walk around, eat. And we can't just put them in a chemically induced coma for six months; their brains would be pudding. Plus, you have to haul resources for them as

well. It's a hell of a lot and you have to nestle it all behind a massive shield so micro junk floating around in space doesn't poke a bunch of holes in everything and everybody while you're traveling at near Fifty-C. That's what our big limit on distances is right now; we'd have to stop and find a new asteroid shield as well as projection material." He shrugged. "Not to mention renew the food stocks."

"Fifty C?"

"You start accelerating and don't stop until you're three quarters of the way there. That gives you your gravity up until that point. Then you turn and decelerate hard for the last quarter for stronger gravity to build up bones and muscles before you land," explained Nick. "It's uncomfortable but it's better than showing up with jelly for muscles."

The young officer sat back. "Holy hell."

Valencia nodded at the lieutenant. "That's fourteen per trip there and back without any issues. We're going to try and negotiate with the Mars, Moon, and Titan colonies for their ships once they're on Arcturus. If nothing else, that gives us and instant ten thousand lift capability without having to build it." He frowned. "Even with that, it is going to be tight."

"Nice. What's the good news?" Nick put his hands on the table. "Teddy said you were going to give me a warm and fuzzy."

"You heard him, Chief," said the Gunnery Sergeant with a smile, "The 'digenous pop' ain't armed."

"That is the only piece of good news I've heard so far," admitted Nick.

"That's not true, Chief," said the Lieutenant. "We've found a suitable planet that's close enough for us to get at least the majority of humanity to, and it'll be a breeze to get it ready."

"How many Ops you got?" Asked Nick.

"Deep Space?"

Nick nodded.

"Counting this one?" The Lieutenant grinned widely. "One."

The Gunnery Sergeant laughed. "Got that warm and fuzzy yet, Chief?"

Nick stood. "I've got a feeling alright but I don't think I'd classify it as warm or fuzzy."

Doctor Valencia stood as well. "Then this'll help, Nick; mission start is forty-eight hours."

"What?"

The Doctor raised his hands plaintively. "This is a highly sensitive mission. You know as well as I do, the longer folks sit around waiting to go, the better the chance the mission will be leaked to the general public. Wiping out a whole civilization, even if it's to save humanity, won't sit well with some folks. Then all hell would break loose."

Nick nodded. "Got it. Online in forty-eight. You up with that Gunny?"

The Gunnery Sergeant stood. "I'll have my troopers ready for launch to Space Ten in forty. I'll tell them it's a routine trip to Mars. Put down some sort of riot or something."

Doctor Valencia nodded. "If you want to bring family along and just stay once you get the planet set, I'll authorize it."

"Keeping those loose lips sequestered, Doc?"

"Dismissed," Doctor Valencia said to his friend. "I'll see you, Theresa and the kids there. Same goes for your families or significant others," he said to the other two men. It didn't sound anything like a request. He turned and left through the small door behind his chair.

"Well that sucks," said the Lieutenant.

"What's wrong now, El Tee?"

"Just got me a girlfriend this week, Gunny. Not sure if she's going to want to move to some planet starting day after tomorrow."

The Gunnery Sergeant slapped the young man on the back. "If it don't work out, I'm sure we can find a nice looking local gal for you. Maybe even two since they're small. Right Chief?"

Nick was only half listening to the Marine. His thoughts were on his children. And Theresa. *And that damned kid that's sneaking in and out of the place when I'm gone* he thought sourly. He was half-tempted to leave the young man -Pete, his informants had told him- behind and deal with Samantha's depression later. Or kill him outright so he didn't show up on another transport and cause any issues. He was also more than half-tempted to just kill Theresa and whatever man she was shacking up with on his way out of the solar system. "Sounds good, Gunny." He said simply as he left out the door he came in through.

"What's up with the Chief?"

"Chief's got family problems, El Tee. It might make him a little moody so I wouldn't bring up the subject."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Reliable sources tell me his wife's getting together with the R&D chief." He pointed at the door.

"Reliable sources?"

The Gunnery Sergeant shrugged. "She dumped me for him. Great looking broad. Snakes in her head, so maybe it's for the best."

"Holy Hell," said the Lieutenant. "Should you two even be on the same mission?"

"As long as he doesn't find out." He smirked. "Or my wife. Or his wife. Besides, I'm one man back in a looong line of them. It's the current one that'll get him going. We just need to get him off this dying rock and out into space before he kills the guy who's supposed to arm us to the teeth."

The Lieutenant shook his head. "Maybe I'll take the em-oh-dee up on dusting beaches."

"We're in exfil mode El Tee. No sense wasting time spraying beaches anymore. We've got new digs to screw up now." He put his arm across the young Marine and led him out of the conference room and to the elevator. "Want me to help with that new girlfriend of yours?" He smiled wide.

"That's fine, Gunny. I think I've got it."

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As the pair exited the conference room they saw that Nick was chatting with Theodore so they hastily left without saying goodbye.
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Chapter 6

Tolen left his office- he had been speaking with several farmers about the upcoming festival. It wasn't that there was anything contentious to resolve; it was merely his job to cast the lots to decide which farmer's crops went for the temple priests. It was an honor and privilege to have one's grains offered to support the temple priests and their families and the lots ensured that the opportunity was shared by all the farmers according to the Father's will. After the casting of the lots, they had sat and discussed the current harvest. Tolen had asked surreptitiously if they would have any to spare- for the visitors Paramus had mentioned. He was pleased to hear that there was indeed a surplus of food this year. It wasn't until they were discussing irrigation that he realized he had lost all the morning. Excusing himself from the men and women farmers (who were content to sit and chat even if he weren't there) he exited his office. Tolen stretched his arms toward the sky, moving to his toes. As he grunted, his stomach growled at him.

"Tolen!" Called the High Priest. "When you said we would have lunch, you did mean today, correct?" He moved quickly to Tolen. "Just look at me; I am wasting away." He spread his arms out wide to emphasize the point. "To nothing, in fact!"

Tolen laughed. "Yes indeed." He clutched his stomach. "I seem to be starving us both." He put his arm on his friend. "Well, there is a bright side, Paramus," he said as he led his friend down the stairs to the hard-packed road.

"Oh?"

"All the food will be prepared when we get there so I won't have a chance to ruin any of it."

"Well then, it's worth the wait." Paramus chuckled. He pointed in the direction of Tolen's home. "But let's not wait too long or you'll spoil my dinner and then you'll have Sarah to deal with."

The two walked along the bustling street as people and wares moved about, chatting about idle things. A young man hurried up to him. "Tolen! Do you have a moment?"

Tolen smiled at the young man- the town's astronomer. "Always." He looked up at the morning skies. "Do you have more news on our very unusual visitor?"

"Unusual visitor?" Paramus asked.

Tolen nodded at Paramus. "It seems that we have an object circling Sivulliik. I had no idea what it was until *our* discussion earlier this morning." He smiled at the young man. "News you say?"

The young man practically hopped with excitement. "I do!" He looked around conspiratorially. "May we talk as you walk? I do not want to hold you two up." He gestured in the direction Tolen and Paramus had been going.

"And because it gives us a little more privacy than standing in the street?" Tolen prodded him with a finger. "Larlet, you must calm down. It is early in the day yet; at this pace you won't make it to dinner." Larlet had been apprenticing with the town's astronomer until only a few years ago when the old man retired, bestowing the honor on him. Larlet had taken the promotion with zeal, adding a second telescope to the town's watch tower and constantly inviting the town's youth for star gazing. Tolen put his arm on the young man as they started walking. "What news do you have?"

"As you know, we've been watching the object for almost three months now and at first we thought it was another rock that would soon fall."

"Like the one that did on the Matte plains," offered Paramus thinking back to a large meteor that had crashed in the late afternoon in the plains near the town of Iktob. The people of Rudens as well as Paramus himself had seen it streak across the sky with two great claps of thunder as it went.

"Yes. We expected this one to last only a few revolutions of the planet before it fell."

"But it has not." Tolen looked up again. "Have we gained a tiny moon?"

Larlet shook his head. "No. *Because it is not a rock*." He grinned broadly. "Not really, that is."

"It either is or it isn't."

Larlet shrugged. "I have been speaking with my fellow astronomers and we think this object has…" He was lost for words. "Has… intelligence perhaps?"

"A rock with intelligence?" Tolen stopped walking and turned to face him. "That cannot be."

"Well, intelligence might not be the right word. It has more a pattern than anything else."

"Nature is full of patterns, Larlet," Paramus reminded him.

"But those patterns are regular and predictable. This rock is neither." He crossed his arms as he gathered his thoughts. "This rock is bright in the night sky as it passes overhead. That is how we first noticed it." He frowned. "But it seems to move up and down as well as around our planet."

"What?"

Larlet looked around conspiratorially again. "At times it drops down and glows as it moves through the air. And…And then it moves higher

again. Plus, as you both well know, the cities on Sivulliik are not laid out in a neat row so the fact that this one object has been seen over *all* the cities shows that it is moving back and forth as well." He lowered his voice. "An astronomer in Simāk said he saw it as it passed while glowing."

"Well, we can all see it if we know where to look," Tolen remarked.

The young man shook his head. "It passed across his telescope as he was looking into it. He *saw* it."

Now Tolen looked around at the crowds walking by. "What did it look like?"

"He said it was like a scepter."

"There is a scepter flying around up there?" Paramus raised an eyebrow.

"No, obviously not a scepter but it looks like one."

"It either is or it isn't." This time Tolen smiled as he said it.

"Well it does have a large rock on the leading end of it, but then the part that trails off is silver and thin."

Paramus grinned. "Why, that sounds like a scepter." He poked the young astronomer again.

The astronomer frowned at him.

"I am sorry Larlet. I did not mean to make fun." He looked up. "It sounds amazing."

"It is. It seems to circle Sivulliik quickly. *Very* quickly. Several times a day in the opposite direction of the sun *and* it makes deliberate movements to pass over our cities. And," he continued as his voice lowered, "it is only when it is over a city that it glows."

"Why does it glow?"

"Well, I proposed a theory that while it is moving high, it does not encounter much resistance from the air since we know that gets thinner the higher we go."

"Like when climbing mountains," said Tolen.

"Exactly! Now it is reasonable to believe that the air continues to get thinner the higher you go. While it is very thin, this object does not glow. But when it gets closer to the ground, the air is thicker it glows because of friction with the air. Much like how wood and leather and stone gets hot when friction is applied to it."

Tolen considered that for a moment. An alarming thought came to him. Instead of speaking it, he decided to see what the astronomer already knew. "Why would it move lower over cities?" He braced himself for the answer.

"Because they are *looking* at us."

"They?"

The astronomer pulled Tolen close. "People. *Other* people have traveled here and are watching us."

Tolen took a deep breath then let it out slowly.

"I know you do not believe me." He shrugged. "Most of the other astronomers do not either but it is also reasonable to think that there are other people besides us in the heavens." He pointed upward. "We can see thousands of other suns in the sky. *Thousands*. If one had people on it…"

"It does." Paramus tossed in, casually.

"… then it would stand to reason that they might have…" Larlet startled. "What?"

"The Father has spoken to me… about this matter."

"What?"

"It seems we have brothers on other planets."

"I knew it!"

"And these brothers are coming to visit Sivulliik. And we are to greet them with love."

Larlet hugged Paramus. "I knew it!" He spun the other in a circle as he sing-songed "I knew it!" When he saw that passersby were looking at them, he stopped. He whispered into Paramus' ear. "When do we meet them?"

"It will be during the Fall Festival."

Larlet thrust his hands into the air. "Excellent! I would love to meet them."

"Well since you will be at the festival, you will have the chance."

Larlet put his hands to his mouth. "Do they look like us?"

Tolen shook his head. "No, they do not."

Larlet thrust his hands in the air again. "Excellent!"

"Well not exactly. They are fairer skinned."

"Like our northern brothers?"

Paramus nodded. "Yes, I believe so. And the Father said they are taller." He hesitated, unsure if he should add more. After a moment he continued. "But they do not act like us."

"Well, different people have different customs. Our brothers on the coast do not act exactly like us or even those to the north even. People act as people act."

Paramus saw no other way to present what he had been told. "These people act like the Clindam."

Larlet stepped back. "Those are beasts that attack anything that comes near. Sometimes even their own kind. How can that be?"

Tolen sighed. "That is all we understand from what the Father has said. That and that we are to welcome them and to show them love and kindness."

"These… Clindam?"

"They are not called that, but yes." Paramus closed the distance between them and put his hand on the astronomer's shoulder. "Remember that they too are children of the Father."

Larlet was not convinced but he nodded anyway. "As you wish Paramus, of course." He smiled. "I will be interested to see how they come from that flying scepter to the ground. It will be a sight, I am sure."

"I am sure," said Tolen. "Please keep this among your fellow astronomers."

Larlet nodded. "Of course." He looked left and right. "Of course."

"You want to tell them now, don't you," Paramus raised an eyebrow.

Larlet grinned widely. "Well, truth be told..."

Tolen grasped the young man's forearm. "Tell your news to your fellow astronomers before you burst."

Larlet took Tolen's arm as well. "I shall! Thank you Paramus." With that he turned and bolted off.

"Well, this will prove to be interesting; once the astronomers know, their families will know."

Tolen shook his head. "Then everyone else within the week."

"You know what would make it better?" Paramus asked.

Tolen peered at his friend. "No."

"Lunch." He pointed down the street. "Onward!"

Tolen laughed. "I think you are right."

The pair started walking again. After only about twenty paces, another young man dressed in rancher's garb approached the pair. "Greetings Tolen," he nodded at the man. "And to you, High Priest Paramus." The man gave another head nod. "Do you two..." He looked up and down the street. "...have a moment?"

The two elders looked at each other. Tolen nodded. "Of course we do."

"What is with the young men of your town, Tolen?" Paramus poked his friend in the side. "They run amok with no regard to eating times."

Tolen smirked at him then turned to the young man. "What is the trouble?"

The man looked nervously at the two. "I am not sure how to explain it. Or even if I can. I was speaking with the Father and I am very confused."

Paramus narrowed his eyes and leaned toward the man and whispered suspiciously. "Have you, by chance… eaten?"

The young man was taken aback. "Actually, no, High Priest."

Tolen picked up his friend's line of thought. "Then we'll discuss it over lunch." He prodded Paramus. "You see, we are starving before your very eyes and by now my wife is wondering where we are and why we aren't at home eating the lunch she has prepared."

The man beamed. "It would be a pleasure!" He had seen the High Priest at the weekly ceremonies but had never spoken to him personally. Other priests he had, of course, as well as other elders. But never the High Priest. To be invited to eat with him as well as the town's leader was a surprise. "A pleasure indeed!" He gave a bow. "I am Yesha."

Paramus pointed in the direction they had been walking. "Yesha, we are not two hundred paces from the feast that awaits us. Can your issue wait until then?"

The man was still trying to assimilate the fact that he had just been asked to lunch by the two most respected men in the town. And it was to be served by one of their wives. "What?"

"You've forgotten already?" Paramus put his hand on the man's shoulder. "Either you are starving as well and can't think straight or the problem isn't too dire." He began to walk. "Either way we'll solve it soon enough, right Tolen?"

"Absolutely." Agreed Tolen.

"Then we must go," said Paramus. His stomach growled emphasizing the point.

Chapter 7

As Tolen, Paramus and Yesha reached Tolen's house and Tolen reached for the door latch, Loren leaned over the knee-high wall that ran around the top of the house. "It's about time you two showed up."

Paramus, smiled broadly. "We blame this man here for our delay."

"What?" The man gaped. His face flushed as he thought of how he had delayed not only the High Priest and the town elder, but apparently made his wife wait as well. "I am so sorry!" He called up.

Loren narrowed her eyes. "Oh, I doubt you were the cause." She pointed an accusatory finger. "When those two start their antics, I'm amazed *anything* gets done around here."

"I spoke to the farmers today," countered Tolen. "Spoke to them *and* cast lots." He pointed back at her with a smile. "Important official business, I'll have you know."

"Me too!" Added Paramus. He stifled a laugh. "Me too! Except I didn't talk to any farmers. Or cast lots. But it was important, I assure you! More important than Tolen's work most likely."

"Well, that may require some debate," countered Tolen.

The man looked back and forth at the two men as they spoke to the woman. Unsure what to say, he only added: "I did stop them in the street."

Loren put her hands on the wall. "Do not let them talk you into taking the blame for their larks. The three of you get washed up and come up here. Lunch has been waiting."

Tolen nodded at his wife. "We shall be right up." He looked at the young man and gestured at the door. "I welcome you as a guest to my home," he said officially.

"And I am honored to enter," the man gave the traditional response.

"And..." The High Priest gave a bow. "As the new guest to this home, I shall wait to follow you."

Yesha shook his head. "My wife is never going to believe this." He entered the house and immediately removed his sandals. The other two men followed suit. Quickly they washed their feet in the ever-present basin by the front door and then they re-laced their sandals.

After only few minutes the three climbed the stairs to the roof.

Tolen went to his wife. "I am truly sorry, Loren," he said as he took her hands. "Truly." He looked at the man. "And the young man, Yesha is along because he stopped us with a concern." He looked back at Paramus. "And Paramus has a concern as well. Are the children here?"

Loren looked worried at her husband. "Argus is downstairs; he's going on a hunt later today. Creta and Parton are in school. Do you want them here?"

"No. Now that I consider it, Argus is old enough but the other two are best left out."

Loren nodded. "Then I'll get him while you make your dishes." She shook her head with a wry smile. "When our esteemed elders didn't arrive, we decided to eat without them."

"A wise decision-maker as always." Tolen kissed his wife then turned back to the other two men. "We can have our discussion over our meal." He gestured at the large flat plates on the table. One was filled with various fruits, the other meats, the third held sliced bread and rolls. "I believe we should listen to Yesha's problem first, if that is alright."

Yesha picked up a smaller clay dish and began to put food on it.

"Wine?" Paramus shook a large brightly glazed pitcher, "Or water?"

"Water please as I am going hunting later this evening." Yesha placed two rolls on top of the food on plate. It was piled high. He looked sheepishly at it. "I... will need my strength on the hunt, I think."

Paramus laughed. "That you will, young man." He poured water from a bright blue pitcher into a large hand-blown glass. The sunlight sparkled through the bubbles in the glass as the water splashed into it. "Do not worry; my plate will rival yours and I will not be running the plains later this evening."

"Hunting?" Tolen looked at the man. "Are you by chance taking…"

"Yesha!" Argus called as he climbed through the hatch in the roof of the home. "I did not know you were eating with us."

Yesha shook his head. "I did not know that either." He gestured with his head toward Tolen. "And I had no idea who your father was."

"Well, the subject never came up," Argus replied. He moved to the table and picked up a plate. "I figured you knew."

Paramus, full plate in hand, sat at the table "We should discuss it while eating, I think."

Tolen nodded, "A wise decision-maker as always."

"I see that you are speaking of me again." Loren poked her head out of the hatch.

Tolen laughed at his wife. "Perfect timing, my love." He held up his hands plaintively, "I know many wise decision-makers. They come and go from wherever I happen to be; I'm blessed that way. But only one is as beautiful as you."

"That is because I am called *handsome*," offered Paramus. "Wine, Loren?" He held up the pitcher and sloshed its contents around.

Loren raised an eyebrow as she approached the table. "If you two corrupt this poor young hunter, I'll not cook for you for a month."

Yesha stifled a laugh.

"Didn't you already eat?" Tolen asked his son.

"Well, that was an hour ago," Argus answered. He put two pieces of fruit beside the slices of meat. "This is just a snack."

"That is a snack?"

Paramus nodded at Tolen. "We ate like that when we were young." He looked down at his piled-high plate and coughed. "Now we're much more reserved."

"Reserved is not the word I would use to describe you," said Loren with a giggle. She sat at the table and pulled her glass in front of her. "Yesha, would you do the blessing?"

Yesha looked from the woman to the High Priest and back. "Me?"

"As our honored guest," Paramus said, suddenly serious.

Yesha shook his head. "My wife will never believe this." He held out his hands. Argus and Tolen took them, they reached across to the others at the table, completing the circle. Yesha bowed his head and sang

Heavenly Father,
We thank you for Your constant blessings.
Your constant friendship.
Your constant council.
Your constant love.

Bless this food to keep us strong
In Your tasks.
In Your sight.
In Your love.

He raised his head.

"Amen," the other four at the table said when he was done.

"A fine prayer, Yesha," said Paramus as he lifted his glass and took a sip. "So..." He started.

Yesha picked up a slice of meat in one hand and a roll in the other. He nodded slowly. "So." He took a bite of the meat to buy some time. When he finished chewing, he continued: "While walking in the long gardens, speaking with our Father, he told me about some of his children. And that they were coming to visit. And that might need to be convinced to join in us peace and love if their hearts were open when they arrived. And that one of my hunters would play an important role. He said we would be tested by them."

"What other way is there to join us?" Asked Argus. "Than with love?"

"I asked that," said Yesha. "But I did not understand His answer."

"Children from one of the other cities?" Argus asked. "Tested how?"

Yesha shook his head. "That is what I asked as well and He said they were not from the cities."

"The wilderness then? I know there are some families that travel between them instead of living in..."

"Argus," Tolen interrupted his son, "that is not it." He looked at Paramus for help, "Paramus?"

Paramus put down the piece of fruit he was eating and nodded. "The Father and I have spoken at great length about this. It seems that the Father has children in other places besides just here." Before anyone could interrupt him, he pressed on: "By other places, I mean besides just here on Sivulliik." He gestured at the skies. "The heavens are filled with stars like our own. We see them every night. Around many of those stars are planets that are like our own. On some of those planets, our Father has other children." He looked at the four at the table. "That is who will be visiting us."

Argus looked up. "Other... worlds? We are to meet other children of the Father?" He smiled broadly. "That is wonderful!"

"Yes, son," said Tolen. "Other worlds." He glanced at his friend. He nodded at him so he continued. "But these children are not like us."

Argus sat back. "What do you mean?" His eyes got large and he leaned forward. "They do not *look* like us?" He clapped. "How many heads do they have? This gets better and better!"

Tolen shook his head. "Well, we are all made in His image but they are perhaps colored differently than us. Lighter skinned." He thought back on his discussion. "And it seems they are taller."

Argus laughed. "Green or pink would be funny to see."

"I think more or less tanned than us like the people who live farther north or south of us."

Argus nodded then took a bite of his bread. "I still do not understand. We are supposed to convince them to live with us?"

Paramus nodded at Yesha. "Yes. They seem to make bad decisions but we are to try and help them make a good decision."

Argus swallowed hard. "But if the Father knows all things, doesn't he already know what their decision will be?"

Paramus sighed loudly. "That, young man is a long, and deep debate that even the priests go in circles about."

"And," continued Argus, "if He knows what the decision will be, then everything is predestined because he knows what is going to happen." He frowned. "Right?"

Tolen chuckled. "It is one of the great mysteries. I have heard it discussed loudly and at length by the priests while I sit in my office."

Paramus shrugged. "Well, the simplest way I can explain it to you, Argus, is this." He took one of the empty glasses on the table and put some bread and meat in it, the he poured juice into the glass. He then took a

second glass and poured just juice into it. He put them both in front of the young man. "Drink one of those."

Argus looked at the two glasses. The bread was soggy and bits of it were floating around the slices of meat sticking out of the juice. He picked up the glass with the plain juice in it and drank it.

Paramus smiled. "I gave you a choice of two drinks, correct?"

Argus nodded. "I suppose so." He peered into the other glass.

"And you could choose whichever one you wanted."

"Yes," said Argus, "but..."

"And yet, I *knew* which one you would choose."

"That one doesn't look very good."

"But you still could have chosen it."

Argus nodded. "I did for just a moment consider it, because I thought it would be funny, then decided not to because of how it would taste."

"Yet even though I knew which one you would choose, you still had to make the decision on your own."

Tolen laughed, "Where were you when I heard the priests discussing this all day long last month? Two cups of juice, some bread and meats and it would have been resolved."

"How are we supposed to convince them to stay with us?" Asked Yesha.

"We will follow our Father's guidance and welcome them to our town," said Paramus.

"But..." Began Argus.

"We should be prepared for a feast when they arrive." Offered Loren. "I imagine it is a long journey from wherever they came from."

Paramus opened his mouth, then closed it.

"When are we to expect them?" Loren added.

"Right during the harvest festival in three months' time."

"Then that is perfect," said Loren. "They can join us at the festival."

"I think we should keep at least two Odivers set aside to offer in their honor."

"We'll do what she said." Tolen pointed at his wife.

The others at the table nodded.

Argus looked into the glass of juice- the bread was completely soggy and puffed up now, pressing the slices of meat along the edges. "I still don't see why they would make bad decisions." He looked at Loren. "What do we do about that?"

"As the High Priest would say; 'trust in our Father' to take care of us."

"Well said, Loren," said Paramus. "You know, we would welcome you with open arms into the temple." He smirked. "If you aren't too busy running the town."

"Maybe once the kids are grown."

Paramus elbowed his friend, "Really? What are you now; eighty-two?" He winked at Loren. "How much longer do you think he needs watched?"

Juice came out of Yesha's nose as he laughed.

"You two." Loren shook her head. "In front of our guest no less."

Argus patted Yesha's shoulder as he wiped his nose. "You need to learn to time your drinks and take them quickly."

"My wife is not going to believe any of this." He managed to say, wiping his eyes with his napkin.

"If it helps you any, I don't believe how these two act either," Loren said.

"Well, I'll be glad to fill in the details if you like, Yesha," assured Paramus with a wink.

"I'd be interested to hear how his version turns out," said Argus.

Tolen put his hands on the table. "While that is going on, I'll make sure two prime male Odivers are set aside and fattened up for the feast."

Paramus nodded at his friend. "Then all is settled. We just need to await their arrival."

"Then let us return to our meal," ordered Loren. She raised an eyebrow, "Respectfully and calmly."

Chapter 8

Nick entered the elevator and kept the doors from closing "See you at launch, Teddy?"

"Most likely," his friend said with a wave. "It's always good to get out and about." He finished as the doors closed.

Nick leaned back against the wall of the elevator as it sped to the ground floor. His stomach rose slightly as it picked up speed, making him think of flying. Nick crossed his arms frustrated; there wasn't enough time with a forty-eight-hour launch time to go joy riding. Even worse, flying in a straight line toward a distant planet through mostly empty space was not what he considered flying. "A monkey could do it." Nick said aloud. "A monkey wearing lieutenant bars even."

Nick's stomach settled low as the elevator decelerated quickly then stopped. The doors opened silently. He stayed in the elevator and looked out at the empty lobby. It would be the last time he took in this particular view. As the doors began to close, he kicked out his foot to stop them. The few MoD employees he passed on the way to the large double doors greeted him as he went. He gave superficial responses. *It'll be a good year before I see any of these people again. It's not like they're going to remember*. He mused.

As he approached the large double doors, only the one on his right slid open. Hastily, he sidestepped to not run into the closed one. When he got to the entranceway, he stopped and looked out at the street. There were only two reasons for both doors to not open- one of them was broken, or there was credible reporting of a threat on the building and the doors had been set for only one to open to make it more difficult for rockets to be fired into the lobby. The reinforced structure of the building meant that

they were impervious to any sort of weapon that could be carried. Since traffic could not get within two blocks of the building, the threat from the ground was negligible. Attacks from the air were dealt with by the formidable array of anti-aircraft weapons situated around the top of the building.

Nick looked left and right. There were a more people walking the streets but it was, as usual, anything but crowded. "At ease Marines," he said as he stepped out of the building. With a potential threat, he did not want them to be distracted by having to perform any sort of military greeting. He slipped his respirator back onto his face. "What's the pucker factor out here?"

The Marines all had their rifles at the ready and were scanning the street. "We're puckering pretty good, Chief," said one Marine as he glanced over his shoulder. "Intel says those OneGen nutcases were going to try something today." He looked out at the street. "Seems they've heard about this latest upcoming mission."

Nick looked at the top of the building. "Dirty insiders," he muttered. It seemed that any and all plans the MoD made were quickly passed to the OneGen terrorists. Even though they had only been successful in stopping one launch, they still managed to kill not only soldiers, but innocent bystanders as well. With a mission statement that included 'Everyone must die for Earth to live', they were not concerned with collateral damage. "Well, stay on your toes, Marines. We're supposed to go hot in forty-eight." He too scanned the street, hand on his service weapon. "After we leave, they'll have to go back into planning-mode."

The Marine nodded. "You're heading home to pack, Chief?"

"Suppose so. A monkey could fly the thing but they want me on it anyway."

Most everyone - officers, scientists, and especially the politicians - that came and went from the MoD tended to blindly walk past the guard force. Nick often stopped and spend time chatting with them since, decades ago, he had been in their position. Because of that, the Marines did not feel it awkward speaking with such a high-ranking officer

"How long are you going to be away, Sir?" Asked a Marine- she was the farthest away on Nick's left. She glanced at him quickly, then returned to scanning the plaza.

Nick looked at the Marine. She was young and fit. As she looked left and right, and back at him, she tracked her weapon along with her eyes. For all intents and purposes, she appeared to be a highly trained and dedicated Marine. Even so, he had no idea where the leak to OneGen was, or if it was a network of informants. "Not too sure," he said noncommittally. He shrugged. "However long it takes to see who's who in the zoo."

"I'd love a ride-along on that..." The Marine's head exploded as a round passed right through it. Gore splattered the wall behind her as she crumpled to the ground.

"Contact ten o'clock!" Shouted another young Marine as he dropped to a knee to steady his aim and present a smaller target. He fired three quick rounds in that direction then began to search for a target in earnest.

Instinctively, Nick dropped to his knees and rolled to his side to face where the Marine has said the threat was. He drew his service pistol. Even though it was a pistol, it was easily lethal up to a hundred yards. Unlike the Marine's weapon, he only had two dozen rounds so he waited to fire until he had an actual target. "Not seeing them!" He shouted as he panned back and forth, unable to discern any actual targets.

The Marine closest to the one who was shot lurched back against the wall as the rapport of a rifle cracked through the morning air. "Ten high!

Ten high!" he shouted as he slouched down onto his butt and his weapon clattered to the tiles.

The remaining two Marines as well as Nick immediately began to scan the higher floors of the building across from them. It was almost a hundred yards away thanks to the buffer zone provided to the Ministry of Defense. Much like the MoD, it was a smooth glass-encased building- there was no way to tell where the shot had come from. "Get those Marines inside!" Nick shouted. He stood and ran toward the second slouched soldier as another two rapports echoed off the building. They marred the reinforced glass but did not penetrate it. The shots came close to but did not hit the remaining Marines. One of the Marines behind Nick switched his weapon to full automatic and strafed several floors of the far building repeatedly. Not being reinforced, the glass shattered and dropped to the street as he fired. "Covering!"

Nick reached the sitting Marine. Even though he was not wearing body armor, he positioned himself between the young man and the potential threat across the plaza. "Where you hit?"

"Just got the wind knocked out of me, Chief," the Marine answered as his hand moved to the small dent in his body armor. His other hand reached for his weapon as he gasped for air. "Get Vasquez. I'm good."

Nick looked at the other Marine. *Vasquez.* The Marine was slumped over to one side; the top left half of her head was missing. The round had caught her in the side of her head, high on the cheek where there was a thin gap between her helmet and incorporated visor. A one in a million shot; if it had hit either, she too would have just been knocked to the ground. A violent case of whiplash being her only concern. A neck brace and teasing would have followed her for a month. As it was, the round had torn off the helmet as it carried a good portion of the young woman's head along with it onto the wall. "Damn, Vasquez," Nick muttered.

The Marines behind Nick were firing furiously into the building in front of them, panning their way across the entire face of the building.

Nick grabbed the young Marine by his body armor and yanked him to his feet. "Get inside and take those two auto-gunners with you! I've got Vazquez." He shouted over the din of the two Marines. They had only stopped their firing long enough to reload their weapons. "CEASE FIRE!" He shouted in vain. With a headshake, he moved to Vasquez and grabbed her by the shoulder strap and began dragging her towards the double doors. Nick cursed as only the right door slid open and it only about half way- another security precaution. Since he was on the left side, that meant he had another ten feet of dragging the Marine in the open before reaching the safety of the building. Several rounds ricocheted off the wall as he went. One even off Vazquez's body armor. Painfully aware he was wearing no protection at all, Nick crouched down to make himself as small a target as possible as he made for the opening door.

As the door slid completely open and Nick made its edge, two rockets streaked into the building and exploded on impact.

The blast knocked Nick onto his back. The sudden ringing in his ears drowned out the two Marines who were now concentrating their fire at the beginning of the smoke trails of the two rockets.

Suddenly the front of the far building exploded into shards of poly-glass and metal as the Marines manning the cannons on the roof of the MoD finally had a target substantial enough warrant their attention. Two sets of gunners had swung out over the side of the building in their rigs and were panning back and forth in the plaza looking for any potential vehicle-borne threats. The two Marines on the ground stopped firing, realizing that their rifles were now woefully overmatched by the pair of anti-aircraft cum anti-building twin-cannons on the roof.

"Inside, Marines!" Commanded Nick. He slammed his pistol into its holster and grabbed Vasquez by the conveniently (for this exact purpose) placed handles on her body armor. "Defilade, Devil Dogs!" He rounded the corner and moved to the center of the foyer, out of line from the still-open door. He was pleased to see the other three Marines make their way into the MoD as well.

"Medic!" Nick shouted. A receptionist peeked over the massive curved desk that took up a large portion of the foyer. The front of her desk was blackened where a rocket struck. "Get medics here, now!" He shouted at the dazed woman. He looked down at the Marine as his heart sank. Vasquez twitched as her oxygen-starved brain fired neurons randomly. *At least it happened here at the ministry where they can help her.* Nick stood. "Meh-DICK!" He shouted angrily. *Everyone must die for the Earth to live*, he thought sourly. "It's never the people you want dead." He said.

"Chief?" Asked one of the Marines. He had moved beside Nick and was now facing the glass doors, rifle at the ready as if he expected the OneGen terrorists to try to enter the building.

The other two Marines quickly moved to Nick's other side, one taking a knee. All their weapons were trained on the still-open door, prepared to make a stand around their fallen comrade.

"Nothing." Nick said. "It's nothing." He reached down and closed the remaining eye of the Marine. It was wide open with surprise.

Finally, the doors of one of the elevators opened and two medics rushed out. They stopped and looked left and right, not sure where to go with the carnage of the rocket's blast.

"Here!" Nick shouted again. "The one missing half her head!" He pointed at the fallen Marine.

The two medics rushed over to the Warrant Officer. "Sir?" Asked one.

"Get her into a tank." Nick ordered.

The other medic shook his head. "Oh, we can't do that; those are reserved," he said matter-of-factly.

"That's right. It takes direct approval from the Minister himself for that. He's right; we can't just do that," said the first as he nodded at his partner.

Nick drew his pistol and pointed it at the man's head. "Chief Warrant Officer Five Nicholas Hauser just said that you're going to put this kid in the tank and regrow her head." He thumbed the pistol off safe. It hummed to life. "Now you can either have your pal here put her *and* you into a tank or the two of you can put her in there yourselves. Right now."

"But, Sir..." Began the medic again.

"I'll call Reggie and let him know it's going to happen."

"Sir?"

Nick grabbed the medic by the collar. He still had the gun to the man's face. "Reginald Hatch. The damned Minister of damned Defense. I'll let him know." He released the man and pointed at the Marine. She had stopped twitching. "Now get Vasquez here in a tank." He slammed his pistol back into his holster, as it entered, the safety hit a raised portion of it and it stopped humming. "Do. It. Now."

Even though they were both civilians, they saluted then dragged the young woman to the elevators.

"Civilians." Remarked one of the Marines.

"Hate those guys," said another.

Nick turned to face them. "Well, you can kick their asses once they've got Vasquez back on her feet."

"That an order, Chief?" Asked the Marine that had been shot in the chest. He was smiling.

Nick looked at the elevator as the door closed. "Yeah. Let's go ahead and make that an order." He looked at the Marine. "Glad you're alright." He looked at the other two. "All of you."

"Damned OneGen won't be happy until they get us all killed."

Nick nodded. "Annoying part is they'll probably make sure *they* get on a transport because they don't really want to stay here and die." He let out a long breath as the adrenalin left him. "I'm really starting to hate those guys."

"Glad you were with us, Chief."

"Thanks 'auto-gun.' " Nick nodded at the young man. "Don't they teach controlled fire anymore?"

The Marine shrugged. "Appropriate fire for the appropriate situation, Chief."

"Yeah. Seemed appropriate to me," said his partner. Then he smiled. "Once we get those Mönchshof sevens, they won't know what hit them."

"Kids." Nick shook his head. "Well, I've got to go pack." He looked down at his flight suit- it was smeared with Vasquez's blood. "And take a shower." He took another deep breath then stood straight. "I'll expect to see all four of you when you get planet-side. The drinks are on me." He rendered a salute.

The three Marines straightened and returned the salute. "Roger, Chief."

Nick dropped his salute and turned to the doors. The right one was still open. "Someone close this damned door!" He shouted at no one in particular. Without worrying about any after-the-fact assassin, he walked out into the plaza and toward the metro stop. He walked half way there before putting on his ventilator. The few people he passed gave his bloodstained uniform a horrified look, and then gave him a wide berth. It brought a smile to his face.

Chapter 9

Paramus walked in the garden with Yesha next to him. The pair had bonded quickly after their dinner at Tolen's home almost two months ago. Between their theological discussions and Yesha's sense of humor almost equaling his, the pair spent a lot of time together.

"I am not sure I understand," said Yesha. "Am I to take *weapons* against these brothers when they arrive?"

Paramus shook his head. "From what I have learned from the Father, I think we should have you as part of the welcoming to show our weapons. Much like a show of force keeps a Clindam from attacking." He put his arm on the man's shoulder. "Apparently these are a warlike people who actually kill each other."

Yesha stopped. "Kill a fellow brother?" The thought was foreign to him. "But why? How?"

"With their hunting weapons, I imagine." Paramus shrugged. The idea was foreign to him as well.

"But why would one do that to another?"

"Some sort of disagreement, I suppose."

"But…argue about what?" Yesha started walking again. "Can we just ask the Father to have them not come at all? It does not seem like these brothers are like us."

Paramus put his hands in his pockets. "That was my first question to Him and the answer was that we were to show them kindness and hospitality in hopes that they will change in their ways."

"But if they do not?" Yesha pointed at the evening sky. "How are these people even going to come to us from the stars? Not on a ship that

sails on the water. One that flies in the air like the Iders do on their great wings? Iders only carry themselves, not others. How big of a vessel will they come in? I have been on a glider. They carry one sometimes two and only for a while until they return to the ground."

"That I do not know, but it will be big enough to carry over a hundred of them."

"A hundred?" Yesha gaped. "Then it is the size of the ships like the ones those our brothers in Simāk use to travel the waters? Something that big flying in the skies?" He looked up.

"It will be a sight to see."

"Yes, but... Why are we armed again?"

"Perhaps it will give them pause and allow them time to consider our hospitality."

Yesha nodded even though he did not understand. "We are to present ourselves as the catchers of the feast then."

Paramus nodded. "That is it," he said not wanting to discuss the issue further and upset the man. He changed the subject: "Is there a hunt tonight?"

"Yes, we are hoping to go to the northern plains where the Lirpas are migrating west with their new young."

"I have seen the migration and it is a sight to see." He thought back to years ago when he had traveled with a hunting party to watch the massive migration. The huge, hairy four-legged creatures were almost shoulder-to-shoulder as they moved westward to the tall grasses of the valleys to wait out the winter. The herd filled the plains in both directions as far as the eye could see. Paramus and the hunters had camped on an outcropping, safe above the pounding hooves for almost a week. The thunder of their hooves lulling them to sleep and greeting them with the morning sun. The hunting party killed nearly five hundred of the one-ton beasts. Along with other

items they could make from the animals, their smoked meat would provide meals throughout the winter and their thick fur would create warm coats for the citizens of Rudens. "I would enjoy coming with your group if that is alright."

Yesha nodded. "You are always welcome. We often take others with us to see the herds." He smiled. "Even after seeing it many times, it is amazing."

"How soon until you leave then?"

Yesha looked up at the darkening skies. "Perhaps within the hour. We are meeting at my home and leaving from there so we arrive before sunrise when the herd will still be asleep. That way they are not spooked by us approaching."

Paramus nodded. "Then I shall meet you in an hour with a satchel prepared to go." A thought occurred to him. "Is Argus coming?"

"Yes, it will be his first trip to the migration. He has handled himself well on many smaller hunts. And Tolen is coming as well since it is his son's first trip." He laughed. "The expedition has now increased in liveliness greatly."

"The three of us together in the wilds for a week?" Paramus nodded. "That is exactly the word I would use."

Yesha's laugh faded as he returned to their previous subject. "And these brothers from afar; when do they arrive?"

"From what the Father has told me, they are still to arrive during the fall festival."

"We should rope two Lirpas to bring back to serve fresh at the feast."

"An excellent idea. We will serve them and the two Odivers to our guests."

"Odiver meat is hard to beat, but braised Lirpa is not far behind." Yesha's smile returned. "We should have guests more often if that is how we prepare a feast for them."

Paramus took Yesha's forearm in his hand. Yesha grasped the other man's arm in return. "Then I shall see you in an hour with my mount, ready to ride." He watched as the hunter walked off. A warm breeze circled around him as he stood on the garden path. A warm glow seemed to fill his chest. "Father, I do not understand enough to even explain it to them and yet they all look to me for answers. What is Yesha to do? What am I to do?"

The breeze swirled around him.

He closed his eyes and listened.

Chapter 10

As Nick thumbed the fingerprint scanner of his apartment building wearily, he was relieved to see that the foyer was empty- he was not in the mood for small-talk. After the mandatory wait for the elevator to arrive at the ground floor, he stepped in and put his head against the cool metal. Mentally he tried to steel himself. Even though his family had been uprooted unexpectedly many times due to military operations, they had eventually returned home. This time it would be a permanent move. Having a new, lush planet to call home didn't make it easier. He hoped Theresa was not home as usual. *I'll just leave her and let her catch the next boat,* he thought as the elevator rocketed toward the top floors of the building. *As right stick, I could even help her get on something quicker,* he tried to tell himself as the doors opened on his floor. "Nice and smooth, Nick," he said as he punched the code for the door. "Keep it nice and smooth." He grasped the handle and pulled it open. Cautiously he peered into the living area. The flat screen was on and he could see two heads sticking up from the couch. Both were male.

Nick padded into his home, quietly closing the door. "Hey everyone," he said. "I had a busy day so I need to change real quick but afterwards we need to talk."

Samantha's head rose and turned into view. It was not one of the ones sticking up "Dad!" she exclaimed seeing the blood on his flight suit.

"It's not mine, Samantha."

One of the heads popped up. "Whose blood is it?" Asked his son.

"One of the Marines I was talking to when some lousy OneGen terrorists opened fire on us."

The other head remained in place on the couch.

"Are they going to be alright?" Asked Samantha.

Nick nodded. "Mostly. It happened at the MoD so they'll put her in a T-Cell Tank and she'll be good as new in a month." He added wearily: "Physically at least." He unzipped his flight suit. "I need to get changed then we need to talk." He paused for a moment. "It pertains to you too Pete, so stay put."

Finally, the last head on the couch turned around. "Oh, alright." He said nervously.

"Don't worry, Pete. If I was going to kill you, I'd have done it last month when we were together in the house, just the two of us." Nick turned and walked to his bedroom, his hand purposely on his pistol.

"What?" Asked Pete. "Would he really kill me?"

Nick junior smirked at him. "How do you think we got that entire upstairs apartment; a friendly note?"

"Maybe I should go."

Samantha shook her head. "You'll be fine, Pete." She put her hand on his, "Dad seems gruff, but he's a softie deep down."

"Dad. Our Dad?"

Samantha stuck her tongue out at her brother. "Stop trying to scare him." She looked at the kitchen. "Let's whip up something to eat while he's showering."

"That's a good idea. Then maybe he'll be in a better mood and won't shoot anyone in the living room. Again."

"Stop it, Nikki."

"Alright, *Sam*."

Samantha stood, pulling Pete to his feet. "Don't let the Nicks squared push you around, Pete."

"Nicks squared?"

"That's what she calls us when we're together," explained Nikki. "Nick and Nick is Nicks squared." He winked. "It's a *math* joke."

Pete nodded at his girlfriend, not totally convinced with his own safety.

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Nick put his flight suit in the trash chute and stepped into the shower. "Hundred two degrees," he said. The shower complied with immediately-hot water. Nick stood under the showerhead situated in the middle of the ceiling of the shower. He rubbed his shoulders, then his chest where the blood had soaked through. He reached for the soap and tilted his head back, letting the water play off his face.

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"What should we make?" Pete asked. He hazarded a glance at the closed bedroom door.

"If Dad wants to talk," Nikki said, "I say meatloaf and mashed potatoes".

Samantha nodded. "Sounds good." She moved to the dispenser. "I know it's really old-fashioned and hardly anyone eats it but, do you like meatloaf, Pete?"

A thought occurred to Pete. He frowned. "I suppose so."

"What?" Samantha asked.

"It's nothing," replied Pete. "It's an unusual dish; takes lots of ingredients so it's expensive to make."

Samantha nodded. "We have it for special occasions," she told him. She turned to the food processor. "Time delay on command. Four meatloaf servings. Four mashed potato servings with butter," Samantha said.

"Beer. Beer all around," suggested Nikki.

"Four Hefeweizen. Half liter servings. Thirty-five degrees."

"We're going to drink beer with your Dad?" Pete asked nervously.

Nikki shrugged "Might as well be numb if he's going to slap you around, right?"

"Nikki!"

Nikki put his hands up defensively. "I'm kidding. Honestly, I've never seen Dad *slap* anyone..."

"But he's punched an awful lot of people," Pete said quickly. "I get it, I get it." He shook his head as he sat on one of the stools around the island. "We eating here or at the table?"

Samantha looked from the table to the island. "Well, Mom's not here so I'd think here is fine."

Nikki nodded.

Nick opened the door to his room. All three youths turned to look. He was dressed in a khaki shirt and matching, loose fitting cotton lounging-slacks. He wasn't wearing shoes.

"Well, that's a relief, Dad," said Nikki, "I figured you'd come out in your uniform and we were all supposed to leave right away with you."

"Prepare ordered food and drinks," Samantha said. The food processor whirred to life.

Nick moved to the island and straddled one of the stools. "It wouldn't be the first time, would it, Nikki?"

"Nope." Nikki shook his head. "What's going on?"

"We found another planet." He looked at his daughter. "Samantha tell you about it?"

"It never came up," Samantha admitted. "We all just got home and started watching the television." She reflexively glanced at her boyfriend. "We thought you went flying and wouldn't be home until late like you usually do when you fly."

The food processor chimed that the meals were prepared. "Sit and I'll get it all out," said Samantha. "Pete, get the drinks."

"I could use a drink," admitted Nick.

Pete moved to the liquid distillation part of the processor and took two tall glasses out of it. The beer in it was opaque and the head rose above the large glass. He handed Nick a beer. "One beer; coming right up, Mister Hauser."

Nick took the drink and met eyes with the youth. "You can't 'Mister' a guy when you're sneaking around his house, using his cups, and..." He glanced at his daughter, "So forth".

Pete broke eye contact as he put the other beer in front of Nikki. He went to retrieve the remaining drinks. "I was going..." He began.

"Forget it," said Nick. "Just forget it." He took a deep breath. *Keep it smooth, Nick. Smooth.* "Let's start over. I'm Nick." He lifted his glass at the young man.

Pete looked from Nick to Samantha and back to Nick. "I'm Pete. Pete Oppenheimer."

Nick's eyes got large. "Oh? Any relation to Julius?" He knew a physicist working on improving the linear accelerators named Julius Oppenheimer by reputation. And because he had slept with his wife on several occasions.

Pete looked uncomfortable. "Yeah; Julius Oppenheimer is my Dad."

The irony of Julius' son keeping company with his daughter when he had done the same with the man's wife was not lost on him. "He know you're here?" Nick raised an eyebrow. "Often?"

Pete shrugged. "He spends most of his time bouncing between one of the EML's and his facility in Utah."

Nick tried to make his next question as nonchalant as possible: "And your mother?"

Another shrug. "She's out a lot."

"Well, she's probably trying to keep busy with all the preparations to get off this rock."

Pete leveled his eyes at Nick with a stare belying his age. "Sure. That's probably it."

Nick hoped he didn't look as uncomfortable as he felt. *Move the conversation along, Nick*. "Well, let's get to eating so I can tell you about this planet."

Pete finally broke eye contact with him and sat on one of the stools. "Meatloaf, huh?"

Samantha slid a plate in front of him. "Dad's comfort food."

"Same with my Mom. Coincidence, I suppose."

Nick picked up his fork, ignoring the young man's accurate accusation. "Lots of people like it," he offered. *Get on with it, Nick*. He cut a piece of the meatloaf with his fork and dragged it across the mashed potatoes. He paused as the fork got to his mouth. "We've found a planet that will hold all of us with ease."

Nikki smiled. "That's great, Dad!" He toasted his father with his own morsel of meatloaf. "Just great. When do we get going?"

"Uh oh," said Samantha. She looked at Pete. "That's what you wanted to talk to us about, isn't it?"

Nick chewed and swallowed slowly. All eyes were on him. "Yes," he said finally, "that's what I wanted to talk about." He sliced another piece of meatloaf. "Time is short. Real short."

"For what?" Asked Pete.

"Earth."

Nick nodded at his daughter. "Exactly. We need to get to that planet, get it ready for immediate colonization. We'll be lucky to get everyone off this rock in time."

Samantha leaned back on her stool. "When's online?"

"On what?" Asked Pete, trying to decipher the inner-family conversation.

"Forty-eight," said Nick. "The accelerators come online in forty-eight hours," he added to help Pete understand. "Or forty-eight from when I had my brief. More like just over forty-six by now."

Pete looked from the man to Samantha and back again. "What? You're all leaving?"

Nick pointed his fork at the young man. "You too, if you want to ride along. As right stick, I get to bring who I want." He smiled. "Within reason, of course. I can't bring the whole building."

Pete looked down at his meatloaf. He put down his fork. "Right stick?"

"Dad's in command of the flight. The pilot in charge sits in the right seat. The copilot in the left one."

Nick smirked. "At least on rotary wing aircraft it is. On fixed wing aircraft, the co-pilot sits on the right." He held up his fork. "It's a long story going back to when we first started to fly planes then helicopters. Rotary pilots will still call it 'right stick' even if they're on a fixed wing and they're in the left seat."

"Absurd military tradition," said Samantha as Pete opened his mouth. "Do *not* try to understand it; just accept it." She put her hand on his shoulder. "And the offer of a ride. It'll really be worth it."

Pete's eyes got large. "Wha - what?"

"Relax Pete; that wasn't a come-on. Samantha knows the deal from other missions," he explained. "Flying on *my* ship will be a whole hell of a lot more comfortable than flying on a cramped transport later on, believe me. We'll have a crew of about a hundred so there's a lot more space to move around. On a transport, there'll be five or six hundred crammed into the same amount of space."

"But what about my parents?" Pete looked at his plate. "Do I just leave them behind? Shouldn't I ride with them?"

"You're saying you want to be uncomfortable for six months just because your parents will be?" Nikki put another bite in his mouth. "Forget that." He said around his food.

"They'll be behind us by less than a year, Pete." He looked at Samantha. "And this is a good way to get Sam there on the flight without a battle that rivals Quebec."

"There was a battle in Quebec? I didn't know that." Pete lied.

Nick shook his head at Pete. "You really need to watch the news once and a while. Did you hear about Kansas City?"

Pete nodded. "Everyone's heard about Kansas City. What a mess."

"Well, at least it's still there. Quebec's not."

Pete picked up his fork and poked at his meal. "I didn't know."

Nick shrugged. "Listen; makes no difference to me one way or another. Stay or go. Just don't waffle back and forth on it. I need a yes or no right now because I need to call in the names for the manifest right after dinner to get off-planet travel authorizations through on everyone." He nodded at Samantha. "Talk it over with Sam. The bottom line is that everyone's going to be going; it's just the order that people will go isn't decided yet. Since your Dad is one of our top scientists, he'll be on an early flight to make sure things are going smoothly on the other end."

Nikki patted Pete's shoulder. "Yeah, they'll be on an early flight. Packed in like sardines in an early flight. Me? I'm going in style with an actual bed I don't have to get out of because someone else is due to sleep in it."

"What?"

"Rotating sleep shifts," explained Samantha. "It's normal on deep-space flights."

"Maybe I'll just ride with you," said Pete. "Can I tell my parents though?"

Nick nodded as he pushed some potatoes onto a piece of meatloaf with his finger. "Sure, sure; you can tell them you're on the advance ship to see who's who in the zoo. Your parents'll probably be on the first or second ship to go, so Julius can make sure the ships are ready to make the return run to Earth for their next pickup." He put the food in his mouth and pushed it to one side. "By now Julius is in the loop for the scoop."

"You sure he won't stay here to make sure the ships were ready on this end?"

Nick shook his head as he chewed. "No way" he mumbled. "No way."

"How do you know that?" Pete picked up some meatloaf on his fork.

Nikki laughed. "Listen, Pete. There's no way in hell I'd stay on *this* end if I didn't have to. Your Dad's going to get as far away from this place as he can in case those OneGen nuts try to pull one of their stunts."

Pete leaned back in his stool. "I think I need to pack."

"You've got about thirty-five hours," said Nick. He picked up his beer.

"But you said forty-four!"

Nikki put his hand on the youth's shoulder again. "Yeah; forty-four hours before the ship leaves. How do you think we're going to get there? Fairy dust?" Nick junior started to tick off on his fingers: "We got to get to the platform, listen to a stupid 'how to load on a ship' briefing, get loaded up, listen to that stupid 'how to be safe in space' briefing, launch." He switched hands. "Fly to the ship. Dock, move to the new ship, listen to the stupid 'how to be safe in deep space' briefing, then blast out of the solar system." He waggled all ten fingers. "Not counting any on-the-spot briefings that get tossed in there by someone who loves the sound of their own voice."

"And five hours is enough for all that?"

Nick shrugged. "Don't worry, Pete. They can't leave without the pilot, so as long as you're with me, you're not late."

Pete let out a relieved sigh. He picked up his fork. "That's a relief." He shoveled some meatloaf into his mouth.

Nick pointed his fork at the youth. "But if you're even a minute late meeting *me* at the platform, I'll leave you on this dying rock without a second thought. I'll just stun her and lug her along and deal with the fireworks later," he finished as he pointed at his daughter.

"Dad!"

"You better take a look at your watch and be at flight pad six by midnight tomorrow night."

Pete looked at his watch. "But that's more like thirty-three hours."

"Dad's fifteen minutes early for the fifteen minutes early for the formation that's an hour early," said Samantha.

"Plus an extra half-hour just in case," added Nikki.

Nick smirked. "Yeah, that sounds about right."

Pete hopped off his stool. "I need to get going."

"Midnight tomorrow night," repeated Nick. "Midnight oh-one is what?"

"Left behind?" said Pete.

"Right. Flight pad three, don't forget."

"You said fight pad six!"

Nick laughed. "I was making sure you were paying attention."

"Is it three or six?" Pete looked worried at Samantha.

"Relax Pete. If you're this high-strung on the flight," Nick said as he winked. "I just might jettison you into space. It's pad six."

"See you there," said Pete. He forced the remaining meatloaf into his mouth then hurried to the door, chewing as he went.

"Thanks Dad," said Samantha after he had left.

Nick shrugged. "You two get separate bunks or I *will* shoot his narrow ass into space."

Samantha smiled. "Deal." Her smile faded. "What about Mom?"

Nick was dreading that subject. He ate the last bite of his meatloaf slowly. "I'm sure Mom would be more comfortable on the first ship after ours."

"What?"

"Listen, Sam." Nick gestured around the room. "You're a smart girl so I know you know what's going on around here. Mom's never around for a reason." He put his fork down. "And I would rather not discuss those reasons with my kids. The bottom line is that if the two of us were stuck in a ship for six months together, I'd jettison *my* narrow ass into space before we were through."

"Narrow, Dad?" Nikki said with a smirk. "Really?"

Nick punched his son's shoulder.

"Hey! It was a legitimate observation." Nikki laughed at his father. "Don't shoot the messenger, you know."

"Fine, Dad, fine. But can I at least let her know we're going together and we'll see her there?"

Nick nodded at his daughter. "I think she probably knows we're going by now. After all, she'll need to sign off on the troops' medical records."

"We're taking troops?"

"Yes, Nikki. We've got about a hundred of them coming along this time instead of just tech support."

"What sort of population they going to be dealing with?" Nikki asked as he leaned forward. "More of those carnivorous woolly mammoth looking things? Or maybe those smart bugs with the fur?"

Nick shrugged. It was another subject he did not want to discuss until they were on their way, and there was no way to stop. "Something like those things, I've been told. We'll know more once we're en-route."

"Cool! Can I shoot some this time?"

"That'll be up to the Marines, son."

Nikki shot his hands in the air and let out a whoop.

"Men." Samantha stood and shook her head. "You're all a bunch of animals." She slid her plate toward her brother. "Can you get the dishes? I need to pack."

Nick stood quickly. "And I need to go draw some gear." He slid his plate toward his son.

"What?"

"Thanks Nikki!" Samantha dashed for the circular staircase.

"Hey!"

Nick smiled. "Just look at it this way; this'll be the last time you do plates for a long while."

Nikki frowned. "I suppose so. Besides, it always takes her twice as long to pack than it does me." He pointed at the ceiling.

"Thanks Nikki. I'm going to draw some extra gear, get my briefings, go over manifests. I might get some shut-eye at the office and meet you both at platform two at midnight tomorrow."

"I thought you said it was platform six."

Nick shrugged as he moved to the door. "If he's too stupid to figure out that it's the platform with a hundred Marines in formation on it, then he deserves to be left behind."

Nikki smirked. "Nice, Dad."

"I'll be back later to pack up. If we miss each other here, make sure you two stay together." He moved back to his son. "I imagine those OneGen nut-jobs know about the flight by now so there's no telling what

they might do. *So stay together*." He took his service pistol out of its holster. "Don't let anyone keep you two from being at that platform." He handed it to his son.

"Got it, Dad." Nikki slid the pistol into his belt and slipped his shirt over it. "I'll give it back to you at the platform."

"All I need is the pistol back; those bullets aren't on the books." He slapped his son's shoulder. "See you at platform two at midnight," he repeated.

"Got it, Chief." Nikki stood and began to pile the plates.

Nick waved at his son. "See you there."

Nikki picked up the stack of plates as his Dad moved to the door.

"Love you, Nikki."

"Love you too, Dad." As Nick closed the door behind him, Nikki swerved from the wash unit to the recycling bin. He elbowed the switch and the lid flipped back. He dropped the plates in and pressed the button. The lid shut and Nikki listened to the loud grinding sounds as he went back for the glasses. "Not going to need you either," he said as he took the four glasses and returned to the bin. Since he was carrying his father's pistol, he resisted the urge of downing the remaining beer in the glasses.

Chapter 11

Paramus walked his mount to the front of Yesha's home. Head-high hedges marking the edge of his property created a small courtyard but he could still see that there were already several people milling about in the area. Their mounts were nearby eating hay from a bin. Paramus pointed his Weiss at the hay trough and slapped its rear. The large, short haired creature shook his head at him. "Go get something to eat, you stupid beast." Paramus slapped it again. This time he pointed as well. "Go, Tober. Go!"

"Trouble with your mount?" Asked one of the men.

Paramus let out a sigh. Truth be told, he had only had the creature for over a month now and it seemed to be the stupidest animal he had ever owned. His previous mount, an Odiver finally got too old for him to ride so he set it free. The new creature- a Weiss - was another typical beast of burden. Like the Odiver, it had four long muscular legs, only not as long. Since he only tended to ride around the town, he didn't need a long-distance mount. He patted the long hair that ran from between its ears to where its long tail began. It provided plenty of handholds so it could be ridden without a saddle. He turned to look at the man. "Yes, Giles, as a matter of fact, I am having problems with my mount. You see…" He gestured at the creature with both hands, "This is the stupidest Weiss to ever walk the ground."

The men laughed as Giles approached. "Well, that may be true but..." He patted the Weiss' side. "There may be more involved that than."

Paramus crossed his arms. "I was riding before you were born, so if you're suggesting that..."

Giles held up his hands. "Not at all," he interrupted. "It's just that..." He thought for a moment to make sure he did not offend the High Priest. "Have you, by any chance owned a Weiss?" He paused again. "Recently?"

"Are you calling me old?" Paramus raised an eyebrow.

Giles dropped his hands. "That I am not, High Priest." He fought to keep a smile from his face. "It's just that Weiss can take years to train so it will obey an owner. Plus, they do best when they have another animal to learn from. These are good in a train because they'll follow the one in front of them. After a while, they will lead a train. But until then..." His voice trailed off. "How long have you owned him?"

"A month since Tober my Odiver got too old to ride."

"Tober? Like this one here?"

"I name all my rides Tober." Paramus smirked. "Makes it easy to remember what to call them." He glanced at his Weiss. It was still standing beside him. "Not that this one is smart enough to even know what I'm saying."

"You got rid of your old mount before getting this one?"

"Don't need two mounts."

Giles grinned. "Well, with a Weiss, you sort of do." He took the reins from the High Priest. "I'll get him with the others. At least he can learn that eating from a strange trough is fine." He tugged on the animal's reins. For a moment it seemed like a tug of war was going to take place.

Paramus slapped the animal's rear again. "Go! Eat!"

The animal begrudgingly began to move. When it got close to the trough and realized where it was being led, it moved to a quick trot to join the other animals.

"That was a chore."

Giles nodded at Paramus. "Well, the good news is that once we start on our way, your Tober will just fall in line in the train with the other animals. You can even sleep on it and it will just follow along."

Paramus considered that. "In that case, maybe I need to borrow a saddle," he said with a smile. "I hate to pass up a nap."

"I'm sure Yesha has one to spare." Giles gestured toward Tober. "Ever have a saddle on him?"

"No."

Giles smiled. "How about if I break in your beast when we get back?"

Paramus bowed to the man. "That would be nice since it is apparently required." He looked at Tober. "Might just trade him for an Odiver when we get back though." He raised his voice. "Or make him a sacrifice!"

Giles laughed at the High Priest. "That won't be necessary. A Weiss is a fine beast once you get them set in your ways. Besides, they are not particularly tasty. I can't imagine the Father appreciating such a gamey and gristly sacrifice."

"Then I accept your offer." Paramus put his arm around the man. "And I'll stick close in case the new Tober decides to act up."

"Paramus!" Tolen called as he entered the enclosure. "Are you here to see us off?" He patted his son's shoulder. "It's Argus' first hunt you know."

Paramus nodded. "I know."

"I'll just go check on Yesha and see if he needs any help," said Giles. With a short bow, he moved off. He patted Argus' shoulder as he went past. The boy beamed at him.

"You're here to see us off?" Tolen let go of the reins of their two Odivers. He pointed one towards the feed trough. Both animals moved there without any further coaxing.

Paramus scrunched up his face.

"Paramus?" Tolen smiled at his friend. "You feeling alright?"

"I'm fine." He waved his hand dismissively. "I'm fine." He gestured at the trough. "Seems I got an especially stupid animal over there."

Argus looked at the circle of animals. "The Weiss?"

Paramus nodded.

"You know you need to train them with other animals, right?" The boy asked.

Paramus playfully shoved him. "Sure, *now* I do. Where were you when I was in the market for a new animal? Oh, and until I get him trained, I'm going to be at the back of the train smelling the gas of every beast ahead of me."

"It could be worse," offered Tolen.

"Really? How?"

Tolen shrugged. "It could be *me* having to ride behind gassy animals."

Now Paramus shoved Tolen. "Oh, you'll be back there too, old friend. To keep me company."

"I think I'll ride up front with Yesha," said Argus. He quickly moved off.

"Kids these days," said Paramus. "Why in my youth, I'd have gladly ridden at the back with the High Priest."

Tolen raised an eyebrow at him. "Wasn't your father the high priest then?"

"Well, those are details I don't care to discuss."

"I see." Tolen rubbed his hands together. "It is good you're on this trip as well then."

Paramus nodded. "Yes. It has been a long time since I've seen the great Lirpa herd."

"Me too."

"And that's the only reason you're willing to sit on a saddle for six hours?"

Tolen put his arm on his friend's shoulder as he became serious. "Well, hunting Lirpa isn't like hunting small game you know. People sometimes get hurt." He looked over his shoulder at his son. He was standing in the circle of hunters as they talked about the upcoming events. Standing with the others, Tolen realized how young his son seemed. "Or worse even." He looked at his friend. "I just want to make sure he's alright."

Paramus squeezed his friend's shoulder, equally serious. "I understand completely, Tolen. And I'll be there to help keep an eye on him along with you." A smile worked its way around the edges of his mouth. "From the back of the caravan, most likely, but I will do my best."

After a little more socializing, a quick meal, and a prayer the group headed out.

With Tolen and Paramus bringing up the rear of the caravan.

Chapter 12

The caravan of hunters rode through the night, sleeping on their mounts as they rode. As dawn approached, they took a short break to eat and deal with the morning's ablutions. After only half an hour, they began to ride again, chatting as they went.

As the sun broke above the distant mountains to their left, the horizon ahead of them seemed to take on a wavering effect.

"Is that the herd?" Argus asked.

"It is," replied Yesha. "We need to keep quiet until we get to the outcrop. Lirpa are pretty docile creatures but when startled, they can stampede," he said quietly. "And when that happens, they plow over everything in their path. When you find one alone, you can almost walk up to them." He pointed at the rider on his left. "Sagem here has one that he even rides."

"What?" Argus gaped at him. "Really?"

Sagem nodded. "Got him as a calf a few hunts ago. I accidentally killed his mother and I didn't want to leave him alone to die, so I took him with me."

"How big is he? Can I ride him?"

"Argus, you can discuss that later," said Yesha. "You must concentrate on the hunt. These are large creatures. Large, wild creatures that you must respect."

Argus nodded at him, mentally kicking himself for what he felt seemed like a childish outburst.

"The Lirpa herds," said Paramus as he whistled low. "It has been a long time since I have seen them. Over twenty years, in fact. You?"

"It was before Argus was born since I was last here," Tolen answered. "Look, the outcropping." He pointed ahead. The sun still had not peaked above the horizon and instead gave it an ever-growing bright blue glow. "There it is."

"I wonder how close the herd is to it this year. When I was here last, after the second day, the herd shifted to where it split around the outcropping them. We were surrounded on all sides by massive Lirpa and their young for almost two days. We dared not try and kill any of them for fear they would stampede over the entire outcropping."

"You sat in silence for two days?" Tolen leaned over and prodded his friend. "That must have been torture."

"Well, mostly silence." He slapped at the hand. "With an occasional supportive comment from me, of course."

"Of course."

As they neared the outcropping, Yesha raised his hand then spun his arm in a circle.

The other riders circled in close to him, Tolen and Paramus as well.

Once everyone's mount had stopped shifting around, Yesha spoke softly: "We ride directly to the outcropping from this side. It looks steep but you can make it up this side. Do not try to go around to the other side. Believe me when I tell you that it is practically a cliff that you cannot ride up, only down. Once you are on the outcropping, you can either spike your mount to the ground, or let it loose if it will come back when you call it. There is plenty to graze on here, as well as water. Your mounts will not have to go far for either." He looked at Tolen. "How behaved is your mount Tolen?"

"He is well trained and comes when I call, of course," assured Tolen. He was taken aback that he alone had been singled out as possibly having an unruly mount.

Yesha tilted his head at him. "I meant no offense, Tolen. I just do not know your mount." He looked at Paramus. "High Priest, you should lengthen your bridle and attach it to Tolen's mount so they stay together. That way when he calls his back, yours will follow. That will make more room on the outcropping during the week for the hunter's mounts since we will be riding off and on it."

"An excellent plan," said Tolen. He held out his hand. "I'll make it fast if you hand it over, Paramus. Then clip it to the other."

Paramus leaned forward and unclipped the left bridle from Tober's harness. He handed it to Tolen who poked the loop through a hole in the back of his saddle, then stuck the free length of the bridle back through the loop, tying a girth hitch. He pulled the hitch tight then handed it back to the High Priest.

Paramus clipped it to the loop at the end of the right bridle, doubling the length. "Done."

"Just hold the extra to you until we get there," said Tolen.

Paramus nodded at him, then Yesha. "Done."

Yesha nodded back. "All the other mounts that are to be released are sufficiently trained then?" Nods all around had him turn and take up a canter for the outcropping. The others in the group followed suit.

The outcropping loomed ahead of them as they approached. Even though it was only twenty feet tall, it seemed massive. On three sides, the ground sloped away from the hundred by fifty-foot plateau at the top. The far side dropped even more steeply a full thirty feet, ending at the valley floor.

Paramus had to kick his mount several times to get it to trot up the incline. When he reached the top, he was covered in a nervous sweat.

"You alright, High Priest?"

Paramus nodded at the rider beside him. "Thought I wasn't going to make it back there."

"Yes, I truly did."

Paramus shook his head. "It was a statement, *not* a question."

"Either way, I am glad you are with us." He smiled earnestly at Paramus.

Tolen swung off his mount and hauled in Tober. "Grab your pack, Paramus and I'll let the beasts go." As he held the bridle, he turned and undid the knot holding his two large saddlebags together. They both dropped to the ground on either side of his mount.

Paramus slid off his Weiss then untied his pack from the beast's hair. It had been braided from its loins to its croup, creating an easy place to secure a pack. Paramus shoved his large pack off the animal's hind end onto the ground. He turned to look at Tolen. "Tober is in your hands." He said softly.

Tolen turned his mount to face down the incline and he softly slapped its hind. Dutifully, the beast started down the hill. When the bridle got taut, Tober initially pulled against it, then begrudgingly followed the other animal down.

"That is a most stupid beast."

"Where did you even get it?"

"Found him wandering around the temple. No one came looking for him so I just assumed he wandered in from the wilds." He grinned. "It may very well be that he was kicked out of a corral, now that I think about it."

A cheer made the two turn and look across the plateau. Three riders disappeared as they galloped down the incline. After another moment, the remaining four went after them leaving Paramus and Tolen alone.

"Let's go watch!" Tolen grabbed his friend's sleeve and yanked him to the edge of the outcropping. When they got there, they skidded to a halt. Tolen gaped at the incline. "Argus rode down *this*?"

"Relax, Tolen, relax." Paramus sat with his legs hanging off the side. "Have a seat and let us watch the hunt now that the sun is coming up."

The top edge of the sun was breaking the western horizon at what seemed to be the far end of the herd, sending brilliant streaks across the cloudless blue sky. The herd stretched in either direction as far as the two could see. Width-wise, it seemed to take up almost a quarter of the immense valley. It was a sea of moving brown, black, and occasional speckled shapes.

"This *is* a sight."

Paramus nodded. "I'm glad I came. I had almost forgotten what this looked like."

The pair sat and watched as the heard came awake and began its journey to the flat plains to the north.

Chapter 13

Nick stood on the wide blue line that designated the edge of platform two. It was only a platform in name; it was actually just a marked-off square of a massive concrete slab the size of two city blocks. A centrally located, equally massive building comprised the terminal. Access to it was via either a long underground passageway from a nearby parking lot by way of a scrolling floor, or an underground train station. Several sleek, brightly colored aircrafts were parked along the edges of the complex. The far side, where Nick was, had been designated for military use. Bulbous olive drab crafts squatted two to a platform in stark contrast to the civilian side of the terminal.

Nick looked across the way at the red border that indicated where platform three was. He was unable to see the purple markings for platform six. "Where you at, kids?" He said to no one. He rested his hand on his empty holster and shook his head. "Should have given him a spare magazine." He looked at his watch. Two minutes had passed since the last time he did so; it now showed five minutes to midnight.

Lieutenant Simpsons moved beside Nick. "Hey, Chief. I'm not trying to push your buttons or anything, but are you going to be ready for dust-off?" He looked out at the people moving about on foot, or riding a scrolling floor. "Who we looking for?"

"No worries, El Tee." Nick sighed. "Well, actually I am worried. For my kids; they're late."

Simpsons put his hand on Nick's shoulder. "That's not good. Want me to grab a few Marines and send them looking?"

Nick shook his head. He looked at his watch again. It was four minutes until midnight now. "They'd of called if they ran into any sort of trouble." He patted his empty holster. "Besides, I gave them a little help to make sure they wouldn't have any trouble."

"You try calling?"

"Phones are off."

Simpsons considered the Chief's two children trying to make their way to the terminal on their own. He was not sure how old they were, but he figured they had to be nearly adults. Especially if the Chief had made a joke about him dating his daughter. "Well, you know we've got some wiggle room for the flight."

"Hurry up and wait."

"Exactly. We can sit for another half hour if we need to before anyone starts to give us grief." Simpsons scanned the crowd. "You got an image of them so I know what I'm looking for? Now you've got me jumpy."

Nick slapped the Lieutenant on the back. "Got them, Sir! He pointed across the pad."

The Lieutenant looked where Nick was pointing. He knew the man had to be relieved because he had actually called him 'sir' instead of 'el tee' or 'left stick' or any number of other names he had come up with for him. He secretly hoped the Chief would come up with some sort of catchy nickname that he could use on his own. "Good to hear, Chief." Moving toward them were two youths- a male and female. They were on a motorized dolly with a terminal employee driving it. It was packed with bags and several boxes. Simpsons smirked. "Hey, she is a good looking gal you got there."

Nick craned his neck to look at him. "She's sixteen, El Tee. Sixteen. I'm going to have enough problems keeping those grunts away from her. Don't need my left stick in the running as well."

Simpsons laughed at him. "Sounds good Chief." He patted his shoulder. "And I'll help keep those Devil Dogs at bay."

"I might start calling you the Dog Handler." Nick grinned. "How's that handle?"

Simpsons shook his head. "Nope. Keep trying. I'll go start the preflight."

Nick nodded at him. "You got her to orbit, you might as well finish the job."

Simpsons smiled wide at him. "Sounds great!" He turned and ran off.

Nick shook his head. "Kids." He looked at his two children as they approached. Neither seemed to be smiling. "Kids?" He called as they approached.

Nikki waved to him. "Dad. Sorry we're running late."

The transport turned and stopped in front of Nick. "Get those bags for you, Sir," said the driver. He hopped off the vehicle and began to unload the bags.

Nick looked at his watch. It was midnight. "You're right on time. Who's worried?"

"Who said anything about being worried?"

Nick frowned at his son. "You had me *damned* worried. Where have you two been?" He looked at Samantha. He could tell she had been crying. He looked back at his son. "Nick?"

Nikki pointed at the man unloading the bags onto the concrete. "Can you take care of him while I start grabbing the bags?" He stared at his father.

"Sure, sure." He put his hand on Samantha's shoulder. "Get aboard and get settled. We'll get the bags, right Nikki?"

Samantha walked to the spacecraft without a word.

"What's going on?" Nick moved beside his son.

Nikki held out the pistol, grip first. "Got it back to you." He sighed. "Not too many bullets left though. Think maybe one or two."

"What happened?"

"Got the bags for you, Sir," said the driver. He held out his digital wallet.

Nick snatched the pistol from his son and whirled on the man. "One or two rounds left? Maybe we should just check to see which it is."

"What?" The man stepped backwards, hitting his vehicle. "Wait a second now."

Nick shook his head. "You'd make us late." He reached into one of the many pockets of his flight suit and pulled out his wallet. He pointed it at the man as he thumbed several buttons.

The man took a step closer.

"Don't worry bub; at this distance, I wouldn't miss with *anything* I was pointing at you." The wallet chirped to indicate that a transfer had been made. "Now get going."

The man sidestepped around his vehicle to the steering wheel. "Thanks," he said gruffly as he clacked the vehicle into drive and sped off.

"We got stopped by a couple of OneGen goons, Dad; right before we got on the train."

"How many?" Nick picked up a bag and slung it over his shoulder. He looked at the large pile of bags. It would take several trips to get them all to the loading platform of the spacecraft. He shook his head. "You leave anything behind?"

Nikki chuckled. "Just the furniture. There were four of them. It was like they knew we were coming here."

"Well, with all these bags, how could anyone not know you two were leaving? We've talked about OPSEC, son."

Nikki picked up a bag. "No, we sent the bags ahead with a delivery service to meet us here. We weren't carrying a thing, Dad." He paused as he picked up another bag. "Well, I had my satchel and Samantha had her purse, but that was it."

Nick put down the two bags he had. "This is absurd." He turned toward the large spacecraft. There were people milling around it involved with pre-flight tasks. There were also several dozen Marines laying down on the concrete in typical military pre-flight fashion. Nick put two fingers in his mouth and whistled loudly. "Get some help over here?" He shouted. He pointed at the bags.

Several Marines hopped to their feet and began the hundred-yard jog toward their Chief.

"That's better." Nick looked at his son. "What happened?"

"These four goons tried to push us around. Ask us where we were going. Who we were going to see. That sort of stuff."

Nick slipped his pistol into the holster. "That where the missing rounds come in?"

Nikki nodded. "Yeah. I heard the train was coming so I pulled the gun and fired a few rounds at their feet."

"Warning rounds go center mass," said Nick. "It lets folks know you're serious."

Nikki shrugged. "Well, they got the message and ran off. Then we hopped on the train and moved down cars until we got to a transit security guard and we sat there."

"Nicely done." Nick gestured toward the ship. "Then why's Sam upset?"

"When we got here and she saw we were on platform two, she kind of shut down."

"Well, that little creep still has some time to make it." Nick looked around. "Can't be too hard to figure out which mil-craft is getting ready to launch."

"What'cha got, Chief?" Asked a Marine as he huffed up to the pair. Three other Marines joined him.

"Can you give us a hand with our bags?" Nick asked. Even though he outranked them and could have easily made it an order, he still asked it as a question. Not that the young Marines would say no.

"No trouble Chief." He looked at the bags then at his three compatriots. "Uhm..."

"We're helping too, Corporal," assured Nick. "I just want to make it in one trip if I can and not be a sweaty mess for liftoff."

The young Marine nodded at him. "Think we can make that happen, Chief." He turned to the other three. "Right?" He smiled wide. "Oh, now we've got it. Blake's on the job." He pointed behind the other Marines.

Nick looked at the approaching Marine. He stood almost two heads taller than the other four and easily outweighed them by sixty pounds. "Good lord. That beast makes it into the air?"

"Only on the bigger ships, Chief," said one Marine.

Blake jogged up to the group. He offered a salute to Nick. "What's the trouble, Chief? Need some head knocking?"

Nick returned the salute. "Bag carrying," said Nick. "If you don't mind helping load my kids' bags, that is."

Blake shrugged. "Gotta go back anyway. Might as well do it with something in my hand."

"He's usually walking around with *food* in his hand," said one Marine.

"And a drink," offered another.

"Gonna walk back with your *neck* in my hand," suggested Blake. He flexed his massive hands. "One each even."

"Well, it's good to have you on our side, Private Blake," said Nick. "If you could grab a couple or three bags, we can make this in one trip."

"Roger that." Blake moved to the bags and much to the relief of the others, picked out the two largest ones. He hefted them onto his shoulders and began to walk towards the ship.

"Holy hell. That's one big guy," said Nikki. He picked up the two bags he had selected as well.

"You know, here in the modern age, we have these things called wheels," said Nick as he picked up his original two bags. "We put them on all sorts of things. Luggage. Vehicles. Luggage. Toys. *Luggage*. Why don't you kids have bags with wheels?"

Nikki looked at his two bags. "This one had wheels but they're broken. I used to carry this one on top of the one with wheels. Now I have to carry both." He shrugged. "It's not like I travel with everything I own all the time, you know."

"I suppose." Nick looked back at the bags. There were only three left. "Can you get those three?" He asked the last Marine.

The Marine nodded. "Sure thing, Chief." He looked down at the three bags then towards the ship. It was a long hundred yards away. He noticed that the Marines who were sitting around it were looking in his direction. "I sure hope so," he said, hoping he would be able to make it to the ship without having to stop or worse, put the bags down. He picked up two bags and slung them over his shoulder. The third he squatted down and bear-hugged. He stood with a grunt.

Nick looked from the Marine to the ship and back. "Want to swap bags? I got a light one you can swap me for."

The Marine shook his head. "Too late for that, Chief. I've already picked them up and they're all looking." He started to shuffle toward the ship. "Gotta get going."

Nick and his son fell into step behind the Marine. Halfway there, they moved beside him to give him encouragement. Sweat was pouring down his face when he reached the loading platform. He dropped the bag he was bear-hugging and wiped his face on his sleeve to scattered applause. "Wheels, people. Wheels," he said as he unslung the two bags. He took a bow to more applause, saluted Nick, then moved off to lounge with a group of Marines. None would move until they were yelled at by their Gunnery Sergeant to get aboard the ship.

"Well, that's done. Now all you need to do is deal with Samantha. She's pretty pissed you sent Pete to the wrong platform. Course, I suppose if he can't..."

Nick silenced his son as Pete approached from behind him. "Well, well. Pete. How good to see you!" He said loudly.

Pete frowned at the man. "Good to see you at platform *two*."

Nick shrugged noncommittally. "Well, you know how the military is; change is progress. We went from six to three to one to two. It all depends where they put the ship down. I've got no say on where it goes until I strap in and take the controls."

Pete looked up at the monstrous ship. "Is that what we're flying in?"

"To where?" Nick looked up at it as well. "Space? Yes. Arcturus? No."

"I see. And have I got a place to sit on this thing?"

Nick nodded. "Yep. Just put your bags over there on the loading platform and the loadmaster and his goons will get it aboard." He looked behind the youth. He was pulling a very large black case. "Got wheels on that thing, do you?"

Pete looked back at his luggage. He had noticed as he approached that the Marines opted for large bags with no wheels to probably to show off their strength. He didn't feel the need to prove his physical strength- in any case, it was his mind that was his best asset. And his dedicated heart, of

course. “Sure. Wheels are the wave of the future you know. Why someday, we might even make vehicles that roll around on them.”

Nick elbowed his son. “Pete’s stock is improving, Nikki. Only passenger I’m bringing besides myself that has a bag with wheels *plus* he’s a smart-ass.”

“Nice.” Nikki looked at Pete. “I’m going to get settled. Want me to show you in?”

“Sure.” He nodded at Nick. “Thanks for waiting.”

Nick nodded. “Wouldn’t leave without you,” he lied. “Sam’s been worried sick you wouldn’t make it.”

“Thanks again,” said Pete as he pulled his bag beside Nikki. He looked over his shoulder toward the terminal. “Might as well get going then. Goodbye cruel world.”

“Don’t get all melodramatic on me, Pete. It’s a long flight and you better not start spouting poetry,” Nick warned as the two youths moved off. Nick walked towards the loadmasters to watch their work. Technically, he was in charge of the mission, but even so, he wouldn’t try to tell the loadmasters how to pack the baggage for the trip to space. If nothing else, it would keep him occupied and out of the Lieutenant’s hair as he completed his pre-flight checklist.

Chapter 14

"Asses and elbows!" Shouted Gunnery Sergeant McCain at the lounging Marines. "That's what I want to see. NOT a bunch of lollygagging. This ain't no pleasure cruise!"

The Marines stood quickly.

"But going to Mars *is* a pleasure cruise, Gunny," said one Marine. He dusted off the back of his trousers. "Best thing going on in the system is Mars."

"Well you're not going to ever see if it you don't get on that ship pronto!" He shouted. Secretly, he was glad that there was a smart-mouth in the group; it gave him a reason to shout. "Now get moving! We're dust-off in thirty! I want gear stowed and seats filled in fifteen!"

"You know, Gunny, I'm starting to suspect this might just be a *dis*pleasure cruise."

"GET GOING GRUNT!" McCain bellowed, immensely satisfied with himself.

The Marines began to mill towards the ship as the auto-turret on the ship came to life. The rotating barrels spun to life, spitting rounds in short bursts.

The Marines all dropped to the concrete.

The Gunnery Sergeant looked in the direction the auto-turret was firing. "On your feet, Marines!" He drew his pistol. "Contact three o'clock!" He aimed down his arm as he began to take slow deliberate steps in that direction.

The Marines with weapons drew theirs as well as another missile streaked toward the ship. The auto-turret pivoted and fired a salvo at it. The rocket exploded as the bullets tore into it.

"Everyone aboard!" Nick shouted. "Dust-off is NOW!" He flipped the switch on the communication pin on his collar. "El Tee, you ready on that pre-flight?"

"Just about there, Chief!" The Lieutenant shouted back as the auto-turret fired again.

"Skip to the end and get those engines fired up!" Nick took to a jog as another rocket was destroyed.

The Gunnery Sergeant was now almost ten yards past all the Marines. He still had his weapon trained in the direction of the rocket fire. It was coming from the far end of the terminal, near where platform six was.

Blake jogged up beside his sergeant. "Need some help, Gunny?" He asked.

McCain glanced back at the man, then up at his face. "Blake. Get aboard!" He turned back toward the direction of the rocket fire as another rocket streaked towards them.

"I just thought you could use some help," said Blake.

"What're you going to be; cover?" He panned left and right with his pistol. It was much too far of a shot to make effectively. "Damn; too far off."

Blake swiveled a large black gun up off his hip. "Want some suppression?" He clacked the safety off. The five barrels of the gun spun one complete revolution as it went through a pre-firing system's check. "Got some handy if you need it, Gunny."

The Gunnery Sergeant looked at the man and his weapon of choice. "That's supposed to be mounted on a wheeled vehicle, last time I read the field manual."

As another rocket streaked out from the direction of platform six, Blake flipped an orange colored monocle over his eye giving him a heads-up display of where his weapon was pointing. "I'll put on some skates next chance I get, Gunny." He panned his head left and right, tracking with the barrel of the weapon. "Got them. Firing?"

"Oh hell yes, Blake. Fire at will."

Blank flipped a red guard up and thumbed the trigger. It came to life spitting bullets in the direction of the rocket trails. The only way that the Gunnery Sergeant knew that the rounds were landing where they were was because every twentieth round was a green tracer. "Engaging," shouted Blake over the din. "One launcher down." He fired again. "Two!" He let loose another salvo. "Uh oh, Gunny; we got incoming."

"What's new? We've been dealing with incoming." He fired several rounds just to make himself feel better.

Blake shook his head. "Vehicle coming our way. Big one too. It's time for one of them tactical flanking maneuvers, Gunny."

McCain nodded. If the massive Marine beside him, holding the formidable weapon felt it was time to leave, who was he to argue? "Right behind you." He slammed his pistol into its holster. "Move out!"

"Think I'm just makin' them mad." Blake fired another salvo. "Time to go, methinks."

As the pair turned to run, the concrete around them exploded as rounds slammed into it.

"Juke and weave!" Blake suddenly cut away from the Gunnery Sergeant with agility belying his size. The tarmac where he was only moments before exploded as rounds hit.

The Gunnery Sergeant looked up at the auto-turret on the ship. It swayed back and forth searching for an airborne target; it was not programmed to deal with terrestrial threats so it ignored the oncoming

vehicle. The spacecraft itself was a large, inner-system supply ship; traveling no farther than the asteroid belt. As far as weaponry, it had the standard anti-missile defenses as well as one forward-facing cannon. "Damned remotes!" He looked over his shoulder to see the large Marine make another move away from the ship and himself. "You're going the wrong way, Blake!" The Gunnery Sergeant turned and ran parallel to the ship for several steps. Several rounds ricocheted of the concrete as he turned. Blake fired again at the approaching vehicle to draw its fire. McCain turned and ran for the side ramp. Several rounds sparked off it as he rounded the corner into the safety of the heavily armored hull. He turned and looked out, trying to find Blake.

Blake breathed hard as he made another turn. He knew he was now too far from the ramp to ever make it there safely. He looked for the vehicle- it was four hundred yards away and approaching fast. He looked at the forward landing gear of the spacecraft, judging its distance. It was also too far. He looked down at his weapon; it had just under a thousand rounds left. With a relegated sigh, he thumbed the firing adjustment to explosive rounds. Breathing deeply, he ran in an arc to take him between the ship and the vehicle he was sure was going to ram it.

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Nick barreled up the decks of the transport ship - seven in all. He could no longer hear anything from outside the ship but he was sure that the threat was far from over. "Make way!" He shouted again as he came to an intersection. Finally reaching the cockpit at the topmost deck, he rushed in. "Status!"

"Ship's ready to rumble, Chief," said the Lieutenant.

"Then fire it up!" Nick swung into the pilot's chair. "Get us airborne!" He flipped the switches activating the static armor plating. "Armor on!" He looked down and turned on the landing cameras, searching for whatever
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threats were still around. The thick glass of the cockpit faced forward and a little ahead of the craft, but the sensor and antenna array stuck out even more, keeping him from seeing the ground personally. He panned the camera around, quickly finding the approaching vehicle. "Hell, Simpsons, they're going to ram us! Get this bucket airborne!" He panned around some more, catching a glimpse of the Gunnery Sergeant running up the ramp. "McCain's in." He focused on the vehicle. It was an old city bus that had inch-thick armor attached to its front end. Fixed on the thick grey plate were cone-shaped brass shapes. They were on the roof as well. "That thing's one giant shape charge!" The ship rumbled as its engines came to life. Within moments it would overcome gravity and begin to ascend. "We're not going to make it." He said as he realized the bus would reach them before they were airborne. Several small explosions lit up the armor on the front of the bus. "What the hell? Who's still out there?"

Nick swung the camera around as he zoomed out. A large Marine was a standing between the ship and the oncoming bus. He was on one knee, firing continuously, tracer rounds seemingly forming a green line between him and the vehicle. "Blake, you idiot!"

The ship lifted off the tarmac slowly as the engines gained power.

As Nick watched, several rounds dug grooves around the lone Marine. "I'm on pole!" Nick grabbed the controls as the Lieutenant raised his hands signaling that he was relinquishing control of the ship. Nick slammed the throttle to one-hundred percent and yanked back on the yoke.

"Need to warn the crew," said Lieutenant Simpsons as his seat adjusted to deal with the sudden movement. Crewmembers without any forewarning would be tossed into each other or bulkheads, or worse.

"Deal with it!" As the ship lurched upward, Nick jammed the yoke to one side, and pressed on his lateral control with his foot, pushing the craft into a sideways slide. The ship bucked as it gained altitude sideways, its aft

lifting before the nose. Nick and the Lieutenant stared at the concrete not a hundred feet away- only ten of those feet being between the landing gear and the ship itself. "Hang on!" He twisted the yoke violently, pivoting in place as the tail rose farther up, the forward landing gear slammed back into the pavement cutting a deep rut as they swung about. Blake came into view, he was down on one side, still sighting at the oncoming vehicle and firing bursts as it. Rounds bounced off the ground around him and, as Nick watched, on him as well. Without body armor, the rounds tore through him, splattering the tarmac with red sprays. "Damn it all!" Nick pulled back on the yoke as he flipped a yellow striped cover on the yoke. "Hot!" As the vehicle came into view on the heads up display, Nick pressed the now uncovered button. Huge pockmarks erupted in the concrete as the 120 millimeter cannon came to life. Designed to deal with wayward asteroids and other jetsam, the weapon was devastating on the tarmac. Nick tracked the rounds towards the bus by skewing the spacecraft sideways. Seeing the rounds hit, the driver of the bus tried to swerve. Nick continued to fire, pulling the rounds in closer and closer to the bus that was now intent on escape. "Everyone must die." Nick said as the rounds finally reached the bus. It erupted in a bright orange ball of flame as the explosives it was carrying - all ten thousand pounds of it- detonated. Pieces of the bus clattered ineffectually off the sizzling armor of the spacecraft as they encountered the static charge and were flung off.

The explosion rocked the spacecraft backwards, pulling the forward landing gear off the ground. Nick returned the controls to their neutral position for a vertical takeoff. "You're back on the pole, El Tee," he said. As the Lieutenant took the controls, Nick flipped on the radio. "Tower, this is the Roadrunner on V-M-R One, Wichita. We were ground zero for that attack just now."

"Saw that, Wichita," responded the traffic controller. "Just so you know, that forward landing gear's not going back in any time soon."

"Roger." Nick turned to the Lieutenant. "Make sure those hatches to that forward gear are secure." When the landing gear was fully retracted, it sealed against the bulkhead of the ship, creating an airtight seal that made the access doors unnecessary since without several overrides, the landing gear would only open in an atmosphere. Because of this, the massive airlocks housing them were routinely left open to make walking in that part of the ship more convenient.

Simpsons nodded. He thumbed on the ship's internal radio. "Cross check hatches, forward landing gear, and all-call."

"Tower, need *immediate* medevac for one down Marine at ground zero." He considered that for a moment. "Approach with caution, he's armed and might be groggy if he's not dead."

"Thanks for that, Roadrunner. Support is already on the way."

"Appreciate it tower. We'll make a standard lift from here on."

"Wichita, roger. Oh, and we'll send you a bill for the resurfacing. You did a fine job down there."

"Send the bill to OneGen," replied Nick. "Wichita, out."

"Safe flight, Roadrunner."

Nick let his arms fall slack to his side. "I am really starting to not like those guys."

Lieutenant Simpsons nodded, then decided to change the subject since his now-estranged brother was a member of OneGen. "Thanks for taking that back there, Chief. There's no way I could have done that."

"Always remember that you can turn a ship with more than just its engines. Pushing off things, propping up on things, bumping into things, and..."

"Pivoting on things." The Lieutenant smiled. "Very nice bit of flying back there."

"Not sure it helped Blake any."

"Well, help is on the way, so he's got a fighting chance, right?"

Nick shook his head. "We're expendable. Politicians and such go into the tanks. They just stick us in the ground. We're not even worth a month of t-cells." Nick rubbed his face with his hands. "Well, *we* might be as pilots, but run of the mill grunts like Blake down there..."

"Sorry about that, Chief."

"Yeah." Nick pushed himself out of the seat. "It's never the people you want dead. You got it from here... Ground Zero?"

The Lieutenant laughed. "Hey, that one's in the running, Chief." He gave Nick a sloppy salute. "I got it. Go check on everyone below."

"I'll blame the pitching and yawing on you."

"I'd do the same."

Nick exited the cockpit and made his way below to check on his family.

Chapter 15

"Where is he again?" Paramus asked. "I lost him."

"He's there with those other two riders." Tolen squinted. "I think."

The pair watched as the hunters moved in and around the herd, searching for the appropriate Lirpa; a large male with horns showing it was in its fifth year or more, or a female in its tenth year that did not have a young with it. None of the animals younger than five years, or conversely, older than fifteen were taken as the youth were the future of the herd, and the older ones guided the herd. The difficulty with the females was that their young could oftentimes move away from them so they would have to be watched to ensure they were childless that year. Of course, between the two, the females were the preferred meat so the hunt progressed slowly with the hunters weaving in and out of the galloping and jostling Lirpa that outweighed them and their mounts by almost a half of a ton.

"Are you sure that is him?" Paramus squinted at the riders that were almost a mile away.

"That is his speckled Odiver there." Tolen pointed. "By those other two dark ones."

Paramus nodded. "I see them now."

"I don't know if they should be in the herd like that."

"Well, if they are after a female, they have to make sure that it does not have a foal. So they have to follow it to be sure."

Tolen nodded. "I know, I know. I just don't like it with Argus out there."

Paramus stood. "What's that over there?" He pointed to their far left where some other outcroppings forced the herd to twist away. There were

several dark animals on the rocks. They were about half the size of the Lirpas. "Young Lirpas climbing on the rocks?"

"What? Where?" Tolen looked where his friend was pointing. His stomach sank. "No. Worse. Far worse." He clambered to his feet and began to shout at the hunters and point at the pack of Clindams that had come to hunt as well. The large, shorthaired carnivores were covered in jet-black fur from snout to tail- over twenty-five feet in all. Even though their sleek tails were almost ten feet long, the remaining portion that was body was a muscled mass held aloft by four equally muscled legs that ended in broad, clawed paws. Sharp fangs extended down past their lower jaws which along with wide spaced eyes and large ears made the head appear larger than it actually was. Overall, a six-hundred pound killing machine that hunted in packs. "Clindams!" Tolen shouted again as he gestured at the approaching animals.

"Clindams?" Paramus looked again. "There's at least seven of them there. They'll start a stampede."

The Lirpas nearest to the outcropping began to move quicker from the shouting Tolen, creating a fast-moving stream of animals closest to them.

"Tolen, you're going to start a stampede!" Paramus cautioned him. "That will not help at all."

"Well, Clindams will eat anything they can catch, even those hunters out there."

Helpless, the two watched as the pack moved to the edge of the herd.

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Argus rode beside Giles. "That female looks alone," he said softly.

"Yes, she does. How old do you say she is?" He whispered back.

Argus moved closer to the female. "I see eight twists in her horns. That makes it a seven-year-old female?"

"Correct." Giles unslung his bow. "Remember where you are to aim?"
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"Yes." Argus unslung his bow as well. He twisted to pull a long, thick arrow from the quiver on his saddle. "Right behind the shoulder, even with the bottom of the neck."

Giles guided his Odiver farther from the youth. "Make sure of your shot. Chasing down a wounded Lirpa could take half the day".

Argus nocked the arrow on the thick sinew.

"Push smoothly on the bow, Argus."

Argus pushed the bow away from himself as he held the nocked arrow to his cheek. He leaned back on his mount to sight at the creature only ten feet away as his arm locked. A movement to his left made him take his eye off his target.

"Argus..." Cautioned Giles.

"What is that over there?" Argus turned along with his head as he looked over. He kept the bow taut.

"Keep your eye on your target, Argus."

Argus swiveled to look at the female. She had moved farther away from him as his Odiver and she walked. He kicked his mount in the sides to coax it faster. His arm began to strain from keeping the bow pulled for so long. "Almost there."

"Eye on the target." Reflexively, Giles looked toward whatever had distracted the youth. There was nothing there. "Eye on the target," he said again.

Suddenly the animals around the pair bolted, one knocked against Argus' mount hard.

"Argus!" Giles moved to get beside the youth to keep him from being knocked off his mount.

A bull Lirpa knocked into Argus's Odiver, crushing his leg between the two animals. Argus winced back and twisted to the side as the Lirpa rubbed down the side of this mount, dislocating his knee.

As Giles reached out for the youth, he saw him wince and twist in his saddle. Argus turned toward Giles and let out a scream as his fingers let go of the arrow. Giles jolted back as the arrow fired at point-blank range into his shoulder, piercing his shoulder blade and sticking out the back almost half way. As he leaned back in his saddle, another Lirpa bumped his mount, knocking Giles from his mount.

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"Someone has fallen!" Tolen grabbed Paramus by the shoulder. "I think it is the young man with Argus." He turned and ran to the far side of the plateau, whistling for his mount as he went.

Paramus was torn between watching what was happening and going to his friend. He ran to follow his friend then decided he would keep an eye out so he could better direct Tolen when he got back. He turned and ran back to look. When he got to the edge, he was horrified to see Argus fall off his mount as well.

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Argus dropped his bow and he clutched at his useless leg. Below the knee, his foot faced the wrong direction. Pain welled up inside of him, making him sick to his stomach. The edges of his vision got cloudy as he looked around for help.

"Argus!" Giles called as he fought to get to his feet. Lirpas were now moving faster around the pair, agitated by their loud voices and jostling. A Lirpa bull turned to face him when he finally got to his feet. Giles waved his arms at it as he looked left and right for his mount but it was nowhere in sight. When he looked back, he saw Argus' Odiver but he was no longer on it. The bull charged at Giles when he took his eyes off it. Seeing movement out of the corner of his eye, he sidestepped as the two-and-a-half-ton creature barreled by him. Giles shoved the beasts ineffectually as he tried to make it to Argus' mount. The youth had been told that if he fell, to remain

under his mount to avoid being trampled, even if that meant hanging onto the bottom of the harness and letting his mount drag him along. Giles hoped to find Argus waiting safely underneath his mount. A Lirpa hit the arrow sticking out of Giles' back, breaking it off and almost knocking him to the ground in the process. "Argus!" He shouted again as he tried to force his way past now-galloping beasts.

Finally, Giles reached Argus' Odiver. It was standing still, with its head down. Giles ducked under its hindquarters for protection, careful not to bump the front portion of the arrow. Looking forward, he saw Argus' huddled in a ball under neck of the Odiver. He was holding the reins in his hand to keep the animal in place. "Argus!" He called again as he painfully crawled forward. He patted the Odiver's side as he went, to keep it calm. When he reached Argus, he saw that his foot was facing the wrong direction. "Argus?" he tried again. The youth still did not respond. Carefully he reached forward and took the boy by the shoulder and pulled him fully under his Odiver. He listened to his chest, relieved to hear his heart beating. "Thank the Lord you are alive." He looked up at the Odivers as they moved past. He was sure that sooner or later, the other hunters would either find his rider-less mount, or see Argus' mount standing still and come to investigate. He cradled the youth's head in his good arm. "Just a little while and we will be fine," he tried to assure the boy. He looked at his shoulder, there seemed to be a little blood seeping from the front of the wound. His bigger concern was the very wet feeling on his back where it was ostensibly bleeding far worse. After only a little, his vision began to iris closed as shock led to unconsciousness.

Tolen rode his mount to Paramus. He looked over the embankment. "Where are they?"

Paramus untied his Weiss. "I saw..."

"What did you see?" Tolen looked at him. "Tell me what you saw!"

"I saw the one with Argus fall off his mount. Then I saw Argus fall as well."

"Get your beast off so I can go down there." He looked down, preparing to ride down the steep decline.

"Wait, Tolen. Wait," pleaded Paramus. "Let me go with you."

"How can I look after you and them as well?" He raised his legs to kick his mount.

"Stop, Tolen. You need my help. I saw where they went down." He pointed. "Look there. See? That is Argus' speckled Odiver. There standing still. They are safe under it. I am sure of it."

"Then that is where I will go."

"You cannot get them both onto your mount and that mount alone." He stuck out his hand. "We will go together."

Tolen grasped his friend's hand. "Let us go then." He leaned back, hauling the High Priest onto the back of the mount. "Hang on." Without any further warning, Tolen kicked the sides of his Odiver and it charged over the edge.

The Odiver fought for traction as it half-slid, half-ran down the slope. When it reached the bottom, they were surrounded by fast-moving Lirpas.

"I cannot see them anymore," said Tolen. He stretched up in his saddle. "That way?" He pointed, unsure.

"I'll guide you." Paramus clambered up to stand on the back of the saddle, using Tolen's shoulders for support.

"You will get yourself killed!"

Paramus ignored him and scanned the area ahead of him. There seemed to be a spot the Lirpas were moving around. "That way. Go that way carefully." He pointed ahead to their right.

Tolen guided his mount through the streams of massive beasts as he followed his friend's directions. "How much farther is it?" Tolen craned his neck to try and see past the beasts.

Paramus gripped his friend's shoulders tight. "Turn around Tolen!"

"What? Are we there?"

"We have to turn back!" He shook Tolen's shoulders.

"We are almost there!"

"Do not go!" Paramus pleaded. He dropped back down onto the saddle. "Tolen, you are like a brother to me, please believe me when I tell you we must turn back."

Tolen turned in the saddle. "We are almost to them!"

Paramus put his hands on Tolen's shoulders gently. "The Clindams reached them first, Tolen. There is nothing we can do."

Tolen's eyes got large. "Argus!" He turned and coaxed his mount forward, oblivious to the ebbs and flows of the Lirpa herd. After only a moment, they burst into a clearing in the moving herd.

Three large black Clindams kept the herd at bay as two others fed. The one closest to Tolen and Paramus roared at them and swiped a paw.

"No!" Tolen kicked his mount savagely in the side as he charged the three creatures keeping guard.

Not expecting an attack, the three pealed apart, allowing Tolen to pass between them. His mount jumped as it passed them, landing near the carcass of a speckled Odiver, its momentum forcing it to jump again over it. The creature feeding on it looked up and snarled at them. The second had one paw on Argus as it chewed on the Odiver's shoulder. Giles seemed to be pinned under the beast. He was also not moving.

Tolen swung his mount around to try to force the Clindams away from their meal.

"They will not leave, Tolen. We need to find the others or we will end up like them."

"That is my son down there, becoming feed for that beast!"

"Tolen, listen. We cannot help them by ourselves. If we have any chance we need the others."

"Tolen!" Yesha called as he and two other hunters approached. "I thought I saw you down here. What is going on?" The trio stayed close together and pushed their way towards them.

"Clindams have gotten Argus and that young man he was with!" Paramus shouted.

Yesha unslung his bow. "Stay back!" The other two hunters took Yesha's reins. As the trio moved into the clearing, a Clindam growled at him and stood. Yesha nocked an arrow and smoothly pushed the bow away from himself. As soon as his arm was locked, he let the arrow go. It sunk almost to the fletching in the soft chest of the standing Clindam. As it fell over dead, the other two stood to face him. One swatted a paw at him while the other dug its hind claws in, preparing to leap. As it judged the distance, it twitched its long tail and shifted its hind end back and forth as it prepared its attack.

Calmly, Yesha nocked another arrow and let it fly in one smooth motion. The arrow hit the Clindam between the eyes. The arrow stuck in almost a foot as the beast flopped down onto lifeless paws. The third looked from the fallen pack mate to Yesha. It let out a roar and bounded toward him. The hunter on Yesha's right shot at the creature. His arrow hit it behind the shoulder blade and stuck deep. The creature took two other steps, faltered, fell on its side and then staggered to its feet. It backed away from the interlopers.

The one chewing on the Odiver roared as it pulled Argus closer, defending its prey.

"That one there! That one next!" Shouted Tolen.

The third hunter obliged him with a shot to its throat. The arrow entered at an angle so that it entered from the front and stuck out just behind the creature's shoulder. It scrambled to its feet and stumbled into the moving herd.

The last Clindam looked at the interlopers, realizing it was suddenly outnumbered. With a roar of its own, it bounded into the herd, leaping from Lirpa back to Lirpa back to make its escape.

Tolen dropped from his mount and rushed to his son.

"Tolen! There is still danger here!" With a headshake, Yesha moved his mount in front of Tolen, between him and the oncoming flow of Lirpa. Without the Clindams to make them turn away, the herd pushed in closer. Turning his mount sideways, they parted around them, closing back up not more than ten feet past the group. "Get your animals up here and get these two out of here." He looked down at Giles and startled. "Careful of the arrow in Giles," he added.

"There's an arrow in Giles?" One of the hunters said as he slung off his mount. "How in the world did *that* happen?" He pulled the injured man out from under the Odiver. "It's stopped bleeding for now." He hefted his comrade onto his shoulder and walked to the other hunter. "Careful to not jostle the arrow." He passed Giles up.

"Tolen, get back on that mount and get up here beside me," Yesha ordered.

Tolen looked from his son to Yesha and back. Reluctantly, he remounted and moved beside him. "Will they be alright?"

"Not if we don't get that wound bound and them both back to the top of the outcropping before they are stepped on. I need you to help block the way with me as we go."

Paramus began to pray silently for the both of them as he hugged his friend from behind. "They will be alright, Tolen," he tried to reassure his friend.

Once Argus was loaded - as carefully as Giles once his dislocated leg was discovered- the group made their way back to the outcropping to assess the injuries from its safety.

Chapter 16

"Everyone alright?" Nick asked as he entered yet another troop-carrying pod. The transport ship was for all intents and purposes, just a large hollow, pressurized container that could be outfitted with any number of custom carrying pods; passenger, vehicle, medical, supply, or any combination of over a dozen depending on how many vehicles were also in the hold. For this current mission, there were four armored vehicles and three troop transports, which meant ten passenger pods, one medical, and three rations pods. Enough for thirteen months of highly repetitive, yet nourishing meals- for the trip there and back in case easily transported local food was not found.

"We're good in here, Chief," said a Marine Sergeant. "We were buckled in when the joy ride started. Any info on that?"

"Just your standard OneGen send-off," said Nick, reusing the same line for the fourth time. "Making sure we're all glad to be getting off Earth." Once again, he was rewarded with laughs.

Nick shook his head. Of the ten passenger pods, only five were being used on the ship; the rest were just left in place from a previous mission. "They're going to be in the last one." He said as he moved to the next pod. "Guaranteed." With a sigh, he poked his head in. "Everyone alright?"

"Dad! What's going on out there?"

"Nikki. Finally." Nick said. "Everything's fine. OneGen just decided to give us a sendoff."

"Anyone get hurt?" Pete asked.

"One Marine. He stayed back to provide cover for Gunny when we those OneGen started to..."

"Who?" Interrupted a sergeant. "Who was it, Chief?"

"Big guy named Blake," said Nick.

"Is he dead?" The sergeant asked.

"No," Nick lied. "And there was help on the way when we took off."

"What about the OneGen people?" Pete asked.

"Who cares? They get what they deserve," said the sergeant angrily. "They want less people on Earth, I say we start with them."

Cheers rose from the other Marines.

"I agree, Marines," said Nick. He raised his hands to quiet them. "But now our mission is off-world, so what you need to do is run through your preflight inspections..." He turned to look at the sergeant. "... and make sure we have a nice clean swap from this pig to the ship. Copy?"

The Marine unlatched his restraints and stood. "Roger that, Chief." He looked at the men. "Let's get it together, grunts."

The cheering had stopped but the Marines still talked loudly as they unhooked their restraining belts and began to go through their equipment hung on the walls of the pod. "Got it under control, Chief," he said. "We'll be ready in this pod." He gave a smirk. "Hell, we'll probably not even steal anything from it when we leave."

Nick shook his head. "That'd be a first." He looked at his son then a thought occurred to him. "Where's Sam?"

"The lieutenant moved her, Dad."

Nick looked at the ceiling, toward the cockpit. "Oh? Where'd that El Tee move my daughter?"

"He told her to stay in his bunk."

"What?"

Nikki laughed. "I'm kidding, Dad. He put her in pod eight with a bunch of females. He said he told you he'd make sure she was fine."

"We'd have watched over her here, Chief," said the sergeant. He couldn't keep a smile from creeping across his face. "Honest! Why, if you can't trust a comms tech..."

Nick looked at the young man. He was slim and fit- and he had to admit, good looking. Still. He glanced down at his nametape. "Mellow, I'd jettison you into space without thinking twice about it." He poked the young man in the chest. "Honest."

"Dad!"

The Sergeant Mellow laughed. "We all know your daughter's on the flight, Chief. Gunny's got her on the no-fly list, if you know what I mean..."

"Yeah, I know." Nick shook his head. "I know all about that list."

The sergeant got serious. "Well, you also need to know that we all think a lot of you and would never do anything that would make..." His voice trailed off. "We've got your kid's backs, Chief." He finished. "And their friend." He pointed at Pete. "That's a guarantee."

Nick was taken aback by the young man. "I appreciate that, Sergeant. I really do." He stuck out his hand. "And if I haven't told you today, I appreciate all that you do on a daily basis."

The Marine shook the Chief's hand. "All part of the service, Chief."

Nick nodded at the man. "Nikki, Pete, help out where you can and stay out of the way where you can't. We're going to be tight on schedule for our launch so we need to make sure we get off this ship and onto the other one as quickly as possible."

"Okay, Dad." Nikki unlatched his belt and stood. "We'll do our part. Right Pete?"

Pete looked down at his feet for a moment. Finally, he undid his restraint and stood. "Sure. We'll do our part."

"I'm going to check on Sam. I'll see you all on the main ship when we're loaded." With that, Nick turned and left. He bypassed the next two

pods and went straight to pod eight. He looked into the pod. There was a fight in progress.

Two female Marines were circling each other in the open area between the seats and the storage lockers at the back of the pod. One had a swollen lip. The other's nose was gushing blood.

Swollen Lip lunged forward, trying to grapple Nose Bleed. Nose Bleed, leaned back and pivoted, swatting at the girl's arms and knocking her off balance. She grabbed Swollen Lip by the shoulder and neck and hip-tossed her into the corner.

"At ease!" A Marine by the door shouted as he noticed Nick peeking in.

All the Marines froze. Swollen Lip stood and straightened her shirt. It was torn where Bloody Nose had grabbed her to throw her. She looked at Nick, eyes wide.

"Stand fast," ordered Nick.

Bloody Nose stepped forward and hit the female in the jaw.

Swollen Lip crumpled to the ground, unconscious.

Nick stormed into the pod. "Who the hell are you?" He shouted at the female. "To keep fighting when I tell you to stop?"

Bloody Nose wiped her nose with the bottom of her shirt. Her rippled abs moved in and out as she regained her breath. "Hicks."

Nick moved forward and crowded her. "Well hell, *Hicks*. I didn't realize there were *two* Chiefs on this boat."

She looked up at him.

"What are we; old drinking buddies? We come up the ranks together?" He kicked her in the shins. "My *boots* have more time in the service than you do, Marine."

Hicks winced as she was kicked. She didn't stop staring at Nick.

"Well, tell you what, *Hicks*. You've bought yourself an immediate round trip ticket on this mission."

"What?"

"What, *WHAT*?" Nick shouted. He put his hands on his hips.

"What, Chief?" Hicks finally said.

"Well, *Hicks* gets it now. Drinks all around." He looked over at the crumpled female. "Someone help that troop up." He looked back at the young Marine. "You disobey an order, strike a fellow Marine while they're not looking, and I'm supposed to take you on this mission? Is that it *Hicks*?" He looked around the pod. "Where is Hicks' top? I'm just dying to see if she has one stripe or two."

One of the other females approached Nick. She hesitantly handed him the uniform top she had been holding.

Nick snatched it out of her hand and looked at it. "Well, a *corporal* no less. Corporal Hicks, is it?"

Corporal Hicks finally lowered her eyes. "Yes, Chief."

Nick drew his survival knife from its calf sheath. He ran it under the sewn on rank on her right collar and yanked it up. "Not anymore Corporal Hicks. Now you're just Hicks. Like when I first met you." He tossed the top at her. "Now get in uniform. Then get off my ship."

Hicks slid her arms into her top and zipped it up. She pressed down the now-bare collar. The other still had the traditional eagle, globe and fouled anchor patch all Marines wore.

"Oh, one more thing," Nick said as he put his knife away.

"What is it, Chief?" Hicks asked as she sighed.

Nick drew back and punched her in the face. She flew back, hitting the storage lockers hard then slid to her butt, unconscious. "Sergeant!" He shouted.

"There isn't one here, Chief," said another Corporal. "Hudson was in charge." He paused. "That's what the fight was about."

"What?"

The Corporal shrugged. "Well Sir... Same date of rank, you know. Sergeant Dietrich in pod seven put Hudson in charge. Hicks didn't like that. So they had a... discussion about it."

Nick looked at Hudson as two Marines pulled her groggily to her feet. "Well, Hudson *is* in charge. You got a problem with that, Corporal?"

The Corporal shook her head. "Not at all, Chief."

"Good. Then until Hudson's back on her own two feet, you're running the show. I want everyone's gear inspected and ready to move. We're on a tight timeline and we need to make a clean exchange from this transport to the ship. The vector to our target is lined up and we're going to make that window." He raised his voice. "Even if I have to leave half of you behind!"

"Roger, Chief." The Corporal gave him a quick salute. "I'm on it."

Nick shook his head as he moved around the milling Marines to his daughter. "Hell, Sam; I think you should have stayed with Nikki." He looked around. "These women are nuts."

"The Lieutenant said I'd be safer here with the females." Samantha smiled. "I don't think he knows women very well."

"Well, if you want to stay here you can, otherwise you can go to Nikki and Pete. They're in Pod three or four." He thought back to the number of pods he had gone to before finding them. "It's four." He pointed up and beyond her shoulder. "Over there."

"I think I'll go find them." She turned and grabbed her purse.

"Well make it fast because the gravity'll be gone here in no time and you'll be bobbing around."

"What about them?" She pointed at the Marines.

"Two weeks of zero-gee training makes sure they'll stay on task." He took his daughter by the arm. "I'll walk you halfway back there, then I need to peel off and get back to the cockpit."

"Thanks, Dad," said Samantha as she took her father's arm. "How's Pete doing?"

"I don't think that kid's been in space before. Seems kind of shook up."

Samantha shook her head. "No, he's been to Mars a bunch of times on trips and even been to his Dad's lab in orbit. Told me so himself."

"Well, something's bugging him." He pulled his arm from his daughter's and put it over her shoulder as he suddenly felt lighter. "Here we go. Make sure you hang on." He pointed at the ceiling with his other hand. "Remember that that way will be up when we dock. We won't lose all gravity until we get close and we decelerate. For now, our acceleration will give you a little downward push."

Samantha grabbed her Father around the waist. "This is why I don't go into space."

"Well at least you're past the throwing up part." He pushed her away slightly. "Right?"

Samantha nodded. "*Yes*, *Dad*. That's not happened since I was nine."

The pair bounced through the passageways, moving to the side as Marines pushed past. Half way there, Nick decided to accompany his daughter all the way to pod four. When they entered, Nikki and Pete were standing by the door, staying out of the way.

"You gents doing alright?" Nick asked.

"Sure, same as always," said Nikki. "As long as no one throws up, I'm fine."

"What?" Pete asked, worried.

"Nikki here is a sympathy puker; as long as no one *else* throws up first, he's fine. But if someone else does..." Nick pretended to vomit.

"Dad!" Nikki turned to look the other way.

Nick laughed. "Sorry Nikki." He patted his son's shoulder. "Stick together you three. As soon as we're docked, you need to shove your way past these troops and get onto the other ship. If you wait your turn, you'll be the last three getting off this tug." He looked at Pete.

"How are you?"

"I'm fine." Pete didn't make eye contact with him. "Just fine."

"Good, because I don't have time to deal with drama." Nick turned and left.

"What's with him anyway?" Pete said.

"What do you mean?"

"Samantha, he just killed a bunch of people back there on the ground and he doesn't even seem to care."

"Uhm, Pete, he killed people who were trying to kill *us*. Fair's fair. You know, if they didn't want to be shot at, maybe they shouldn't be shooting first."

"That's not what I meant." Pete looked at the Marines as they stacked their gear. "I mean that..." His voice trailed off.

"Relax, Pete," said Nikki. "It's not like he killed a bunch of innocent people. Those OneGen crazies kill all the time. They're the ones killing innocent people. People who happen to work on space ships. People just walking to the store or riding the metro. People minding their own business. *They're* the ones with a problem." Nikki shoved him. "Whose side are you on, anyway?"

"I'm on my side," said Pete.

"Good to know where I stand," said Samantha. "Let's get up to the docking tube, Nikki." She pointed out of the pod. "That way when we

hook up, we can be the first across and we won't have to deal with floating around down here."

Nikki nodded. "Good idea, Sis." He shoved Pete again. "You coming or are you going to sit down here looking sad about a bunch of dead terrorists."

Pete shoved Nikki back. "Stop doing that." He balled up his fist.

Sergeant Mellow grabbed Pete's wrist. "There'll be none of that on my watch." He spun Pete around. "Listen up, as far as I'm concerned, you're *their* guest" He nodded towards Nikki and Samantha. "They are *my* guests and I'm not going to have the Chief down on my case because you're going to act the fool." He let go of the young man's wrist. "Now you either behave yourself or I'll beat the hell out of you and shove you in a locker. We'll be long underway before anyone notices you."

Pete squared his shoulders to the young sergeant. They were the same height with Pete's build being slightly less than the Marine's.

Sergeant Mellow pointed Pete. "And if by some *miracle of miracles*, you manage to get the best of me." He gestured at the other Marines. "You'll have to do the same to every single one of *them*." He jabbed Pete in the chest. "Got it?"

Pete put his hands in his pockets. "Yeah, I got it alright." He shook his head as he turned. "Let's go Saman..." The pair was gone.

"Catch up with your friends Petey; you sure don't have any down here." Sergeant Mellow shoved him out of the pod into the passageway. The sergeant was going to leave the young man to find his own way but the thought of Chief Hauser being upset with him for not taking care of a guest got the better of him. "Go up three decks from here, then head to the front of the ship. The numbers on the bulkheads will get bigger from here to let you know you're going the right way."

Pete stared at him. "Where am I going?"

Sergeant Mellow frowned at him. "You're going to the gantry. What you're looking for is the number two, twenty, zero, and the letter x painted on the door. It's one deck below the main deck for the two, twenty forward from the center of the ship, and on the centerline on the ship for the zero. The 'x' stands for gantry."

"How does 'x' stand for gantry? Why isn't it a 'g'?"

"G stands for fuel; 'x' stands for exit. Remember it that way. Two, twenty, zero, 'x'. I've got better things to do that to keep explaining it to you. If you get lost, ask for directions to the main gantry." With a headshake, Sergeant Mellow turned and joined his fellow Marines.

Pete looked out into the passageway. There were Marines moving back and forth. With a frown, he stepped into the flow and went left until he reached a stairway. He climbed up three flights then continued forward, following the numbers. He only had to ask once to find Nikki and Samantha. They were standing with several other Marines in a large round room, in front of a twenty-foot wide yellow hatch.

"Took you long enough," said Samantha testily.

"Samantha, I'm sorry about what I said back there," said Pete.

Nikki rolled his eyes. "I'm going to barf all on my own."

"Nikki!"

"Fine, fine. I'll wander around for a little bit." Nikki obliged his sister by moving off a discrete distance.

"You were saying?" Coaxed Sam.

"I'm sorry about that." Pete took a deep breath. Then another. "It's just that those people believe in what they are doing and they're being killed for it."

"But what they believe is that everyone should die."

"Well, the Earth is sure a mess thanks to humans."

Samantha crossed her arms. "What are you saying? You agree with what they are doing?"

"No," Pete said, quickly realizing that Samantha was not going to be convinced all at once. "Not at all. It's just that we've made a mess of the planet and a bunch of people have suffered because of it. Doing that to another planet just seems... wrong."

"I suppose. But we'll be better this time. We've learned from our mistakes."

Pete nodded at the girl. "I'm sure we will." He smiled and held his arms out wide. "Sorry, babe."

Samantha stepped into his hug. "It's fine." She kissed him.

"Going to barf!" Nikki said loudly from across the room to the laughs of the Marines there as well.

The lights in the ship turned red as the floor dropped from under Samantha as the ship decelerated. The Marines around her quickly grabbed for the walls to keep from floating. With her arms around Pete, she and her boyfriend floated off the ground.

"Grab hold of something," said a Marine. "Or you'll bash your head in. The ship's slowing down around us."

Pete put his hands up and caught himself before he hit the ceiling. "They should have some sort of warning or something," he said as he pushed off.

"That's the red lights. Don't push off," the Marine shook his head. "Just grab hold of something because when we..."

Pete's downward motion turned sideways as the ship pivoted. His direction changed but not his speed- he pinned Samantha between him and the bulkhead as he slammed against it.

"Finding something to hold onto should be moving up on your list of things to do," said another Marine. She shook her head. "Civilians. Haven't you people ever heard of space? It's that stuff around planets."

Samantha let go of Pete and reached backwards and gripped the wall of the spacecraft. Her head throbbed where it had hit. "Pete, seriously?"

Pete reached around her and also grabbed the wall. "We always stayed in our seats for landings and takeoffs," he said.

"Yeah; welcome to the Marines," said the female Marine to the laughs of the others.

"How soon until we're there?" Nikki asked. He was clutching the wall of the ship as it jostled back and forth.

"We're probably close now," said the female Marine. "Pilot's searching for the dot."

"Dot?"

She nodded at Pete. "There's a big red light above the entry port. It comes on when it's the one you're supposed to be linking up to. The pilot just needs to put that in the crosshairs and aim for it. A monkey could do it."

More laughs from the Marines followed.

"Nikki, get back over here so we can get through," Samantha said. As the lights had gone red, signifying that the ship was approaching the dock, more and more Marines began to crowd the foyer. "I don't want us to get separated."

"What about me?" Asked Pete.

"You're like a fungus," said Nikki as he pushed off the wall towards his sister. "That doesn't go away," he finished as he bumped into both him and her.

"Nice. I see the two Nicks are of the same mind." Pete frowned.

"Hey, you're on this ride instead of sitting on Earth. I think that's a pretty good endorsement from the *other* Nick."

"What about this Nick? Don't you like me?"

Nikki grinned. "Nothing personal, pal; I only like girls."

Samantha slapped her brother's shoulder. "Nikki!"

Nikki smiled at her. "What are brothers for, right?"

"Are we almost there?" Pete asked again.

With an exasperated sigh, the female Marine pushed off the wall toward the trio. When she reached them, she deftly stopped her forward motion with a foot rub on the floor then slid beside them. She punched a button and a metal panel slid to the side. "Just watch for yourself." She pointed out the viewport as she pushed off the wall to return to her original spot.

All three youths crowded to look.

The ship had the appearance of an absurdly long barbell. A massive mile-wide, mile thick mushroom shaped piece of asteroid created a safe shadow for the rest of the ship, blocking not only incoming radiation but also micro particles that would hammer against it. A similar asteroid was affixed to the rear of the twenty-five-mile-long ship to provide protection when it turned to decelerate. The front shield would lose almost one half of its mass before the end of their six-month journey, the rear end, used only for the latter part of the journey, would lose roughly a quarter. The ship would make the return journey backwards, arriving with hardly and shielding left. Thanks to a large number of asteroids placed in orbit around the Moon, new shields could be attached in under a week.

As they approached the ship, it filled the small viewport until only the slender part of it was visible.

"We're moving awfully fast," remarked Pete. "Does your dad know what he's doing?"

"I won't tell him you asked that," said Nikki.

Everyone lurched as the ship decelerated sharply.

"Here we go," said the female Marine. "Almost there."

Within moments, the lights on the ship turned white again.

"Stand clear of the door, civvies," said the female Marine. "There'll be some techs coming this way. They go first."

The three moved back as the large door first pushed towards them slightly, then pivoted inward with a whooshing from equalizing air pressure.

True to the Marine's word, four men in jumpsuits were standing ready and as soon as the door locked open, they moved into the area with a purpose. "Welcome to Space Ten. Get aboard and stow your gear," said the lead one. "There's a real short turnaround this time."

"We hear that all the time," said the female Marine. "But it always turns into hurry up and wait."

The tech shook his head. "There's no waiting this time. You'll be underway in thirty." He looked at the three youths. "You the Chief's cargo?"

Nikki nodded. "Yes, sir."

"You three go straight to your berths and stay out of the way until the LINACs are up and running and you're feeling some G's." He handed Nikki a card. "Directions."

Nikki nodded. "Sounds good to me." He grabbed Samantha by the sleeve. "Let's get aboard and out of the way. We'll track down Dad later." He turned to look at the tech. "Uh oh. What about our gear?"

"Where'd you leave it?"

Nikki blinked at the man. "It's back in the pod where we were sitting. Were we supposed to bring it?"

"Counting on the charity of strangers? I hope you like the clothes you got on, kids."

"What?"

He smiled at Samantha. "Relax, young lady. We do a sweep of the pods to make sure these grunts haven't left behind half their gear. I'll make sure to grab yours with everything else."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Said the female Marine.

"You're great at killing things, don't get me wrong," said the technician. "But I could open a surplus store with all the gear troops leave behind." He looked at the three youths. "Get moving you three or these grunts'll trample you." He pushed them towards the airlock. "I've got work to do."

With that, Nikki, Samantha, and Pete floated into the airlock. Under normal circumstances, a linear accelerator facility or any ship in space would spin on a slow rotation creating an artificial gravity by centrifugal force. When a LINAC was configured as a propulsion system, acceleration was used to maintain gravity while underway. As such, the ship was laid out along its long axis like a tall, thin building built out of stacked rings slid over the twin LINAC shafts. However, while loading gear in preparation for a launch, the ship would be brought to a standstill to allow heavy gear to be handled easily and efficiently. Since the Marines were used to zero gravity, they also could move through the long corridors quickly.

Within twenty minutes of bounding over flying crates, equipment and personnel, Nikki, Samantha, and Pete reached the living quarters near the front of Space Ten. "See you in about an hour," said Nikki as he pushed in the hatch to his sleeping quarters, a ten by ten metal box equipped with a bed, table and toilet that flushed directly into space. Even though the box was equipped with a bunk bed, he knew he would not have a bunkmate unless there were serious issues in other compartments as the ship was traveling with a far smaller contingent than it could carry. "See you later,"

he said to Pete, relieved he did not have to share a room with his sister's boyfriend.

Pete nodded at him. "Sure". He looked at Samantha. "I'm going to check out the living area and I'll see you when we're going."

"You sure you don't want to come in?" Samantha eyed him. "While we're zero-G?"

Pete shook his head. "Not while there's all this commotion going on." He looked over his shoulder. There were Marines moving in and out of the living cubicles. He looked back at her. "*And* while we're docked to that transport that can take me back to Earth if I get caught." He kissed her. "See you in a little." He pushed open the hatch to her room and pointed in. "I'll come get you in an hour and then we'll go find your Dad. Promise."

After Samantha entered her cubicle, Pete looked left and right down the corridor. The corridor led off in both directions as far as he could see. Hatches were nestled in the walls alternating so opposing doors were not directly across from each other. Every fifty feet there was an intersection of tubes leading in all four directions connecting to the other sleeping decks stacked tightly against one another forming concentric rings around the central spine of the ship. He knew that the front of the ship and the main bridge was near the mushroom shield about a mile ahead, but was unsure what was behind the quarters.

He went that direction.

Chapter 17

Tolen leaned over his son, smoothing his hair. "Son?"

"He'll be alright, Tolen," said Yesha. "We're rigging up a sled to pull him back to town right away." He looked at the edge of the plateau. "I'll check on the progress. *He'll be fine.* This is the best way."

Tolen nodded. He sighed, exasperated. Even though it had been explained to him that the wagons to gather the Lirpa meat and hides wouldn't arrive for two days, he still didn't like it. "I know, I know." He put his hand on his son's cheek. "I understand."

Paramus patted his friend's shoulder. "Yesha's right, Tolen. It's just his knee and that will heal." He looked at Giles. The arrow was still protruding from his shoulder; the men were afraid to pull it out and have it start bleeding again. "I really want to know how that happened."

Tolen looked at Giles. "There must be a logical explanation, I'm sure."

Paramus smiled. "Oh I'm sure. I just want to hear it before Giles wakes up so I can tease him about it."

"Father?" Argus squinted up at his father. His eyes opened wide as he tried to stand.

"You're safe, Argus," his father assured him as he pushed down on his shoulders. "Just lie still." He smiled. "You're safe."

"There're Clindam in the herd."

Tolen nodded. "Yes, we encountered them." He nodded over his shoulder as a hunter dragged a dead Clindam onto the ground with the other three. "They're dealing with them now."

As if on cue, another hunter rode his animal up the incline onto the plateau. He had a Clindam tied across its rump. "Got the last one," he said

as he dismounted and began to work on the rope holding the carcass in place.

"We'll make you a coat you can wear for when you recount the ordeal," said Paramus as he moved into view. "I'm glad you are alright, son."

Argus nodded slowly, then startled. "And Giles?"

"He'll be fine, I should think." He stifled a smile. "Once we get that arrow out of him. Yours is it?"

Argus closed his eyes.

"Paramus!" Scolded Tolen.

"I am sorry," said Paramus. "I was just trying to bring some levity into the situation, now that everyone is going to be fine."

"I shot him by accident."

"I should hope so."

"Paramus!"

Paramus looked at Giles. "How in the world did it happen?"

"I was ready to shoot when a Clindam surprised the herd. One of them knocked into my knee and I think I lost the arrow as Giles was trying to grab me." He shook his head. "I don't remember anything after that."

Paramus smiled. "Well, that's not the *best* story, but I think we can embellish it enough to give old Giles a hard time about it." He chuckled. "You should notch your bow, Argus."

"I should say not; I'm not dead," offered Giles with a weak smile. "He'll need to finish me off first."

"If you two are quite finished," scolded Tolen. Then he realized Giles was awake. "Giles!"

"Well, as far as first hunts go, that was definitely one of the more interesting ones," said Giles. He touched the arrow gingerly. "Will this not come out?"

Paramus moved to the man. "No, no! Not out here. The bleeding has stopped but we are worried if we remove it..." His voice trailed off.

Giles nodded. "How long have I been unconscious?"

"Just a little while." Paramus kneeled beside his comrade. "Not long at all."

"We've two days before the wagons arrive." Giles let out a sigh. "Two days."

"No; the others are making a sled to get you and Argus back right away."

"That is good. Otherwise this will begin to heal around this shaft." Giles tried to push himself into a sitting position.

Paramus helped him up. "Just remain still until it is lashed together."

"How is your leg?" Giles asked.

Argus craned his neck to try and look down at his leg but couldn't. "It hurts...I... I don't know." He winced as looked at his father. "How is my leg?"

"It is back in position." Tolen rocked back and sat on his butt. "It was your knee that gave."

"That will take a lot longer to heal than just a broken bone."

Argus nodded at Giles. "Will you be alright?"

Paramus shook his head. "It will take him years to get over this."

Argus craned his neck to look at the two. "Years?"

"Well, for the teasing, that is." Paramus patted Giles' uninjured shoulder. "The wound should heal within a month since he's quite young. Me? It would take six."

A hunter rode onto the plateau pulling a broad sled. He dragged it toward where the two injured were. "Is it done. Wheels would be nice but alas, we cannot make those out here." He looked at the slope than at the two injured. "We should get you down then load you onto it."

"You're going to pull us there, Gossel?" Argus eyed the sled, not looking forward to being jostled along the ground for the six-hour ride.

Gossel shook his head. "No. We decided it will rest between two animals and you will ride on it." He looked at the youth. "The jostling along the ground would be uncomfortable to you Argus, but for Giles," he nodded at the seated man. "It could be lethal." He smiled. "I know I speak for the rest of us when I say we want to keep him around for a good time longer."

"And I as well," agreed Giles. "Thank you, Gossel for taking the time to make such a well-woven sled."

Gossel nodded at his friend. "I recall you did the same for me a while ago."

Giles smiled. "What are friends for?"

"Teasing," offered Paramus as he poked Giles.

"Well, that too," agreed Gossel. "Honestly, who gets shot while on a hunt?"

"I am sorry, Giles," said Argus. "Truly I am."

Giles waved off the youth. "It is not unknown to happen. Hunts can be dangerous for all sorts of reasons, Argus. There are many variables and most of them can't be controlled. That is why patience is always paramount on a hunt."

"Sound advice," said Paramus.

Gossel nodded at the High Priest. "You will see on your next hunt that they all present different problems."

"You're allowing me to come back?"

Gossel nodded at the youth. "Hunters are needed, Argus. Good hunters. And, good hunters take time to make. After twenty or thirty hunts, you will begin leading your own youthful hunters out here."

"I hope so." Argus put his head back. "Once this knee gets back in order."

Tolen nodded. "It will. You just need to take it easy on it. Dislocations take much longer to heal than breaks and if you do not treat them right, they will become almost lifelong limps."

"More sound advice," said Paramus. He patted his leg. "It took decades for mine to go away after I refused to give it the proper time to heal."

"An impatient High Priest?" Tolen chuckled. "I would never have imagined."

"Indeed." Gossel pointed down the slope. "We should carry them down. I will tie the sled to their mounts so they can be home before dark. It will be a slow walk to keep the sled steady."

Tolen stood. "Argus?" He extended his hand. "Let's get you home."

Argus took his father's hand and allowed himself to be pulled to his feet. The branch that had been tied to his leg kept it at a slight bend so that it didn't reach the ground. He looked at the slope. "That is pretty steep."

"Then we will take it slow." Tolen ducked down and under his son's arm putting his shoulder into his armpit. "Keep that leg off the ground and we will take it one step at a time."

Giles rolled to his good side and pushed himself onto his knees. As he stood, Paramus took him by the waist. "Let's get you down in one piece, eh?"

Giles nodded at him. "Alright, High Priest. My fate is in your hands." He too looked at the slope. "We should cut steps into this thing."

Paramus looked down as well. "Why hasn't anyone else ever thought of that?" He looked around the plateau. "And a nice sleep shack or two as well."

"Like there are on the trails for hikers," agreed Giles.

"Brilliant." Paramus grinned at the man. "Why didn't someone shoot you sooner?"

"You know..." Began Giles.

"Yes, yes of course I know; because Argus hadn't been invited earlier," Paramus finished triumphantly.

"Paramus!"

Paramus grinned at his old friend. "Just making conversation Tolen, that is all." He moved toward the slope. "Just hold tight Giles," he continued as he became serious. "We do not want you rolling over that arrow on the way down." He tightened his grip on Giles' waist. "Nice and slow."

Giles nodded as he focused on the now impossibly-steep looking decent.

After twenty minutes, the two injured were seated on the sled. "They will take it slow and once the animals get into a rhythm, it will be a smoother ride," said Yesha. He looked at Paramus. "You will also accompany them back?"

"I will." He looked at the sled then at Tolen. "Do we need to send anything back once we get to town? They would arrive late into the night but if you needed these animals back I could have a priest return them."

Yesha shook his head. "We each have our own beast so we will be fine. Plus, we have added four more days' provisions to our own with you four leaving, so we have more than enough food."

Tolen nodded. "That makes sense. Anything else?" He was ready to begin the journey so his son - and Giles - could receive proper medical care.

Yesha thought for a moment. He nodded. "Yes, actually. With fewer hunters, tell the wagons to delay another day and tell them to plan on staying an extra day or so as well."

Tolen nodded. "I will do that." He moved forward and took Yesha's forearm with his hand. "I pray you have a... further uneventful hunt."

Yesha smiled as he grasped the other's forearm. "And a comfortable journey to you." He looked at the sky; it was clear. "At least it shouldn't rain on you."

Tolen patted the hunter on the shoulder. "We will see you back in town."

Chapter 18

Pete bounced down the hallway past rows of sleeping quarters. After a hundred feet or so, he came to a large open area. It seemed to span the entire width of the ship. For a moment, he was disoriented and unable to recognize where he was since he was floating facing sideways, looking at the far wall. As he pivoted around, he realized it was a dining area with rows of tables and benches and what appeared to be a serving window on the far side.

There was a lone woman sitting at one of the tables, sucking a drink from a straw. The sight was surreal so Pete pushed off the wall towards her. "Mind if I join you?" He called, not wanting to startle her.

The woman turned to look.

"I'm just trying to stay out of the way until we're going." He looked around as he floated. "And we get some stupid gravity on this thing."

The woman nodded. "That's what I'm doing as well. Sitting down and looking straight ahead helps keep my stomach in line."

Pete grabbed the top of the bench to stop himself. He pivoted around so he was 'right side up' to the woman. She appeared older than Pete by a few years, but not many. And very attractive. "I'm Pete," he said as he grabbed the bench with both hands. "Mind if I join you?"

"Not at all," the woman said. "If you're wanting a drink, they're over there." She pointed at an automatic dispenser. "The tea is weak but better than nothing."

Pete looked toward the machine. "Need anything while I'm up?"

"Nope."

Pete lined up on the dispensing machine and pushed off gently.

"I'm Violet, by the way," the woman said as Pete reached out and stopped his forward motion on the dispenser.

Pete looked over the choices. There were three: coffee, tea, and water. "This selection is going to get old quick."

"Especially with weak tea," said Violet.

"Well this is just absurd."

"The weak tea giving you troubles, Pete?" Violet laughed.

Pete looked over his shoulder. "No, it's just that I want cream and sugar in my coffee but I can't hold those buttons down and press the coffee button and hold on to the machine all at once. Stupid ship."

"Yeah, well, we all have our problems." Violet went back to staring at the far wall.

Pete frowned at the woman. "You don't know the half of it," he muttered as he turned to assess his predicament. He tucked his feet under the bottom of the machine and pressed the coffee, sugar, and cream buttons gently. As he pushed himself away, they all clicked down. Once the machine clicked to life, he grabbed the handhold again. "Stupid machine."

Once the machine was through dispensing coffee, Pete pulled it from the tray. Several drops of liquid rose from the one-way straw stuck in the top of the covered cup. Thanks to a slight vacuum from a drain at the back of the tray, the drops were pulled back into the drain. "Smartest thing I've seen so far," he remarked as he pushed off toward Violet.

"What's that?" She asked.

"Nothing. Now I just want to sit for a while too." He smiled as he swiveled onto the bench across from her. "Get my bearings."

"Up will be that way," said Violet as she gestured at the ceiling with her cup.

"Thanks." Pete took a sip of his coffee. It had too much sugar in it and tasted weak either from too much cream or not enough coffee. "Perfect."

"That good, huh?" Violet shifted her eyes to the far wall.

Pete put the cup on the table. He gently released it so that it stayed in place. "Oh yeah." He looked at the woman. "So."

She looked at him and raised an eyebrow. "So," she repeated.

"Come here often?"

"First time."

"In space?"

Violet returned to looking at the wall. "No, just here."

Pete took another sip of his coffee. "So who are you here with? You're not a Marine, that's for sure."

Violet put her cup down. "You sure I'm not a Marine?"

Pete shrugged. "You're sitting here drinking tea instead of stowing gear. Odds are you aren't a Marine."

Violet leaned back, pressing her feet against the bench. "Well that's where you're wrong *Pete*. I am a Marine. Once you're a Marine, you're always a Marine. When you start, you're a young Marine or a BOOT because it's the beginning of one's tour. During your career you're just a Marine, then when you retire you're an old Marine."

"I see."

"I am a Marine, just not a Marine on this mission."

"What are you on this mission?"

"Cargo," she said flatly as her face soured.

"That's what I am as well." Pete put his hands on the table. If Samantha wouldn't assist him, he hoped this disgruntled Marine might. "Cargo."

"You someone's kid?"

Pete shook his head. "I'm not *anyone's* kid." He frowned. His artificially-manipulated youthful appearance did help with a lot of the missions he was sent on, but it also made it difficult for him to flirt with women closer to his actual age. "I'm here as a guest of the Chief. He asked me to come along on this trip."

Violet examined him. "The Chief asked you along? What are you; the world's youngest Xenobiologist?"

"I'm not that young," Pete said defensively then he smirked. "It's called clean living." It was a come-on that he used regularly with woman. Often successfully.

"Clean living huh?" Violet took a sip of her tea. "Wonder what that's like." She looked at her cup again with a grimace.

"Whose cargo are you?" Fished Pete.

"I'm *here* with Lieutenant Simpsons." She started to take another sip but stopped herself. "Jeffrey and I are dating."

Pete nodded at Violet. "Well, that's nice." He looked around the room. The girlfriend of the copilot was not the person he wanted to ask to help him sabotage the mission.

"Looking for someone?"

Pete shook his head. "I think I'm going to head back to my bunk." He grasped the table and lifted himself out of the bench. "It was nice talking to you." He picked up his cup. "Stay away from the coffee." He gave a smile he knew looked genuine.

"Avoid the tea," she toasted him with her cup.

Pete's smile dropped from his face as soon as he turned and pushed for the opposite door as the one he had come from. He only had to adjust his course once to make it there. He didn't look back when he did.

Chapter 19

As Pete made his way down the corridor, the amount of Marines he encountered became less and less. The corridor was still connected to at least two others thanks to the still-present albeit more infrequent cross tubes, but the doors leading to sleeping quarters were now gone. The corridor disappeared into darkness ahead of him, ostensibly ending at the other asteroid, miles ahead. Just when he thought he has passed his last Marine, another appeared from an adjoining tunnel ahead of him. Pete put his smile back on. "Excuse me, Sir," he said to the Marine.

"Lance Corporal," corrected the Marine. "I'm a Lance Corporal." He tapped the single chevron on his collar.

Pete nodded. "Sorry about that. I couldn't see that far away." He looked around. "Half these lights aren't working. That's not a good sign at the beginning of a mission, right?"

The Marine shook his head. "There aren't that many lights in the bridge. No need for them."

"The bridge?" Pete grabbed hold of the wall next to the Marine. "That's where they pilot the ship from."

"Yes. But it's also what we call the part of the ship connecting the two asteroid shields." He gestured in both directions. "The bridge between the shields."

"What's at that end?" Pete pointed behind the Marine.

The Marine looked down the dark shaft. "Well, the business end of the linear accelerators for one thing. At least for the trip there; on the way back they run the LINACS the other direction." The Marine looked at Pete. "But you're not allowed down there at any time. Same with the other end."

"Not even if I'm curious?"

"You're curious to see the end of a long tube?"

"That's all that's there?"

"Pretty much it. Just the end of the two accelerators." The Marine paused for a moment. "Well, and a secondary bridge of course."

"Then there's three bridges on this ship?" Pete smiled as friendly as he could.

"Suppose so. It's a trick question on promotion boards. Kind of like the number of trucks on a base."

Pete did not get the reference but before he could ask, he unexpectedly lurched toward the Marine.

The Marine, who had his arms akimbo, reflexively brought his hands up into a boxer's stance.

"Hey!" Exclaimed Pete. He reached out as his hands scraped on the wall. "What the hell?"

The Marine laughed as he opened his fists and grabbed Pete. "Relax. We've started moving so we're getting a feeling of gravity." He pushed Pete to the wall as he gestured over his shoulder with his head. "That is now officially down for most of the voyage there."

"You'd think they would send out a warning or something."

The Marine nodded. "Sure, sure they do. On the main decks, the lights all flashed red twice then back to white. Here on the bridge, there aren't any red lights to flash."

Pete turned and looked the way he had come. The passageway, as the one in the other direction, disappeared in the distance. The ladder built into the side looked as if it had no end "Hell, that's a long way back all of a sudden."

"Take the cable." The Marine said. "I need to get to my station and you need to get back to the forward compartments. Everything from the messhall down is off limits to civilians."

Pete looked back at the young man. "What cable?"

The Marine exhaled loudly. "Go back up to the next junction. When you get there, go to the starboard side of the ship. It has the cable."

"What cable?"

"This your first time in space or what?"

"I've been in space," Pete said defensively. "Lots of times. I've gone on cruisers to Mars, the asteroids and even Titan."

"This ain't no cruise ship." He pointed 'up'. "Go to the next junction and turn *right*. When you get to the bulkhead, there's a thick rope moving along the side of the ship that runs in a loop from one shield to the other. Just grab hold of the one that is heading up and ride it."

"How fast is that thing going?" Pete looked in the direction the Marine was pointing.

"You can make it from stem to stern in about three hours," he answered simply, not wanting to mention the classified methods of moving from one end of the ship to the other practically instantly if the need arose.

"Three hours? What if there's an emergency."

The Marine turned and climbed hand over hand away with a headshake. "Then someone other than a civilian like yourself deals with it. Get on the cable and get back to the authorized parts of the ship before I tell someone important you're down here."

Pete watched as the Marine moved to the next junction then disappeared from sight. With a frown, he climbed the ladder to the next junction as the gravity steadily increased. He was covered in sweat and had to stop twice to rest before he made it the hundred fifty feet to the junction. He looked from the ladder to the decking of the junction. It seemed to be

almost ten feet. He looked back down the passageway. "How the hell do I jump that?" He shouted. When no one answered he decided that even though there was a feeling of gravity, it was not nearly as strong as being on earth. Judging the distance twice, he braced his feet and jumped the gap. As he left the ladder, he realized he had jumped too high and hard, still treating the distance as he would one on earth. Pete put out his hands to keep from crashing into the top lip of the passageway just in time and flipped head over heels as he careened into the junction area.

As he spun, he grabbed onto the wall to stop from sliding completely out and into the tunnel on the other side. "What the hell," he said to no one in particular as he picked himself up. Standing in the junction, he hopped up and down, judging how much effort it took to get off the ground- it took some effort, but definitely not like it would on Earth. Prepared now for the jump, he moved to the edge of the junction area and judged the distance. True to the Marine's word, there were two thick brown ropes along the wall. He crouched slightly then easily hopped the gap towards the ropes on the far wall grabbing a handhold positioned between the two ropes. As he swung to the wall, his feet found a small outcropping- ostensibly to allow someone to easily make the jump to the junction he recently occupied. Pete grabbed the rope that was moving 'up', the other was moving 'down' at an equally brisk pace. There was almost fifteen feet in between the two so that 'travelers' going one direction could easily avoid those going the other. Pete was yanked into motion and began to move back toward the messhall at what seemed to be a very brisk pace. Thanks to the gravity being much less than Earth's, he was able to hold on without any issue. Even so, by the time he returned to his sleeping pod, he had swapped hands a half a dozen times each to rest them. He made the jump to the junction area easily, then peered up at the handholds that led the fifty feet to his sleeping pod. After shaking out his arms for a moment, he leaned

out and began to climb to his sleeping quarters. Half way there, he decided that next time he would ride the cable all the way to his sleeping quarters.

When he finally reached them, he pressed the button to his door. He was immediately yanked in as it slid open.

Chapter 20

Tolen, Paramus, Argus and Giles made their way steadily toward town. By mid-afternoon they stopped to eat and allow the animals to move about on their own so they did not become too antsy from being harnessed together in such an unusual manner.

"We'll be there within two hours," said Tolen as he pulled some dried meat from a pack. "We can rest for a while and still be back in plenty of time before dark." He tossed a slab of meat twice the size of his hand to Paramus. "Can you get the drinks while I help Argus down?"

Paramus nodded- he had put the piece of meat in his mouth to have his hands free so he could not speak.

Argus leaned over on the sled as his father put his arms around his chest. He slid the youth off the sled, making sure that his splinted leg did not hit the ground. Once he was clear of the beasts, his father pivoted and allowed Argus to put his good leg down. "Keep the other up as I lower you down," Tolen said.

Argus grasped his father's hand in his and slowly squatted until he was seated then slowly lowered his injured leg to the ground.

"I'll get you some meat." Tolen looked at the sky as he returned to his pack.

Giles slid off the sled and then carefully moved to a sitting position. "I'm going to need help up," he said as he winced. "Maybe I should have stayed standing."

Tolen handed him a piece of meat. "We will get you up, Giles. Just rest and stretch your legs out and we will get you loaded once we're ready to

go." He looked at the sky again. There were clouds forming along the horizon. "Sooner rather than later, perhaps."

Paramus handed Giles a skin of water. "Just don't fidget too much; that wound has finally stopped seeping."

"Unfortunately, past experience tells me that condition will be temporary," remarked Giles before he took a bite of the meat.

"Why is that?" Argus asked.

"Well, once we get to the physician, he's going to have to pull this thing out."

"It's a good conversation piece though," offered Paramus. "If you decide to keep it."

Argus cringed. "I am so sorry, Giles."

Giles smirked. "Well, to be honest with you, it won't be the first time he has pulled an arrow from me, so we will just let this pass."

"That is a story I'd love to hear later," said Tolen. He looked at the sky. "But with those clouds starting to gather, we should probably eat quickly or eat on the way so that we are not drenched along with everything else."

Argus looked over his shoulder. "Wet is not something else I want to add to my condition." He put his hand out. "High Priest, if you would do the honors?"

Paramus bit down on his thin sheet of dried meat and moved to him. He grasped his hand and gently brought him to his feet. He tugged on the meat, tearing of a piece. "I'll help you up if you hold this," he said as he chewed.

Giles took Paramus' piece of meet with the same hand as his. "I was going to hand mine to you to get on."

Paramus shook his head as he got on his hands and knees. "You should not stretch up at all. Not even with your legs. Step up on me to get aboard."

Tolen moved to steady the man as he stepped onto the small of Paramus' back then swiveled around to sit on the sled. "I am on," he said.

Paramus stood and dusted his hands off. "My lunch, if you please," he said with a smile.

"Absolutely." Giles handed him the piece of meat. "Thank you for that."

Paramus shrugged. "It's all part of the service of being a High Priest." He grinned. "Or at least that's what our town elder tells me."

Tolen raised his hands. "I do not believe I have ever discussed the actual duties of the High Priest." He too grinned. "To be honest, I think they change with the High Priest's many moods." He finished up with a small bow.

"Nicely done, Tolen." Paramus clapped. "Nicely done."

Argus started to hop toward the sled.

Paramus quickly moved to him. "Stop that. The last thing you need to do is fall over and injure yourself further." He looked at Tolen, suddenly serious. "You will need to keep an eye on him or he will limp for a very, very long time." He now looked at the youth. "You will limp for a very, *very* long time if you do not take it easy on that knee."

Argus nodded. "Yes, Sir." He put his arm over the High Priest's shoulder. "I will make sure I keep off it." He exhaled loudly. "But why did this need to happen and why now of all times? It was my first hunt, and we will soon have our brothers come to visit us. And now I am bedridden?"

Paramus led the youth to the sled. "Listen Argus. There is one thing that you need to know now and forever." He stopped talking as he

crouched down and picked up the youth, placing him gently on the sled's edge. "Swing your leg up carefully."

Argus swung gently onto the sled. "What do I need to know?"

"Things happen for a reason. Sometimes we do not know the reason. But that does not mean that our Father is not involved in our daily lives. Even when bad things happen, the Father is ultimately in control of those events."

"By why did I need to be hurt?"

"That reason may become evident later on." Paramus shrugged. "Or the reason may never show itself to you." He smiled. "It is oftentimes like smelting."

"Smelting?"

Paramus nodded at the youth. "Without fire, one cannot remove the impurities from metals for them to be worked properly." The youth frowned and before he could speak, the High Priest continued: "That is not to say you are impure. That is just to say that we must always turn to Him and keep our eyes on Him. Prayer does that. This may be a time that you are to spend in prayer."

"But…" Began Argus.

Tolen mounted his animal. "We can continue this discussion as we go." He pointed at the clouds. "I'd rather not just sit and wait for the rain to catch us if we can do something about it."

Paramus nodded. "I agree completely." He moved to his animal. "If you would be so kind as to get in front of my inept beast so he has something to follow, I'll be right with you."

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The banter between the four helped pass the time as they traveled. By the time they arrived it was late in the afternoon and the clouds were thick and dark. And directly overhead.
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"We shall go to the physician directly," Tolen said to Paramus.

"I will fetch Giles' wife and also let Loren know," Paramus answered.

"Thank you Paramus," said Tolen as he swung the beasts in a gradual arc at an intersection. "I will let you know what he said later."

"I will be back with Giles' wife," said Paramus. "And I'll hear the news for myself." He smiled at the two injured men. "I'll be praying for an encouraging finding by the physician while I retrieve your families."

"Thank you, High Priest," said Argus. He looked at Giles. Still upset he had injured the hunter, he began to pray for him as well.

With a wave, Paramus kicked his animal in the sides coaxing it to go in a different direction. It continued to follow the other three mounts. "You stupid beast!" Paramus slid off the animal's back. "I'd sacrifice you if you weren't so unworthy of such an honor." He slapped the animal's hind. "I shall go on foot and meet back up with you."

"We will see you later, Paramus," said Tolen.

Giles smiled at the High Priest. "Thank you for your company. You made the journey bearable."

Paramus turned and ran off, waving over his shoulder as he departed.

"I am sorry I ruined the hunt for you."

Giles turned to look at the youngster. "Do not say that again, Argus."

"But…"

"It was not your fault. It was an accident. They can happen even in the best circumstances."

Argus nodded. "Alright."

Giles smiled at him. "Remember what the High Priest said; everything happens for a reason, Argus. The reasons for this incident might not show themselves for a long time, or at all even. But you can't let it get you down."

"Very well said, Giles," said Tolen. He smiled. "Maybe it is to give you time to train the poor High Priest's beast that burdens him." He jerked his head backward. "It vexes him so."

The trio looked back- the Weiss was diligently following them.

"It seems kind of drastic for such a simple task," said Argus.

"Well, it really does need some intensive training," offered Giles. "That is one stupid animal."

"Still," said Argus, not wanting to accept the explanation.

"The Father's actions *are* often a mystery." Tolen considered what he understood about the impending visit from the brothers that had traveled from someplace far away. "Even when He explains them," he offered. He pointed. "The physician. We are here." Tolen slipped off his animal's back. "I will only be a moment." He moved into the large building. There were actually two physicians in the town - an elder and an apprentice. Though the townsfolk did not have much use for them. Sickness was something the people of the town - or the planet- had not dealt with. Since the people of Sivulliik also did not have wars or even criminal acts, the physicians assisted with childbirth and the occasional accident.

Chapter 21

"I am doing fine," said Argus "Really I am. The pain has really gone down a lot since I'm not on it."

"Then it shouldn't be difficult for the physician," said Giles. "Do not put weight on your leg," he warned.

Argus nodded. "I won't." He looked down to judge the distance to the ground.

Giles slid off the sled, careful not to bump the nub of the arrow sticking out of his back. "Stubbornness will just have you take longer to get well," he warned. "Stay put until the physician gets here."

The grizzled old physician stepped through the doorway with Tolen close behind. "The physician is here." He looked at the young man. "But you are still not to jump down, young man."

"Yes, sir." Argus scooted back to sit fully on the sled.

The physician eyed Giles. "And why is it that you have gotten down?"

Giles smirked. "Because my legs are fine?" He held up his hands. "Honestly Vinglan, it isn't that bad."

Vinglan moved around Giles. "How many times have I pulled arrows or other objects out of you?"

"Do you mean lately?"

Vinglan eyed the man again. "There are better hobbies to have, I should say."

Tolen laughed. "I must agree with our esteemed physician." He moved to his son. "Let me help you down." He reached up and took his son by the arm. "Gently now."

Argus slid to the ground, keeping his injured leg up. He winced as his good foot landed.

"Get your son inside, Tolen, while I help this pincushion." He reached out and took Giles by his good shoulder. "Honestly, how did this happen?"

Argus bowed his head. "I did it, Vinglan. It was on the hunt."

"We are hunting Giles now?" Vinglan shook his head. "That is not the best idea. I imagine they are a gamey beast and full of gristle."

Giles shook his head. "As always, your bedside manner gives comfort to your patients."

"I think you are mistaken, Giles; I have no patience."

"Patients," corrected Giles. "You know; those poor people you assist."

"I think it's mainly you and women giving birth." Vinglan reached out and put his hand on the man's shoulder. "Now walk gently so that it doesn't start bleeding."

Giles nodded. "I'll be careful." He gestured at the young man. "Help Argus in and I'll follow behind."

Tolen ducked down and under Argus' arm, putting his shoulder in his son's armpit. "Ready when you are, Vinglan."

Vinglan moved to the youth's other side and after getting under his arm, picked him up. "Don't let either foot hit the ground Tolen, until I know what is going on."

Tolen and Vinglan carried Argus in, turning sideways so they would not have to put him down. Diligently, Giles followed behind them, careful not to hit the arrow against the door frame.

When they were inside, they moved Argus past the dozen beds that filled the open area of the room to the first of three archways on one side that led to separate rooms typically used for birthing. Giles moved to a stool at the archway and sat slowly on it. "I think I'm going to wait here," he said.

"We will be with you shortly," said Vinglan. "Just sit still and try not to bleed on my floor." He looked at Tolen. "Let us get him onto the examination table." The pair shuffled over and when they got to the table they pivoted around so that Argus' back was to the table. "Up," he said simply as he and the other man picked up the youth. Argus winced as he sat and they turned him so he could lie down. Vinglan looked at the youth. "What happened?"

Argus shrugged. "I shot him by accident."

Vinglan shook his head. "No, not Giles. I know what happened there; it is pretty obvious. What happened to you?"

"I was on the hunt when a Lirpa knocked into me. It caught my leg between it and my Odiver."

"Clindam were in the herd," explained Giles, "and it spooked the Lirpas".

Vinglan nodded "A hunt can be dangerous." He motioned to Tolen. "Get on the other side of him."

Argus looked from his father to the physician and back. "What is wrong?"

Vinglan lifted the youth's loose-fitting trouser leg up to his thigh carefully. "That's what we're going to find out. Tolen, if you would hold his shoulders, I am going to see what is happening with his knee."

"Why does he have to hold my shoulders?" Argus asked nervously.

"Because when I touch your knee, it is going to hurt and if you flinch, it will hurt even worse, and you might even injure yourself even more."

"But I am feeling a lot better," said Argus.

"That's what I think until Vinglan pulls something out of me."

"Well, if you'd stop getting shot, or jabbed, or stuck, or perhaps learn to duck quicker, you wouldn't have to come see me so often," countered

Vinglan. "Now if you will let me attend to this young man…" His voice trailed off

"I think I'll just wait my turn quietly," said Giles. "Be strong Argus. Vinglan is an excellent physician who has helped me on many…"

"*Now if you will let me attend to this young man*." Vinglan said again. His sharp tone to the hunter softened: "If you please."

Giles nodded at him. "Sorry."

Vinglan exhaled loudly. "Alright, Argus. I'm going to make sure that your knee is back in place where it is supposed to be." He rested his hands on the table. "I am sorry but I must feel your knee and if necessary, move it."

Argus picked up his head and looked down at his knee. "But it feels better now. Are you sure it won't be fine the way it is?"

"It may very well be. But if it feels like some sinew has been pinched by your knee, or some is torn, then there will be issues."

Argus let his head fall back and hit the table.

"But, you are young and young men are very flexible so the possibility that there was just stretching going on is likely." He leaned over and pulled up the young man's other trouser leg.

"Nothing is wrong with that knee, Sir," Argus said. He picked his head up again.

"Which is why I need it to make sure they both look and feel the same." He smiled at the youth. "Put your head back and just breathe deeply." He looked at Tolen. "Hold his shoulders, please."

Tolen obliged the physician.

Vinglan bent over and peered at the injured knee closely. "All appears in order," he said to himself. "Hold very still," he said a little bit louder as his fingers gently prodded the youth's knee.

Argus breathed in deeply as the doctor's fingers touched his knee and lightning bolts of pain ran up his leg. When he flinched, his father leaned forward putting his weight on his shoulders.

"Gently as possible," said Vinglan as he moved his hands to the sides of the knee. He reached behind the knee with his fingers then ran them along the sides, feeling for any distention or irregularity. When he was done, he did the same to the good knee. He repeated the process twice.

"Vinglan?" Tolen asked. "What is the prognosis?" He said when the physician straightened.

Vinglan crossed his arms. "Well, it is what I hoped; the joint has returned to its normal position and none of the tendons have been pinched or torn."

"That is a relief," said Tolen.

"But," continued Vinglan, "they have been stretched so they will need to be wrapped to ensure that the knee does not come out of its joint again. The more it happens, the easier it will be for it to happen." He put his hands on the table. "You will need to bind your knee to keep it in place especially when you are sleeping. During the day, you will need to remove the binds and exercise it to strengthen it and to help the ligaments to shrink back down."

Argus pushed himself onto his elbows. "For how long?"

Vinglan leaned in and looked at the knee again. "I would say for three or four months to be sure. And there is to be no running, no riding, and no climbing. Ligaments take longer to heal than bones, you know." He looked at Tolen. "Is there a way to have him sleep on the ground floor so he does not have to climb stairs?"

Tolen nodded. "Yes. We have a larder we are not using that we can move his bed into."

"I cannot hunt or ride *and* I sleep in the larder?" His eyes got wide. "And that means I cannot go to meet our brothers at the festival?"

"The festival? Not at all; I am sure you can leave early and ride in the back of a wagon and find your place before the festivities begin."

"No, not…" Began Argus.

"You will need to do what it takes to heal properly," Tolen interrupted his son. "We can leave early to make sure you are there at the festival. The plan is to invite our brothers there anyway, so you will see them when they arrive."

"When they arrive at the festival," said Argus with a frown. "Not when they arrive."

Vinglan looked back and forth as they spoke, not understanding. "Sleep and see your brothers as you will. Just understand that without the proper time to heal, that knee could bother you for the rest of your days or at the least for a very long time."

"I am sure the larder can be made as comfortable as you need, Argus," his father assured him. He hoped that his son would understand the omission of the news about the strange visitors as a signal to not discuss it further.

Argus lay back down. "I will follow your instructions, Sir."

"Now that the young Argus is taken care of, can attention turn to me?" Giles stood slowly using the wall to steady himself. "While I was sitting here minding my own business, I seem to have started to bleed again." He put his other hand on the small of his back where it was wet. "I am trying to not be alarmed but it seems to be a great deal of blood." He teetered. "And now that I have stood, I am feeling light headed which is probably…" Giles fell forward.

With speed belying his age, Vinglan lurched forward and broke Giles' fall. "Help me get him to the table," he said. "Argus, move to the head of the table but do not get down on your own."

Tolen moved quickly to the crumpled hunter. "I will get his legs," he said as he grabbed the man at the knees. "On his belly then?"

Vinglan shook his head. "On his side with the injury down so that he may breathe easier."

The two shuffled to the table and hefted the hunter onto it.

"Hold him steady while I help Argus down," the physician said.

Tolen obliged him as Vinglan helped Argus down and to the stool. "Sit." He said simply. The physician then returned to the table and took one of the leather straps hanging down from under it and pulled it up and over Giles. "Secure it on the buckle."

Tolen moved down the table as Vinglan handed straps over. After all four were secured, Vinglan took a long knife from a peg on the wall. He held it up as Loren, another female and Paramus burst in.

"What is going on?" asked Giles' wife. She looked from Argus to her strapped-down husband. "What happened?"

Loren moved to Argus and put her arm on his shoulder, giving him a gentle hug.

Vinglan looked directly at her, avoiding eye contact with Argus. "An accident, Kess, nothing to be concerned about."

Kess looked past the physician. "Is that blood his? And an arrow?"

Vinglan turned back around. Gile's back was soaked with blood. "I would have to say that it is. If you would let me work, I will take care of his injury."

"Will he be alright?"

Paramus put his arm around her. "He will be fine, Kess. Let us wait outside while he works." He started to turn her around but she resisted. "I

have also sent for his assistant. He should be here any moment, Kess; there's nothing to worry about."

Vinglan nodded at the High Priest. "Thank you for that."

"Let us go to the other room and pray while he…"

Vinglan's assistant burst into the room. "I heard that someone had been shot!" Exclaimed the young man.

Kess, Loren, and Argus began to explain at once what had happened.

"Calm down, it is not life threatening." Vinglan let the knife clatter noisily to the table. "Everyone that is not my assistant or does not presently have an arrow in them needs to leave." He pointed at the archway. "Be gone, all."

"Well then," said Paramus, taken aback. "I suppose we shall go." He nodded at Tolen. "Can you and Loren get him home? I shall stay with Kess."

"I brought the wagon," offered Loren.

"Get him home and bind that knee so that it cannot straighten. Tomorrow in the early afternoon I will come by to check on it and to discuss the exercises and wrapping techniques."

Tolen nodded at the physician. "Thank you, Vinglan." He looked at his wife. "Good thinking on the wagon. That will make easy work of it." He looked back at the physician. "Thank you for your help." He moved quickly to his son. "We will leave you to your work." He put his son's arm over his shoulder and helped him stand. "Let's go home."

The trio left with Paramus and Kess close behind.

"He will be fine, Kess. You will see." Paramus smiled at the young woman as he moved to some chairs. "We shall sit and pray until he is done." He looked at Tolen. "I will stop by later this evening with news."

Tolen nodded at his friend. "Thank you."

Argus gave a wave from his father's shoulder as the trio left.

Paramus cleared his throat then began to sing

Oh Father, our great physician
We lift up Giles and his injuries to you...

Chapter 22

Argus hobbled to the table using the crutch the physician had sent over. "How much longer do I need to sleep in the larder?"

Creta laughed. "It's been all of four days so you have… let's see…" She stifled a giggle. "Still almost four months to go."

Tolen entered the kitchen. "At least it is now almost four months instead of four months." He patted his son on the shoulder. "Soon it will be 'almost three months' before you even know it, right Parton?"

Argus eased into the chair keeping his leg straight- not that he had any choice as the wrappings kept from moving it. "It's almost forever." He picked up a glass. "Parton, can you pass the milk?"

Parton nodded at his older brother as he slid the clay pitcher across the table. "In almost four months, it will be my birthday." He returned to peeling an egg. "That is soon, you know!"

Argus nodded. "I suppose it is. And the best present will be getting these wrappings off."

"I do not see how you getting your wrappings off is a good present for me."

"Do you want to go riding, or chasing Trills?"

Parton nodded. "Yes!"

"Well, we will do that when the wrappings come off."

Parton thrust his hands in the air. "That *is* a great present!"

"Told you so," said Argus as he poured milk into his glass. "How go the plans for the festival, Father?"

"They go well. We will have representatives from the other eleven cities here so when our brothers arrive, we will all be here to greet them."

"And do they know they need to come here?"

"How could they not know where to come?" Asked Parton as he rolled his eyes. "The festival is here every year. Do you think they forgot where Rudens is?"

Argus shook his head. "No, not the brothers from the other cities, the *other* brothers."

"Other brothers?" Parton asked.

"You will see," said Argus. "Father?" He coaxed him.

Tolen sat back. "That is a good question. I assumed they would come here on their own." He picked up his glass. "But we may need to go fetch them." He thought about the issue as he drank.

"I would love to be one of the ones to greet them," said Argus in what he hoped wasn't too excited a voice.

"You are in no condition to be traipsing around the countryside looking for wayward brothers."

"Wayward brothers?"

Both Tolen and Argus glanced at the youth. Parton grinned wide at them then took a bite of his egg.

"Well, I think today I will see about putting together a welcoming committee as well as everything else. I would not like for them to wander around and not find their way here."

Argus nodded. He had a strange feeling in the pit of his stomach that the initial meeting would not go as planned. "I suppose not. Are you sure I cannot be part of those that welcome them?"

Tolen shook his head. "They arrive in four days' time. You will not be up to riding any sort of beast by then." He chuckled. "Why, even then then you will *still* have almost four months before the wrappings come off, right Parton?"

Parton laughed at his father.

Argus shook his head as he stifled a smile. "I am glad I can serve as entertainment."

"Ohhh! You could even play a tambourine at the festival with me, if you want!" Parton started to bolt from his chair, then remembering his brother's injuries, sat back down and stuck his tongue out at him instead.

Argus squinted his eyes at his younger brother. "Just wait until these wrappings are off Parton the tambourine player. There will be bites and tickles saved up for four months."

"Almost four months," reminded Parton.

"Oh, I started before today," warned Argus. "Didn't I tell you?"

"What did you start before today?" Asked Loren as she entered the room.

"Saving up bites and tickles," said Creta.

Parton gaped. "For me!"

"Well, that will be quite a lot of them, I would think." She removed a pan of bread from the oven and slid it onto the table.

The children gingerly took pieces of the hot bread and put them on their plates.

Tolen picked up a piece of bread and juggled it from hand to hand as it cooled. "I need to get into town to make sure things are progressing well." He picked up an egg as he held the bread above his palm on his fingertips. "I will be home in time for dinner though."

"With only an egg and some bread, I should think not," said Loren as she began to peel an egg. "Take two eggs with you now and I'll bring lunch by later today."

Tolen peeled his egg and put it in a bowl. He looked down at his meager breakfast. "I think I may like that." He looked around the table. "And perhaps for right now some butter and jam for my bread."

"Why don't you just sit and eat?"

Tolen shook his head at his wife. “The other elders are arriving this afternoon and I need to make sure they all have a place to stay.”

“It should be the same as every year.”

Tolen shook his head at his wife. “There are far more coming this year. Now that the leaders know we have other guests coming from far away, that is.”

She nodded. “Well, we have a room upstairs that is open if it is needed.”

“You can tell them it is much more comfortable than a larder,” said Argus. “If they ask.”

“I will let them know.” He smiled at his son. “If they ask.” Tolen picked up the bowl with the two eggs in it and put his bread on top of it. Using the copper knife, he scooped a large dollop on butter onto it. “Perfect!”

“Just do not tell anyone your wife sent you out with such a breakfast.”

Tolen moved to his wife and kissed her forehead. “Your secret is safe with me.” He moved around the table, kissing the tops of his kid’s heads as he went. “See you all this evening,” he said as he left.

“I am worried about these new brothers,” said Argus.

“You always worry,” said Creta.

“Well, worrying about others is a good thing,” said Loren as she buttered her bread. “But praying for them might be a better thing to do.”

Argus sighed deeply. “I feel that I should be there when these visitors arrive.” He peeled an egg. “And I’m worried I won’t be there.”

“It’s all up to the Father when all is said and done so...”

“Yes, Mother,” said Argus. Even though he felt it was the Father telling him to be there when they arrived.

“I want to go too!” Chimed in Parton. “Promise when you sneak out, you take me too!”

"No one is sneaking anywhere," warned Loren. "These are important dealings and they will be left to the Elders and the High Priest to decide."

"Yes, Mother," said Argus. He shot his little brother a look. "That's another bite, in case you're keeping count."

Parton stuck his tongue out at his brother. "I can't really count yet!" He declared.

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Tolen walked down the street eating the eggs- he had eaten the bread first.

"Ahh, there you are!" Said Vinglan as he jogged to catch up with him. "Good morning to you, Tolen"

"Good morning," Tolen said around a half-chewed egg. He looked at the physician. "How are you?"

"I am alright, I suppose."

"You suppose?"

Vinglan shrugged. "God has been speaking to me about these new brothers that are to visit."

"I see."

"And I am wondering how that will go. I really do not understand a lot of what He has said."

"How what will go?"

Vinglan stopped walking.

Tolen coasted two steps farther before stopping. He turned to face Vinglan. "What is wrong?"

"It is silly, I think, but I was wondering how we are to meet these brothers of ours and speak with them when we might not be able to speak with them."

"What?"
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"Well, even here, the people who live in Rudens speak a little differently than our brothers that live in Iktob or even Simāk. They have words that we do not have and their accents are also different." He put his hand on Tolen's shoulder. "You know as soon as someone you do not know speaks to you, that they are not from the same town as you, and if you have traveled, you can make a good guess as to where they are from."

"That is true," admitted Tolen.

"And these brothers. They do not come from the coast or from the far lands. They come from a different planet all together, correct?"

"That is what I understand." Tolen pointed at the sky. "It is another world much like ours that also has children of the Father on it."

"Exactly. That is my point, Tolen,"

"But we all still meet and talk to one another. I do not understand." Tolen stepped closer to the physician. "I do not understand what you are saying."

Vinglan put his hands on his hips. He tried to think of another way to explain what was to him, still a very foreign idea. "Well, we live on Sivulliik, yes?"

"Yes. That is true." Tolen smiled. "Have you been speaking with the astronomers?"

"I have, actually. And this place these brothers come from is farther than our own great moon, or the sun above us. And it just stands to reason that the people who live on such a faraway place would have a language that is not like what we on Sivulliik speak." He paused for emphasis. "We will not understand what the words are that they use because we will have never heard them before."

Tolen opened his mouth then closed it as the concept sank in. He thought for a long moment. "That is indeed a problem." He looked up at

the sky. "How do we speak to people if we do not even know what they are saying?"

Vinglan beamed. "I have worked it out, Tolen."

"Oh?"

Vinglan nodded. "We shall make drawings on large parchments. One of the town."

"We are to draw the entire town?"

Vinglan shook his head. "No, just a depiction of the town so that when we show it to our brothers, they will know that it is a town."

Tolen nodded. "That is brilliant, Vinglan. And," he continued, picking up the idea. "We can also have drawings of the people at the festival and of the food so they know it is a festival."

"Even if their ways are strange to us, they will still have festivals and eat in groups. We can show them the drawings then beckon them toward town."

"I think I may need to speak with some artists to see if they can draw some sketches before two days' time."

"I... I am also good at drawing," said Vinglan anxiously.

"Oh?"

Vinglan nodded. "And I draw occasionally with the artists during their classes. I could go there for you and explain it to them. You probably have enough to deal with already."

Tolen smiled. "I do. It would be wonderful if you could take care of this unexpected problem."

Vinglan extended his hand and grasped Tolen's forearm. "We should have them done by tomorrow so if you would like, we can bring them by in the late afternoon to your office for you to see."

Tolen grasped the other's forearm as well. "Thank you for taking care of that for me." He looked toward his office. "That will let me deal with finding places for the extra people to come stay."

"All my beds are empty at the moment," said Vinglan. "I have two births I expect this week but those are in homes, and unless something unusual happens and Giles manages to get himself shot again, they will all be all free for use."

"How is Giles?"

"He is doing well as usual."

Tolen shook his head. "How does he manage to get hurt so often?"

Vinglan shrugged. "He's a passionate youth. You have one of those in your home as well, so you should prepare yourself. Racing their mounts. Cliff diving into small pools. Flying gliders. You will see."

Tolen laughed. "I will mention it to Loren."

The two parted ways- Vinglan excitedly toward the artisans' commune and Tolen to his office.

Chapter 23

Peter lurched into his quarters, unable to hold himself in place in the light gravity, he tumbled in. He hit the bed upside down.

"So *Peter*, what mischief have *you* been up to?"

Pete startled at the unexpected, yet familiar voice. "Scribbs?" He smiled. "What are you doing here?" He pushed himself upright in his bed as he looked at the lithe, olive-skinned woman in front of him. Her dark hair was trimmed short. Much shorter than the last time he had seen her. Even so, it flattered her athletic features, giving her twenty-seven years a more youthful look.

She crossed her arms and cocked her head to one side. "I've told you to not call me that."

Pete stood, careful of the gravity, "Well I never know what name you're using so what's a guy to do?"

"Not call me Scribbs." She moved her hands to her hips.

Pete closed the distance between them and took her in his arms. "Well, I'll be sure to ask you your name sometime real soon." He kissed her.

Scribbs kissed Pete back then pulled her head away from his. "I've been waiting for a while here." She narrowed her eyes. "I was worried what's-her-face would come looking for her darling Pete."

Pete smirked. "Well, I'm hard to resis..." He stopped when he saw her eye. "What happened? Who hit you?" He asked furious.

"It's worse that it looks, really."

Pete pushed her away and held her at arm's length. "Well that *looks* really bad. Have you had it looked at?" He guided her to the bed and sat

her on it. He moved to her injured side and looked closely at her eye. "That's going to swell shut. You need to see the medic"

Scribbs shrugged. "It's not my first black eye." She took his hands in hers and brought them down to her lap. "It's fine, Peter." A forced smile came to her face. "Of course, I've heard you're involved in some full-contact work as well." The smile faltered for a moment. "Who... is she?"

Pete looked down at their hands, suddenly embarrassed in front of his lover. "Some stupid kid that I used to get on this flight. That's it."

"Her parents are scientists?" Scribbs said, trying to coax the subject along, even though it was painful to her.

Pete shook his head. "She's the daughter of a Warrant Officer. The guy's the pilot on this mission."

"Chief Hauser?"

Pete nodded. "That's him. He's a real piece of work."

Scribbs nodded. "This is his work too."

"What?" Pete balled up his fists. "He did this?"

Scribbs shrugged. "It was kind of my fault."

"I don't see how..." Began Pete.

"I was in this fight," interrupted Scribbs, "and he tried to break it up."

"Who were you fighting?" Pete smirked. "This time?"

"Some stinking Marine. You know the word is that they're going to wipe out an entire *civilization* on this planet we're supposed to be going to?"

"What?"

Scribbs nodded. "Yeah. There's an indigenous population there. They look a whole lot like us too. And they're some peaceful Iron-Age type culture." She leaned forward. "And they're just going to wipe them out, Peter!" Tears welled up in her eyes. "They're just going to kill them all."

Pete un-balled and balled his fists. "Some people."

Scribbs nodded. "And when she said it was going to be a bug hunt and they were all going to see who could get rid of the most of them, I lost it and I hit her."

Pete moved close and hugged her. "I understand."

Scribbs smiled. "I had her beat when Hauser showed up. When I didn't show him the respect he thinks he should have, he hit me." She shook her head. "He's going to murder an entire race and he thinks we should respect him."

"He and his whole family are pigs," said Pete. "He didn't even bring his wife along because she's running around with some other man."

A pang of regret ran through Scribbs. And jealousy. "So… this girl?"

"His daughter." Pete inhaled and exhaled loudly. "She's this sixteen year-old who has had everything..."

"She's *sixteen*?" The pang turned into a lightning bolt.

"It was the only way to get on this ship," Pete said defensively. "The other pilot's single, and the scientists all had boys. Straight boys... or little kids."

"Sixteen *is* a kid."

"That's what you think." Pete regretted his comment as soon as he made it. Pete took Scribbs' hands again, "I'm doing what I need to do to keep this plague called humanity from spreading to the galaxy. I thought you'd understand."

Scribbs nodded at him. "I do, I'm sorry." She leaned in and kissed him. "It will be nice when this is all over and we can just die in peace in some quiet part of the world."

Pete pulled away from her. "You know that's not going to happen, right?" He gestured around. "We're going to die out here. On this ship when I... when we destroy it."

Scribbs put her head on Pete's shoulder. "I know. That's why I had to sneak back to get to you. Hauser had tossed me off the mission for the fight but I knew you were supposed to be on it and I wanted to be here with you."

Pete hugged his lover of eight years. "I'm glad you did. There's no one else I'd rather be with." He looked her in the eyes, "You know that, right?"

Scribbs nodded. "I know. It's just sometimes..."

Pete kissed her again. "It is you and only you that I love."

Scribbs giggled. "It's so weird now; you look like a kid, you know. I get older and you get younger."

Pete waggled his eyebrows at her. "Young and virile. That's what I am now."

Scribbs pushed him back on the bed. "Oh really?"

"Really," said Pete. He reached up and pulled her down beside him. "What you need is a little convincing..." A rap on the door made them both look over. "Get in the closet," Pete hissed.

Scribbs rolled to the floor and quickly moved to the floor-to-ceiling closet on one wall. Just as the she pulled the door almost shut, Samantha slipped in.

"Who you talking to?" Samantha asked. She looked around the room. The closet door was slightly ajar, but besides that, nothing else was amiss.

Pete was lying on the bed with his feet on the floor. He picked up his head to look at her. "I'm just going over a speech I want to give your dad." He said testily.

"What'd my Dad do to you, Pete?" Samantha moved to the bed and sat on it. "I mean, he even brought you along so you wouldn't have to be all cramped up in one of the other ships." She smiled at him. "We're getting more and more gravity as we get going."

Pete let his head drop back and he stared at the ceiling. "Yeah, I felt it."

"Hey, before we get a lot of gravity going on, you want to..."

"I just want to rest, Samantha," Pete said, cutting her off before she said something too graphic about their history in front of Scribbs. He had had to remain close to the girl to ensure he would be invited along on the mission. Now that he was safely aboard, he didn't need to keep their fake relationship going as intensely. He lifted his head to look at her. He had to admit that she was attractive, and fun to be with, but even so, the chattering of a sixteen-year-old did get tiresome. "Maybe I'll find you later?"

Samantha leaned forward, putting her hands on his thighs. "Come on Pete. There's no telling when we're going to get some alone-time once we're moving along and Dad doesn't need to stay up front." She stuck out her lower lip. "It's been a while, Pete. Let's just get those pants..." She started to work on his belt buckle.

Pete noticed the closet door behind Samantha open slightly. He was sure that Scribbs was fully prepared to knock out the young girl and stuff her in the closet. She was the love of Pete's life- they held the same values and passion for ending the rein of the Humans since they met when they were nineteen. But she did act impulsively at times- like now when she was going to stuff the pilot's daughter into a closet on the first day of a six-month voyage. He sat up and pushed Samantha's hands off him. "I just want to be alone, alright? That can't be too hard to understand." He looked her in the eyes. "I'm sure there's plenty of Marines that would give you a zero-gee ride if you asked them. Go knocking on doors, why don't you."

Samantha recoiled from Pete, staggering to her feet. "What a horrible thing to say!" She screamed at him. "You're disgusting!" She turned and stormed out of the room, slamming the door shut behind her.

Scribbs let the closet door open. She was back to standing with her arms crossed and her head cocked to one side. "Peter the heart breaker."

"Well, I can't have her poking around my cabin now that you're a stowaway, now can I?"

Scribbs moved to the door and locked it. She turned to look at Pete with smoky eyes. "What's this zero-gee thing the kids are all talking about?"

Pete leered at her. "Well, come over here and I'll show you."

Chapter 24

Samantha crawled up the ladder towards her own quarters, tears running down her face as she went. Just as she got to her door, Nikki opened his. "What's the racket about?" Nikki noticed his sister's tears. "What's wrong Samantha?"

Samantha shook her head. "Nothing, Nikki. It's nothing."

"Is it Pete?" Nikki frowned. "Did he try something with you?" He moved down the ladder toward her. "I'm going to..."

Samantha reached out and stopped him. "No, nothing like that." She looked back at Pete's cabin door. "I'm through with him, is all."

"We brought the little whiner along for nothing?" Nikki put his hand on his sister's shoulder. "You sure you don't want me to rough him up for you? Dad would approve, I'm sure."

This brought a laugh to Samantha. "Thanks, Nikki. But let's just keep this between us." She looked toward the front of the ship. "Dad's got enough on his plate as it is, you know?"

Nikki nodded. "Fine." He looked toward the front of the ship as well. "But if you change your mind, let me know."

Samantha hugged her brother. "I will." She looked at the door of her sleeping quarters. "I'm going to take a nap and I'll see you at lunch." She startled. "Wait, what's ship's time?"

"Apparently Dad decided that it's morning all of a sudden so it's oh-nine-hundred hours."

"What? That's going to make for a long day." She smiled. "I think he does that just to keep the Marines on their toes."

Nikki nodded. "I was going to rope up to see how things are going and if there's anything weird going on, I'll call your room directly to let you know." He shrugged. "Should be fine with us just starting out. The troops'll probably not start any training for a couple of weeks just to give them some time off. I'll let you know."

"Thanks Nikki." Samantha wiped her eyes. "And please don't tell; it's... it's embarrassing."

Nikki smirked at his sister. "Gross is what it is." With that he bounded past her to get to the connection way that led to the moving ropes.

Nikki went to her room and as she was getting ready to take a sedative, a thought came to her. She looked toward Pete's sleeping quarters, trying to will herself to see through the interposing bulkheads. When that did not work, she moved to the room's communication panel. She tapped two buttons. "Comms room?"

Within a moment, a bored voice answered: "Comms. What's not working?"

"Nothing," said Samantha.

"Nothing's working?" replied the technician, still not sounding interested. "Well, *that's* going to be a real issue."

"No, nothing is wrong," replied Samantha. "I need a... a little favor." She grimaced. What she was going to ask for was not only more than just a simple favor; it was illegal.

"Chief's daughter?"

"Yes, that's me," said Samantha. "Samantha Hauser."

"What's the issue Miss Hauser," said the technician. Although he didn't sound any more interested, he at least still seemed willing to help. "Need a T1 line to Earth? Bootleg shows? First crack at the language modules that have been genned up?"

"The what modules?"

"Language modules. We've been monitoring the population on Arcturus and we've got a good bit of the language figured out. Thought you might be trying to get an early crack at those."

Samantha was taken aback. "Well, that's not why I was calling but... There's a language they use? I thought there wasn't anyone living on the planet above lower lifeforms."

The technician hesitated, realizing that the Chief's daughter had apparently not been given access to all the information on the planet yet. "Well, maybe you should ask your father for those." Wanting to end the conversation before it got him relegated to patrolling the dark, lonely bridge for anything out of the ordinary, he pressed on: "What do you need, Miss? I'll see what I can do."

"Well, I was hoping if you could connect me to the sleeping quarters two down from me." She looked at the number stenciled above her door. "That would be delta twenty-eight if the numbers run smaller as they go aft."

The technician smiled at the speaker; the young girl seemed to have picked up some military lingo from her father "Roger that, smaller numbers toward the back. So, you want me to connect you with delta twenty-eight. Hold on..."

"No!" Samantha said, panicked. "I don't want to connect to that room."

"But you said..." Began the technician as his voice picked up a bored timber again.

"I want to hear what's happening in that room but I don't want them to know."

"Hot mike delta twenty-eight?"

"Peter. His name is Peter," corrected Samantha.

The technician laughed. "No, no. Hot mike'ing is when you have your microphone on and you don't know it. You listening in on your brother?"

Samantha blushed. "No, Nick junior is in delta twenty-seven. Twenty-eight is..." She summoned up the courage. "Is my soon to be former boyfriend."

Again the technician laughed. "If he finds out, I'm going to wander the long bridge for six months. No way I will do that. Sorry, kid."

"But he's not a Marine. He's a civilian and if he complains, I'll make sure my Dad knows it was my idea." Samantha heard some talking in the background. Another voice. She knew that the communications station was, like her father, on the bridge. She closed her eyes in anticipation and dread.

"Hold one."

Samantha stepped back from the communication panel worried that the technician was now contacting her father. The seconds dragged by as she waited.

When the speaker came to life, it was a different voice. "Miss Hauser. You're talking about Pete?"

"Yes… Pete." She cringed, expecting her father to be the next voice she heard. "How'd you know?"

"This is Sergeant Mellow. We met earlier. This Pete's causing you trouble?"

"I'm... I'm not sure, Sergeant," said Samantha. "I just have a bad feeling."

"I'll patch you through." He said flatly. "It's on until you receive an incoming message or you turn it off. Just make sure you hit the red disconnect button and not the green, or he'll hear *your* room." There was a slight pause. "Of course if he knows what he's looking for, he'll realize he's hot mike'ing and will switch it off and there might be hell to pay."

"Thank you, Sergeant. I appreciate it."

"Yeah, yeah. You can bring me hot cocoa when I'm freezing my butt off walking the long bridge for the next six months," said the Sergeant. "Stand by. Going hot in five. Don't touch anything..."

The speaker was silent for five long seconds. When it came on again, Samantha became furious.

Chapter 25

Chief Hauser sat in the flight deck of Space Ten. The computers had plotted the route to the far-away planet of Arcturus using the telemetry provided by the probe that had gone there first. Since the probe was still in orbit of the planet instead of having gone in search of other viable planets, there was a steady stream of information coming to him. "Telemetry is strong," he remarked to Lieutenant Simpsons. "Data looking good?"

The Lieutenant nodded at him. "There's a lot coming in. A real lot. Those squints are going to have their work cut out for them, I think. They're getting data faster than real-time, it looks like. It's going to swamp them."

"Well, they're used to it. You know, it's not really six months of data over six months; it's really a year's worth of data over six months."

The Lieutenant turned in his seat. "How's that?"

"Remember we're moving at way past C, or at least we will be. That means that we're gaining on the planet at a staggering rate. Look at it this way; when you drop a pebble into a puddle, waves move out in rings from where the pebble went in. If you travel out with a wave and stay with it from when it starts to move out from the pebble and that's the wave you know. If you're moving in toward where the pebble was, you run into waves as you go to the center where the pebble was, encountering newer waves. Right?"

"I suppose so."

Nick nodded. "Great, so now Arcturus is the pebble sending out waves of light that's reflections of what's happening on the planet continuously in all directions. And we're traveling toward them so we're

actually moving into their actual present time faster than their light is going out. It's like we're moving faster in their time because we're gaining on their present. Our probe was sent there a year ago and it's been transmitting for a year, but even at hyper speeds, that signal takes six months to arrive to earth. The first signals had a four-month delay. As we move towards it, we are gaining on its present-time so we're gobbling up that information at a faster than real-time rate. And when we get to the probe in six months, that light we'll be seeing won't be hardly anywhere near Earth or the signal our probe has sent, so as far as Earth is concerned, we won't be there yet. If they had a telescope strong enough, they wouldn't see us in orbit until thirty-seven years later because Arcturus is thirty-seven light years from earth. But by then, we'd have already lived those thirty-seven years. If we had the ability to see earth, we'd see the reflected light of us leaving Earth's orbit. Looking into the past." He smiled. "And if we raced back to Earth, we'd have lived that year during the round trip, but on earth only six or seven months would have gone by." Nick grinned. "Got it?"

Lieutenant Simpsons shook his head. "Now I'm more confused than before."

"It's all part of the fun of crossing massive distances at incredible speeds. Just wait until we start setting up shield farms and food resupply depots farther and farther out in the galaxy. Next thing you know, we'll have humans living five hundred light years away. Or in the past if you could see that far" He waved his hand. "The best advice I can give is to just keep track of what time zone you're in, and then just ignore the rest."

The Lieutenant turned back around in his seat. "You mean like it's all of a sudden morning when it should be late in the day?"

"Well," explained Nick, "I always like to start missions at oh nine hundred hours. It seems like a good starting-off point." He smiled. "For our next mission, *you* can pick the time."

"Deal." Simpsons looked down at the instrument panel. "We're at Saturn now. We're past C and accelerating steadily. Everything's in the green." He looked at a readout on one of the many screens on the flight deck. "Navigation says it looks like we'll clear the remaining seven planets without any troubles and then be free and clear for the better part of two months before we even have to make any adjustments. We'll be up around seven C by then."

"Once we're out of the system, if you want to auto pilot it, we can drop to shifts. Just let me know what you want to make them."

The lieutenant nodded. "Sounds good Chief. Thanks for all the time on the stick."

Nick unhooked his harness. "Someone's got to keep doing this when that glorious day comes when all I'm doing is sitting on a beach, fishing." He gave his copilot wink. "And that day is coming up soon, Ground Zero. Real soon."

"Got it, Road Runner."

"I'm going to check on the crew and my kids. Want me to bring you anything?"

Simpsons shook his head. "I'm good." He paused for a moment. "How long you going to be gone?"

"Probably less than an hour; I like to jump down and cable up."

"Isn't that what the young troopers do to get a thrill?"

"Not just the young troopers. You should give it a try." He stood and took a blue oval-shaped box off the wall above his seat. He held it up by the handle on one end letting the thick leather strap dangle. "Best way to go down, arrestors."

"Maybe after a month of doing nothing." The Lieutenant gave him a quick salute. "See you in a bit."

Nick stepped down behind the two pilot chairs and went to the center of the bridge and looked around. It was an area over fifty feet across and fifteen feet high- cavernous by normal ship standards, the bridge contained all stations necessary to manage whatever ship it was attached to, so not all the stations were powered up- offensive weapons and traffic control being the two largest stations that were dark. Nick moved towards the communications section. The pair of communications technicians seemed to be working an issue that took the both of them since the sergeant was now leaning over the other technician to listen in on a second headset. "Need something from below?" He asked them.

The two gave him a quick head shake and a thumb's up as he neared them, practically shooing him off as they pressed their hands on their headsets. With a shrug, he detoured to the sciences section as he made for the exit. "Anything going on, Doc?" He asked.

The man seated there gave him a head shake. "Things look good on our end, Nick. Data are being assimilated at an expected rate; we'll have everything you need to know by the time you get to the planet. Including most leader names. And we've already got a pretty good handle on the local language so any time you or anyone else wants to download the basics, we can set it up in their cabins for sleep-integration. Pretty simple; they use letters that you can sound out so it's much easier to figure out than say, Mandarin where symbols only mean one or two things."

Nick nodded. "Know a little Mandarin. Lots of memorization. How big a vocabulary you have going, Doc?"

"Several thousand words, actually," the man replied matter-of-factly. "More than enough for you to get your point across as long as you don't get too technical." He smiled. "You can show up the intrepid space traveler and talk like a fifth grader to a people that doesn't even have sustained flight capability. The shock factor will be a lot of fun."

"This isn't a social call." Nick braced himself for what he expected to be a long and passionate argument from the scientist about the upcoming course of action. "You've gotten the mission parameters, right Brian?"

The scientist shrugged. "I got it Nick. I don't like it, but I got it." Before the Warrant Officer could say anything, he pressed on. "I'm not a OneGen'er by any means; I'm all for humanity to continue on. Me especially. But it does bother me we're going to lose this chance to examine an alien culture that seems to really mirror ours on Earth."

"They're not Earthlings," Nick reminded the man.

"True enough but they'd fit right in if we plopped them down in Europe, a thousand years ago. No, one'd give them a second look, really." He held up his hands defensively. "But I know we're not going to do that, so I'm learning all I can from the data we're pulling in and I'd really like to have a crack at their institutes of learning and art before we move in completely."

"I'll make sure you get your time for that, Brian." Nick smiled at the man. He was easily forty years Nick's senior in not only age but knowledge. Nick had made sure that he was part of the initial expedition specifically because of his expertise and intelligence. "And I'd be interested to hear what you find out."

Brian brightened up. "I can set up a series of lectures if you like."

Nick shook his head. "Well, that might be a little much. If after we're settled we put too much emphasis on the now-extinct Arcturians and their very similar civilization, we might end up with a whole new batch of OneGen sympathizers. I think these people need to just quietly disappear before they get a foothold in people's minds."

"A new batch?" Brian raised an eyebrow. "You don't think you have any OneGen folks onboard already?"

From how he said it, Nick realized the man thought otherwise. Still, he hoped for a clean break from them on Earth: "I figure we have some sympathizers on board, sure. I mean, a lot of what they say is compelling with how the Earth has turned out. We humans really did screw it up."

"With the number of crew we have, I'd say we have two or three actual, active members and about ten sympathizers onboard, Nick."

Nick was taken aback. The scientists and support personnel were hand-picked by Theodore and Doctor Valencia for their loyalty and their technical expertise. The Marines however were taken because the Fifty-Third Marine Expeditionary Unit were next in line for a deployment. Besides that, there was no additional screening. Nick thought back to the one female he had kicked off the mission for fighting and gross insubordination. "There might have been one I ran into who was a Marine, but I tossed her."

"Well, that's probably one down anyway." Brian leaned forward. "Just keep an eye out and security tight." He put his hands on the arms of his chair. "I don't really want to spin out of control at thirty C because some fool has mucked up our LINACs."

"Well, that might be tough since all the Marines have access to the ship so we'll just have to rely on self-preservation to keep anything like that from happening."

Brian thought for a moment. "Huh; just us dozen techs, you the El Tee, and close family?"

"You bucking to be the new security officer?" Nick chuckled.

"You didn't bring one of them," Brian reminded him. "All you have is your Gunnery Sergeant to keep the grunts in line. Even for a Gunny with good NCOs, he's still one guy in charge of a hundred. He can't be everywhere at once. Plus, some of them brought their significant others. We don't know a thing about them, really. That's a lot of unknowns."

Nick opened his mouth, then closed it. "Well family I brought as well." He reconsidered that. "And I brought my daughter's boyfriend as well. He's one of those unknowns, I suppose."

"Oh?"

Nick shook his head. "Don't worry, Doc. He's Jules Oppenheimer's kid so..."

"Well Julius is definitely a patriot of the human race, but Ophelia is another story."

"What?"

"In the science circles we all call her OneGenphilia." He smirked. "Not to her face, of course. And she's not the only one; there's quite a few scientists who even though they seem to be trying to help keep us humans from turning into the next former species of Earth, their heart just isn't in it."

Nick thought back to his times with Ophelia, their meeting at a conference and her warming up to him so quickly. And their subsequent pillow talk. About the exploratory missions mostly. "Holy hell. Ophie?"

Brian laughed. "I see she got to you too."

"What?"

Brian waggled his eyebrows. "Don't feel bad, Nick; she's a real knockout, that one. And she talks a good story about perpetuating the race. And she'll make you feel ten years younger, if you know what I mean." He winked. "And I think you do. But her heart's not in it."

"You're killing me, Brian. Killing me."

"Well, by the time she gets out here, it'll be a good year so she'll have moved on to someone else."

Nick shook his head. "No, that's not it. I brought her kid along with me. He and Samantha are seeing each other. Pete was really shook up when those OneGeners attacked us as we were lifting off." He thought back to

the interaction in the pod with Nikki. "More than shook up, he was pissed that I'd killed a few of them."

"Might have been people he knew. I'd keep an eye on that one, if I were you." Brian pointed a finger at him then smiled. "As your new security officer, that is my first order."

Nick exhaled loudly. "Roger that. I'll annotate it in my log that we've got a new Ess Oh." He turned toward Lieutenant Simpsons. "El Tee," he called.

The Lieutenant turned in his chair. "Chief?"

"I might be a little late, I gotta run something down. You might have to take the call from Sedna Two Station."

The Lieutenant gave him a thumb's up and turned back around. The more flight-hours he got, the more sure he was of his upcoming promotion.

"Keep up the good work, Chief of Sciences and Security Officer Sanderson," said Nick with a snappy salute. He smiled wide. "Oh, that now means you need to keep two separate logs, you know."

"Aye, aye" Brian returned the salute even though he had been a civilian for almost sixty years- after his obligatory service he had turned to the sciences instead of the military for a career.

Nick moved to the double doors that led from the bridge to another area that was actually twice the size of the bridge, extending fifty feet out in all directions- it was the coupling pod that connected the bridge to the rest of the ship. On the right wall the cable that ran the length of the ship rattled along. The large pulley it ran through was only ten feet above and out of sight. The pulleys and motors were part of the coupling pods so they could be attached onto any sort of in-between craft and still be used- only the length of the cable changed. Nick walked to the opposite wall to the fifteen-foot wide shaft that ran along the outside of the ship within. He grabbed the handrail and looked down it.

The shaft disappeared from sight, ending a little over twenty-five miles below at the coupling pod's mate. He looked at the blue device he was holding, checking to make sure its batteries were fully charged. The series of green lights showed it was ready for use. He threaded his hand through the padded leather loop and grasped the thick handle on one end of it. Thanks to the lower gravity, terminal velocity on Space Ten was just over eighteen feet per second, as opposed to thirty-two feet per second on earth. Although it seemed like a leisurely pace on paper, the twelve miles per hour seemed much faster when traveling down a narrow fifteen-foot wide tunnel- much like riding a go-cart seemed faster since the rider was closer to the ground.

Nick moved to the open portion of the circular railing and executed a short hop to put himself near the middle of the tube and immediately began to pick up speed as he fell.

Chapter 26

Pete went to the small food generator- it could provide only half a dozen liquids and half that many food items. "Coffee?" He asked.

Scribbs rolled over on the bed. "Sure. I could use a cup of…" Her voice trailed off as the communications panel caught her eye.

"Coffee then?" Pete asked as he looked over his shoulder. "What's wrong?"

Scribbs slipped out of the bed. "Nothing, nothing at all," she said loudly as she pointed at the comms panel.

"What?" Pete asked. He looked at the panel then back to his companion.

Scribbs rushed him before he could say anything else and covered his mouth with her hand. She pointed at the green button on the panel. "Coffee sounds great, Pete."

Pete shrugged.

Scribbs leaned in close and whispered into his ear. "The panel is on. Someone's listening."

Pete closed his eyes and let his arms fall slack.

Scribbs removed her hand from his mouth. "And a little sugar too." She motioned with her hand to show that he should respond.

"Oh… okay," he stammered.

Scribbs rolled her eyes at him. "Maybe I'll just skip the coffee and take a nap instead. Want to relax some then get some coffee from the main deck when we have a little more gravity?" She nodded up and down furiously.

"Sure?" Said Pete.

Scribbs moved to the bed and began to quickly get dressed. "Don't bother with the coffee. Come back to bed." She sat and pulled her socks on. She motioned for him to dress as well then shook a fist at him.

Pete startled then moved to the chair he had piled his clothes on. "Sounds great, sweetie," he said loudly.

Scribbs shook her fist at him again then held her finger up to her lips. Finally, she pointed at the door.

Pete nodded as he quietly got dressed.

"Good night Pete," Scribbs said as she pushed down on the latch slowly. Only a soft click betrayed that it opened. When her partner was dressed, she opened the door and peeked out, looking up and down. The passageway was clear. She motioned for Pete to leave. She grabbed the blue arrestor as she too stepped out, closing the door quietly. "We need to get to the emitters," she hissed. "Now. Someone's onto us."

"I think it's Samantha listening in on me. I can handle that."

"Really? You can handle this?" Said Scribbs, unconvinced.

"Sure. I can sweet-talk that kid." He smiled at her.

"What about her dad? Think you can sweet talk him?" She pointed at her eye. "Once he hears you're two-timing his daughter with the Marine he tossed off the ship?"

Pete opened his mouth, then closed it. "Well, maybe."

"No. We need to get to the emitters now and disrupt one of them. There's no time to spare."

Pete started moving to the passageway that had the cable. "Well, it's a good couple of hours away."

"We don't have that kind of time." She held up the arrestor. "We're going to jump for it." She grabbed him by the shirtsleeve and pulled him to the other end of the junction. "Down there."

Pete shook his head. "Jump for it? Are you nuts?" He looked at the thing she was holding. "What's that; some kind of parachute? A jetpack?"

"It's an arrestor; we can use it to control our fall." She looked at it. She wasn't completely sure that it would support the two of them but there were no other options. "We'll jump from the ladder chute not the cable chute. No one should be climbing now that the cables are running."

"But I tried to get to the emitters and there was a Marine guarding the bridge." He smiled, glad he had a ship's term he could use as well.

"That's one guard. We can take care of him if we have to." She patted the small of her back. "Picked up a small pistol on my way out of the brig on the Wichita."

"You can't fire a gun in here. You'll breach the hull!"

Scribbs shrugged. "This is a one-way trip, Peter. We're never getting off this ship alive." She squared her shoulders as she looked down the shaft. "We just need to make sure we take this ship with us."

Pete put his arm around his longtime companion. "At least it will be with you."

Scribbs smiled. "So we're going to jump feet first like we're jumping into a pool or lake or something."

Pete nodded. "And how does that thing work?" He touched the blue device.

"It uses a magnetic anchor and a cable to arrest our fall." She tilted it in her hand. "That's why it's an arrestor."

"Fine. I'll hang onto you since you know how it works."

She turned her back to him. "You should probably hold me from behind so I can get this thing over my head when I need to."

Pete grabbed her around the waist. "Ready when you are. Just give a one two three, go."

Just as they jumped into the center of the ladder-shaft and began to fall, Samantha stepped out of her living quarters one junction up. She was prepared to confront Pete and whatever girl he had in his cabin.

Chapter 27

As he fell, Nick held out the arrestor device up over his head and aimed it at the side of the passageway- as he always did, he tested the device as soon as he started his decent to make sure everything was working properly before he actually needed it. If it didn't work, he had plenty of time to come up with a 'plan-b' before reaching the end of the shaft. He had never personally had an arrestor fail on him, but he had had a friend whose arrestor didn't work. The results had been gruesome. Nick thumbed the trigger and a disk shot out of the top of the device, magnetically anchoring itself. As the line played out, the drag increased, slowing his decent until he was stopped and hanging along the side of the tube. He reached over and pulled himself to the ladder. Satisfied the device was working properly, he thumbed the button again to turn off the electro-magnet. He pushed off the ladder as the line quickly reeled in. He deliberately tried to ignore the fact that just because it worked once did not necessarily mean it would work a second time.

Executing a tumble, he aimed himself straight down and enjoyed the air passing by him as he accelerated to terminal velocity. It was as close to flying as one could get- in space or on a planet. He began to count the junctions as they moved past to make sure he didn't miss the one his children were on. As he neared their level, he saw someone large jump into the open air and begin to fall. "At that size, Marine, you should take the ladder to burn off some weight," he remarked as he executed another tumble. He was within five junctions of Nikki's when he fired the magnet. It clamped on and he began to slow. When he fell against the side of the chute, he was in-between two junctions and one above where he wanted to

be. "Losing your touch, Chief," he remarked at the insurmountable distance. He begrudgingly pressed a side button on the device and reeled in the cable. After clipping it on his belt, he descended the thirty feet to the correct junction.

Just as he knocked on his son's door, Samantha charged out of her room.

"Dad?"

"Samantha. I was coming down to see how you two are getting settled." He looked at his son's door. "Nikki's out?"

"He was coming up to see you. You didn't see him?"

Nick held up the arrestor. "I jumped down the ladder chute. Probably passed him as he cabled up." He shrugged. "I'll cable up that way I'll be sure to see him." He looked at his daughter- she seemed to have been crying. "You okay?"

Samantha put her hands in her pockets. "I suppose."

"Pete?"

"Yeah."

"What'd he do?" He started to move toward her door. "He in there?"

"No, Dad. He's in his cabin." Her voice faltered. "It's… something else."

He moved close and put his hands on her shoulders. "Just spit it out, Sam. What's wrong?"

"There's… someone else," she began.

Chapter 28

Nikki made the short jump to the platform that led to the open area before the bridge. He had only passed two others on the cable but not his father. He clambered up the ladder to the flight deck. The bridge spread out in all directions from where he stood. Looking left and right he got his bearings then walked to the flight deck. Even though it was only one step up from the rest of the bridge, Nikki knew that pilots insisted on differentiating between just being 'on the bridge' and 'on the flight deck'. He moved to the area and stepped onto the platform. "Where's Dad, sir?" He asked the Lieutenant.

"Jeffrey," said the Lieutenant. "Call me Jeffrey."

Nikki nodded. "Nikki. Where'd my Dad go?"

"He went down to check on you and your sister."

"That's weird; I didn't see him."

The Lieutenant laughed. "That's because he jumped down."

Nikki shook his head. "Crazy."

"That's what I said."

"Well, he'll have to cable back up so I'll head down and either meet him on the way or see him at Samantha's room."

The Lieutenant nodded. "Sounds good. If he makes it back up here without seeing you because he's built a jetpack or something else Warrant Officer-esqe, I'll tell him you were looking for him."

"Thanks, Jeffrey." Nikki waved then turned to leave. As he went, he saw the insignia of the sciences division so he detoured that way. When he got there, the man at the console was leaned over with his hands pressed

over his headphones. Nikki moved around the console until he was at the edge of the man's peripheral vision.

After only a few moments, the man looked up and smiled. "You're Nick's kid, aren't you?"

Nikki nodded. "That's right. I was up here looking for my Dad but we've missed each other." He smiled. "I was wondering what sort of briefs you had on the planet we were going to, that I could maybe look at."

The man nodded. "I've plenty of briefs. Plenty." He rubbed his hands together. "What sort are you looking for? Flora, fauna, topography, weather, inhabitants?"

"Well, Dad said we'd do some hunting here so I suppose that would be interesting. And anything that's not classified on the inhabitants."

"Definitely Nick's kid." The man stood and held out his hand. "Doctor Brian Sanderson. Brian's good enough when I'm not in front of a classroom."

"Nikki". He shook the man's hand. "I don't really like Nick junior, or just junior."

The man nodded at him. "I'm a 'junior' myself, young man; I completely understand. Let's see… there's plenty of stuff to hunt on the planet. Some of it dangerous but mostly not. Just like Earth used to be; less apex hunters than grazers. You need more gazelles than lions."

Nikki nodded even though he did not understand the reference.

The man eyed Nikki, "I hope you don't mind me asking but you only have one younger sister, correct?"

Nikki nodded. "Yes; just the one. Why?"

"Hmmm," remarked the man. "I was just curious is all. That man must have really won Nick over."

"Pete?"

Brian nodded. "Yes, Pete."

Nikki smirked. "I don't think Dad cares too much about him at all, much less won over by him."

"The age difference, I'd imagine," the man said as he turned to look at his console. "Fauna and indigenous population." He gave a wink. "Unclassified records only."

"That would be great."

"I'll put it on the net so you'll be able to access it from your room." He gave a wink. "It's nice to have people actually interested in the data you collect." He ran his hand along the console, dragging files into the appropriate folders. "There we go."

"What age difference?"

Brian looked up. "What?"

"You said Dad wouldn't appreciate Pete's age. He's younger than me."

Brian stared at him. "Pete. Pete Oppenheimer."

Nikki nodded. "Yeah. Got kind of a tan, brown hair that's a little longer than mine. Pete."

Brian leaned forward over the console. "Listen Nikki, I don't want to get in your business but I work really closely with both Doctor Oppenheimer and his wife." He considered that. "She's a doctor too, so I suppose to be more precise, I work with the Doctors, Oppenheimer."

"Ahh, you know Pete. What age difference?"

Brian shrugged. "Well, I haven't seen Pete in years but I know he is their only son. Once he graduated college, he went off to lead his own life so I didn't see him around anymore."

"College?"

"He's twenty-seven if I'm counting it correctly." He gave another wink. "And as someone who has several doctorates, two of which are in the field of mathematics, I think I'm pretty accurate with numbers."

Pete leaned forward. "I swear he looks sixteen, maybe seventeen." He shook his head. "Dad's really going to be pissed."

Brian sat back in his chair. "As the Chief of Security…" He gave another wink. "Among other things, I say you need to find your father as soon as possible and pass along that bit of information in person. I'd rather not send it to his comm-link and have anyone else around him hear it as well. This is decidedly a…delicate situation."

"I don't know how well you know my Dad, but 'delicate' is not a word that's used to describe him."

Brian considered that a moment. "I know him pretty well." He leveled his eyes at the youth. "Try to tell him when he's not armed."

Nikki nodded. "Yeah, you know him pretty well. That's a good idea, thanks." He turned to leave then stopped himself. "Thanks for the briefings. I'll see if Samantha wants to watch them with me."

"All part of the service," said Brian as he gave a sloppy salute.

Nikki moved quickly to the centrally located ladder and went down to the coupling area. He walked to the cable, then just to be sure, moved to the ladder chute and looked down. It seemed empty. "No jetpacks," he remarked as he moved to the cable. He grasped the one heading downward and disappeared from sight.

Chapter 29

"I'm going to kill him," said Nick for what was the third time in Samantha's story. He put his hands on his hips. He wasn't wearing his sidearm. "With my bare hands, it seems."

"Dad, you can't just kill him," Samantha said once again.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't."

Samantha considered that for a moment. "It's illegal first of all."

Nick stared at his daughter. "Give me a *good* reason."

Samantha leaned back against the bulkhead. "Boys are stupid."

Nick smirked. "I wholeheartedly agree but that's still not a good reason."

"Dad!"

Nikki made the short jump from the downward cable to the handholds beside his passageway. When he heard both his father and sister's voice, be was tempted to just ride the cable down further and tell his father in private.

"Dad, just because Pete has another girl is no reason to kill him."

Nikki's eyes got large. *Another girl? Another sixteen-year-old girl?* He shook his head. "That's gross." Steeling himself for the confrontation, he stepped around onto the platform. "Hey, you two."

"Nikki, I was going to come right back up but I ran into Sam and she's…" Nick let his voice trail off.

"Pete's a jerk," Samantha finished helpfully.

Nikki shook his head. "There's more…"

"I'm with Nikki on this one," said Nick.

"Dad!" Samantha punched her father. "What are you talking about Nikki?"

Nikki looked back and forth between the two. There was really no good way to break the news. "Well, I was talking to Doctor Sanderson on the bridge after seeing you weren't there," he said, stalling. "He put some briefs on the fauna and indigenous people on the net because I asked him."

"Nikki…" Began Nick.

Nikki raised his hands. "It's all unclassified, Dad."

"That's not what I meant," said Nick. "What about Pete?"

Nikki took a deep breath. "Well, Brian… That's Doctor Sanderson's first name, Brian…"

"Spit it out Nikki."

Nikki glanced down at his father's waist. He wasn't wearing his sidearm so he pressed on. "Brian said he's known the Oppenheimers for years. And he knew Pete."

"So what?"

Nikki looked at his sister. "Samantha, he *knew* him. But he hasn't seen Pete since he graduated college."

"I don't understand," said Samantha. "College?"

"He's twenty-seven, Samantha." He shrugged. "I guess he's had work done to look young."

"Oh, I'm sure as hell going to kill him now," said Nick. His hand went to where his holster would have been. "Where's my gun?"

Samantha replayed the conversation she heard between Pete and the girl; it made sense now. "Then she's older, normal age looking and he's younger. That's what she meant."

"What?"

"Nothing, Dad."

The communications link on Nick's collar chirped. Nick tapped it. "Chief here."

"Chief, we've got some problems."

"What's up El Tee?" Nick looked at his kids. "It something you can handle? I have a situation going on here."

"We just had an alarm go off outside emitter control. It shut off almost right away but the security code wasn't punched in afterward. Now we can't raise anyone down there."

"The fat Marine."

"What? What fat Marine?" The Lieutenant asked.

"It wasn't a fat Marine I saw jumping into the chute; it was Pete and that girl. They jumped together but I was a ways off so I thought it was a fat Marine."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Chief," said the Lieutenant. "What do you want me to do?"

"What's our current speed?"

"Two point seven C."

"Fine. Keep the acceleration steady. I'll head down to see who's who in the zoo. Send a security detachment as well. Fax 'em down."

"Oh man. Fax, Chief?"

"Do it, El Tee. We need to get a handle on this or our trip'll turn into a seventeen year one at this speed. Do it. Now. Tell anyone that refuses that they're liable to get turned into emitter fuel." Nick taped his comm-link. He looked at his children. "Hell's bells. Get inside and stay there. If we're tossed around at two C, at least you're in your cabin and won't end up getting chucked down a chute."

"Fax?" Nikki had heard the archaic term. "Faxing *people*?"

"No time to explain." Nick looked up and down. "Need a zero floor," he said to himself. He moved to the ladder chute, then seemed to realize his

children were still there. “Get inside!” He leaned around the corner and grabbed the ladder, swinging onto it, then he pressed his feet against the outside of it and slid down. When he passed the large blue number thirty, he gripped tightly with his hands and feet to stop himself and stepped onto the thirtieth junction point. He rubbed his warm hands together as he moved to a flat black panel between the two berths on one side. He tapped his comm-link, opening the connection. “Lieutenant Simpsons,” he said. The Marine at the communications station immediately tapped the connection for Lieutenant Simpsons.

Only a second later, he responded: “Lieutenant Simpsons.”

“El Tee. I’m at Junction thirty. Get me down there before they get that door open and we’re all dead. Keep this comm link active and be ready take the LINEACs offline on my command if I need a distraction.”

“Roger, Chief. Initiating now.” There was another short pause then the flat black panel split on an unseen seam. The two halves pivoted out revealing a small alcove.

“Inside,” said Nick as he stepped into the space. A thought occurred to him. “Send a pistol, same location once I’m there.”

“Roger,” said the Lieutenant. “Comms, you’re on.”

At that point the communications sergeant took over, initiating the direct transporter. Since the advent of food processors over two hundred years ago, the scientific community began to consider their use as a means of transportation. Within a hundred years, they were successfully used to transport lower life forms and foodstuffs across the planet with moderate success. When transports to other colonies in the solar system were attempted, it was discovered that even the slightest loss of data resulted in catastrophic results to the subject being transported. Space was far from being an empty vacuum to easily transmit data through; micro particles, dust, radiation, and even solar flares would wreak havoc on the signals.

Over the decades, the need for one-hundred percent of the data to be sent without any loss whatsoever was only overcome by the use of fiber optic cables and its use as a planetary or ship-board transportation. The deconstruction and reconstruction did not result in duplicates as the processing of a subject resulted in its disintegration. This fact also kept it from being used by the general public since the results of even a miniscule percentage of data being lost were horrific and permanent since the original was destroyed. This was a means of transportation of last resort.

"Stand still, Chief," said a young man's voice. "Shunting power." Then after a moment longer: "Initiating transfer."

Nick exhaled slowly. The feeling, it was discovered when the inevitable human trials began, was not painful but still disconcerting- it was like being poured through a funnel becoming smaller and smaller then finally the world closed in around him- it was akin to dying. Except at the very end of being 'poured out' the feeling reversed as one reappeared at the other end. The process seemed to take several minutes for the subject when in reality it happened at nearly the speed of light. The early technicians likened it to sending a facsimile message in the early twentieth century and the name stuck.

Chapter 30

Pete and Scribbs fell down the shaft- they weren't in the middle of it but since they had no lateral motion, they just fell along one side, away from the ladder.

Pete craned his head to look down as he gripped Scribbs tightly around the waist. "How much farther is it?"

"Another minute and we're there," she answered. She looked again at the arresting device.

"Is that thing going to hold us both?"

"It should. I mean you're not that big and neither am I, and they only make them in one size, so if a Marine can use it…"

"Scribbs, a Marine'll weigh two-hundred thirty, two-hundred sixty pounds. Together we're more like four. I mean, I'm two fifteen, you're what- two ten?"

"Two oh five, thanks very much."

Pete looked down again. They had been falling for almost fifteen minutes and the feeling was becoming disconcerting. "How close to the bottom are you going to use that?"

"Under forty feet. The cable's thirty and I don't want to have to climb down a ladder while whoever's down there gets to lock themselves in the emitter room." She looked at the numbers on the wall as they whizzed by. "Two more…" She raised the arrestor over her head and took aim at the far side of the chute.

"Why not the close side?"

"Because we need to be near the ladder! Now be quiet!" As the large red number forty – signifying the distance to the end of the chute in feet-

passed, she thumbed the trigger. The cable launched from the device and attached to the metal wall with a satisfying clang.

As the cable began to play out, one of the technicians moved to the opening and looked up. "What the hell you two doing?" He called up. "This area's restricted! Find some other quiet place to mess around!"

The cable played out as the Pete and Scribbs' descent slowed. "Get my pistol, Peter."

Pete tightened his grip on Scribbs' waist with one hand and moved his other to the small of her back. He wrapped his fingers around the butt of the weapon but kept his hand there, out of sight.

"You'll go on report!" The Marine shouted as the two continued to descend, but at a more leisurely pace. When the cable drew tight, they jerked to a halt. They were almost ten feet from the ground, then the magnetic disk began to slide on the metal. With a lurch, the two started moving again.

The technician moved out of the way and drew his service pistol. He looked at his partner. "Get inside and button it up."

"Got it. I'll keep an eye out," the other said as he stepped into the thick hatchway and pushed shut the reinforced door. He spun both locks then moved to where he could see out the thick glass viewport. As he flipped the switch on the speaker the two civilians crashed to the ground.

Pete rolled away from Scribbs, taking the pistol with him. As he brought it up, the wide-eyed Marine raised his as well.

"Drop it! This is a restricted area!" The Marine private commanded. He backed up to the bulkhead as the woman got to her feet. "Keep still!" He ordered. He moved his pistol from one to the other, not sure if the she was armed as well.

"Shoot him, Pete," she said coolly.

The Marine returned to pointing at the male. "Don't move kid." As he pointed his pistol at him, he reached up over his shoulder to hit the alarm button. Unable to find it, he took his eyes off the youth.

As he hit the alarm, Pete shot him in the leg. He had been aiming for his chest but because of his nervousness, he jerked the trigger and pushed down on the unfamiliar weapon, expecting a harsher kick. "I'm no kid, you stinking murderer!"

The Marine hit the bulkhead and slid to the floor, gripping his bleeding leg as the alarm ran through the area and ostensibly the rest of the ship.

"Turn it off!" Scribbs commanded as she turned to face him.

"Not a chance!" retorted the Marine. He raised the pistol shakily.

Scribbs charged the fallen Marine and kicked at the pistol as it went off. The shot dug a shallow groove in Pete's shoulder and struck the bulkhead on the far side of the area. Scribbs continued her motion and scooped the pistol off the floor as it clattered against the wall. "You alright?"

Pete pulled his hand away from his shoulder. "It grazed me; I'm fine."

"Keep an eye on him," she said gesturing at the fallen Marine with the pistol. She went to the alarm and flipped it off. "They're going to want the code."

The Marine shook his head. "I'll never give it to you."

"We'll see about that, she said as she pointed the pistol at his head. Hand me your pistol then pick him up, Pete."

Pete obliged, handing it to her quickly. "Stand up!" He shouted at the Marine.

The Marine slumped to his side. "No," he said.

The amount of blood coming from his leg let Pete know he had hit a major artery. "If you want help, you better cooperate." He said as he bent

down. Whether he was feigning injury hoping for help to arrive, or truly did not have the strength to stand did not matter- with the weaker gravity, Pete was able to easily pull the man into a standing position.

"Put him in front of the window." Scribbs gestured with one of the pistols. The other she kept trained on the injured Marine.

Pete muscled the Marine to the window.

His compatriot gaped at him. "Hang on Lewis!" He shouted.

"You've got five seconds to give us the code and open that door," Scribbs said. She put the pistol against the back of the Marine's head. She positioned it so the bullet would exit his head and hit the glass. "Five."

"Don't" said Lewis weakly.

"Four."

"Let him go you bastards! He's injured!" Shouted the Marine behind the glass. He glanced at the door lock.

"Three."

Pete looked from his girlfriend to the Marine and back. He was not sure if she was bluffing or not. "Tell her the code!" He pleaded.

"Two."

"Go to hell," the Marine muttered. He looked at his partner behind the glass and gave a smirk. "Simper Fi, brother."

"Lewis!"

"One." Scribbs pulled the trigger spattering the window with gore. There was dent in it where the bullet had hit.

Pete stepped back, letting go of the Marine. He looked down at his shirt- it was spattered with blood and bits of the Marine's head. "What did you do that for?" He shouted over the ringing in his ears.

She pointed the gun at the glass and fired. The pockmark got bigger. "Open the door." She said flatly. "Or I'll kill you next."

"Oh, you're dead, lady! DEAD!" The Marine shouted.

Scribbs alternated firing with the pistols. After a dozen shots, there were large, opaque cracks where the sheets of lamination had separated.

The Marine knew it would only take a few more shots and the glass would give way. He took a step back, then another as she continued to fire. Panicked, he looked around the room for a weapon. He picked up a chair and held it in front of him. The window finally gave way so the Marine sidestepped out of the line of fire. Scribbs fired again and the shot hit the far wall.

"Open this door. Now," warned Scribbs.

Chapter 31

Nick materialized in a dark room. He looked down and punched the dimly glowing red light in front of his chest. Double doors matching the ones he had been between several miles up opened and he stepped out onto the deck. He turned and looked down. After only two seconds, a pistol materialized where he had been standing. Nick picked it up and checked to make sure there was a round in the chamber. Satisfied there was, he switched on the laser sight and cautiously stepped forward in the small area. The machine was set in an alcove between the two chutes. He moved to the ladder chute, pistol at the ready.

As Nick reached the corner, he heard a female say 'One', then a shot rang out. Not wanting to wait any longer, he leaned out and saw the Marine slump to the floor. Gore slid down the cracked window. Inside, Nick saw a horrified young Marine take a step back, then to the side. "El Tee?" He whispered.

"Here, Chief," came the reply. "What's the situation?"

"One Marine is down. They're trying to breach the emitter room. I need some support down here," he whispered. As he watched, the female started firing at the glass. "Hell, there's no time." He thought for a moment as he assessed the situation. "The word for the day is got it."

"Got it?"

"Cut the engines on 'got it'. If I need them to get off balance, that will do it. Give a three count, then kick them back on."

"Got it. Roger."

Nick heard the glass give way. "They're in. Moving now. Stand by." Nick leaned out again to look.

As the female ordered the Marine to open the door, Pete moved beside her. He saw that she had two pistols and Pete had none. He sidestepped into the opening and moved the pistol to the center of his chest, arms pushed out. He put the red dot of the laser in the middle of her shoulder blade. "Drop the guns!" He shouted.

The female froze.

Nick could see her hand whiten as she tightened her grip on the pistols. He pulled the trigger halfway down. As the female turned, Nick shouted: "Got it!" Her turn hesitated as her feet lifted slightly off the deck- the lack of forward momentum caused the still-weak gravity to falter. She lifted off the deck three inches and tilted to the side instead of spinning around. Nick shot her in the shoulder blade. The impact spun her back around and the pistol in her hand on that side spun out of it. Just as quickly the gravity returned and it clattered to the deck in almost-real time. She started to stand upright. Since Nick had the pistol centered on his body, the recoil merely pushed him backward a foot. He planted his feet as he touched down. "You do anything but drop that other pistol and the next one goes through *your* head," Nick said icily. He moved the dot to the middle of the back of her head. "Try something. *Please*."

Scribbs let the pistol drop to the deck.

"Now both of you back away." He gestured to the far corner of the area. "Over there."

As they moved the Marine in the emitter room opened the door and quickly picked up both pistols. He trained them on the two.

"I've got a security detail on the way, Private. We just need to hold them until they arrive." He tapped his comm-link to bring the communications station back onto his channel. "Doctor Sanderson."

Within a moment he was rewarded with "Sanderson here."

"Where's my security detail, Doc? We're holding the two terrorists…"

"YOU'RE the terrorists!" Scribbs shouted.

"Terrorists," Nick said again. "Awaiting the detail."

"They're on their way, Chief," assured Sanderson. "Need anything else?"

"You got the tanks up and running?"

"You have injured?"

"Lewis," said the other Marine. "That's Lewis. He wouldn't give them the code to shut off the alarm."

"One for the tank, Doc. Copy?"

"Where's the injury?"

"Shot in the head, Doc."

"Got it Nick. We just need him within the next ten minutes and we're probably in real good shape with him."

"We'll send him up when the detail arrives. Chief out." He gestured at the door behind Pete and Scribbs. "Get in there."

Pete looked over his shoulder. "No way I'm getting in that airlock!"

"Well *I'm* not going to have a standoff until the security detail gets down here. Either you're going to wait in there or I'll leg you both." He gestured again. "I'm not going to deal with any more antics from you two."

"Move it!" Snarled the Marine. He moved to the panel next to the door and hit a button. The door slid open. "Get in there. I want to get my pal taken care of."

"Your pal is a murderer," said Scribbs.

"Yeah? That's not your brains all over the door there, is it?!" The Marine shouted. "Get in there!"

Pete took Scribbs by the hand. "Let's wait in there before this fool shoots us by accident." He pulled her into the airlock behind him. He glowered at Nick. "You people." He shook his head.

The Marine hit the button again and the door shut. He pressed a second button, locking it.

"Good work Marine," Nick said. "You two saved the ship."

"He did the saving," the Marine said pointing at his fallen comrade. "Lewis didn't give the code."

"What's your name, Devil Dog?"

"Hutchinson, Chief," said the Marine.

"Well, Hutchinson, *you* didn't open the door," Nick reminded him. He lowered his pistol. "I'm really starting to hate these people."

The Marine nodded. "I can't believe she convinced that kid to go along with her plan."

Nick shook his head. "That's no kid. He's actually twenty-seven." Nick moved to the panel and looked into the window. Pete was sitting on the floor holding the woman. Pete kissed her on the forehead while he was keeping pressure on her shoulder.

The Marine looked from the airlock to Nick and back. "Hey Chief! Isn't that the same guy your daughter brought on board?"

"Yeah," Nick muttered. As he looked into the airlock Pete met his eyes. Nick gave him a wink. Pete's eyes got large. "Yeah." He punched the release for the outer door. There was a whooshing sound as the air in the small space was pulled out all at once. "That's him alright."

"Thought so," said Hutchinson, not reacting to the outer airlock being opened.

Two Marines bolted around the corner, assault rifles at the ready.

Nick and Hutchinson turned toward them.

"Everything's under control," said Nick.

"Chief?" One Marine looked around. "Where are they?"

"Don't worry about them; we let them go," remarked Hutchinson with a smirk.

Nick nodded. "Yep." He pointed that the fallen Marine. "Priority one is getting Lewis there into a tank. He needs moved up to the med bay quick-like."

The two Marines shouldered their rifles. "We're on it, Chief," said the Corporal. The pair quickly moved to their fallen comrade and picked him up by the arms. "We'll fax him up, then cable our way back up."

"Not keen on getting faxed?" Nick raised an eyebrow at him.

"Not a bit, Sir." As they dragged Lewis to the transportation alcove, the Corporal tapped his comm-link. "Medical…"

"If it's alright with you, Chief, I think I'll take the cable up as well," said Hutchinson.

Nick nodded at the young man. "You've earned going any way you please. I'll make sure I annotate your actions… and the actions of Lewis in the log."

Lewis gave him a salute. "Thanks, Sir."

"No, *thank you*." Nick returned the salute then turned to leave. "I'm taking the short way." He glanced at the airlock. "I need to talk to my daughter sooner rather than later. See you topside."

The Marine nodded. "Thanks for getting Lewis into a tank. Will… will he be alright?"

Nick shrugged. "Well, they'll harvest some T-Cells from him, replicate them and set them loose on his injury and keep doing it until he's a hundred percent. Just keep in mind that the odds are that even though he'll pull through, he won't be the same guy you know now."

"What?"

"Well, his T-Cells will regrow his brain and other tissue but any memories those areas held are gone and will get replaced with brand new, blank brain cells. He'll have to relearn everything he lost. If he lost too much of his upbringing, his personality will be different."

Hutchinson frowned. "I'm beginning to hate those OneGen terrorists as well."

"Well, on the bright side, there's two less of them to worry about in the universe." Nick turned to leave. "See you topside."

"Roger that, Chief." Hutchinson tapped his comm-link. "Sergeant of the Guard," he said.

Nick walked to the alcove as the two Marines were coming back. "He's at the med bay now so he'll be in a tank in no time, Chief."

"Nice work. Thanks for coming down."

The female Marine nodded to him. "All part of the service, Sir."

"See you topside," said Nick. He tapped his comm-link. "Comms, can you get me back to level thirty?"

"Sure thing," replied the Sergeant. "Step in, Sir and we'll get you back."

Nick stepped into the dark alcove. He exhaled slowly as he felt himself once again being poured through a funnel.

Chapter 32

Nick sat across from Samantha explaining what happened in the emitter room. He made sure to not skip over the details of Peter's female friend and the shooting of Private Lewis. He did leave out the wink he gave Peter before jettisoning him into space at almost three C. She was satisfied with the overall outcome so he did not press his luck.

After taking the cable back to the bridge, he flopped down in his chair. "Those OneGen guys are really starting to piss me off, El Tee."

"Lewis going to make it?"

Nick frowned. "No, no he's not. He's missing most of his head, right down the middle. Even if they get him all rebuilt, which if you don't know, will take about two months, he'll not even remember who he is. We'll have a twenty-one-year-old with the mental capabilities of a two-year-old."

"But, Doctor Sanderson…"

Nick waved his hand dismissively. "Sure, sure, Doc can get him trained back up again, but it'll all be books and sleep induced learning. We'll have a fully capable, intelligent twenty-one-year-old in about five months, but he won't be Lewis then. He'll be some gen'ed up guy with all sorts of schooling and no life experiences. He might not even want to be a Marine anymore." He shrugged. "And who could blame him?" He shook his head. "No, that woman down there and Pete as her accomplice, murdered Marine Private Chance Lewis in cold blood." He took a deep breath then let it out slowly. He clapped his hands once then rubbed them together. "It's never the people you want dead that die." He looked at the controls. "What's going on up here?"

"Sedna Two says good luck to us." He smiled. "And to send our messages through them and they'll relay them to the rest of the system. I think they're ready to bug out just as soon as we give the word that the planet is vacant."

"How much lift capability do they have?"

"Apparently they have two smaller LINACS that'll haul all two hundred fifty of them and their equipment all at once. It'll be an eight-month trip for them but it's only one-way for them." The Lieutenant smiled. "Seems they've been intercepting the data feeds from the Arcturus probe and they've laid claim to an island in the Southern Ocean. Apparently it's now called Sedna Island. They're going to do oceanic research and scope out the rest of the system as well. They're really excited about it."

"Squints."

"Everyone needs a hobby."

Nick nodded at the young officer. "Suppose so. Since you asked, mine is going to involve fishing and drinking."

"I didn't ask."

"I figured you secretly wanted to know."

Lieutenant Simpsons spread his arms out wide. "And leave all this behind? Come on, Chief…"

Nick pushed himself out of the chair. "You just watch me." He looked around the bridge- he realized it was practically deserted. "Where's everyone?"

"Chow. Everyone feels like it's dinner time so they're eating what is apparently lunch according to ship's time."

"What about you?"

"I'm going down after my trick is done. Got a couple of staff sergeants who say they're interested in flying. They're going to take some of the shifts between you, me, and the auto pilot."

"Welcome to the Simpsons flight school."

"Pretty much. If they have the chops, I'll recommend them for proper flight school. They'll be way ahead of the curve."

"That's smart. Plus, you'll need someone to replace me." Nick stepped off the flight deck. "I'm going to track down Gunny. I imagine Gunny's set up a head table of some sort. I'm going to see who has a training plan in place." He stifled a yawn. "Then I might sleep for twenty hours even though it's about eleven hundred hours."

"We've got the boat," said Lieutenant Simpsons. "Take your time."

Nick made his way to the ladder and climbed down. Taking hold of the downward running cable, he let it pull him off the platform and into space. He let himself hang slack on it as he descended.

When he reached the galley, it was so crowded it took him several minutes to find his senior noncommissioned officer- he as well as several other heads of section had made an impromptu command table. Complete with an absurd centerpiece of forks, knives, and spoons. It was topped with a small flag of the United Americas. He detoured to the serving station and picked up a tray of food on his way to the table. "Permission to come aboard?" He said as he stood at the end of the table.

"All are welcome, Chief," said Doctor Sanderson. "Glad you're joining us."

"We're glad you *could* join us," remarked Sergeant Mellow. "We really scrambled to get some security down there as quick as possible, Chief. Those OneGen's are really and truly nuts."

"The reinforcements were very much appreciated." Nick slid onto the bench. He looked down at his tray of fabricated food. "I'm really going to like having food that was actually grown and served fresh and not already eaten a few times before I get to it."

"We got Lewis in a tank, Nick," said Brian. "I expect him to be up and about pretty quick. I asked the medics to keep you posted on his progress. Shouldn't be more than three weeks before he's out."

Nick picked up a spoonful of brown paste that was supposed to be meat. "Then the reeducation starts."

Brian shook his head. "No, no; not in this case. You see," he began as he switched into his lecturer's voice, "the bullet passed right through the longitudal fissure. Kind of like the hemispherectomy that was common centuries ago, it just separated the two halves of his brain. So really, there's minimal damage and we just need to reconnect the two halves. He lost a bit of skull and skin on his forehead because the bullet really didn't slow down as it went through, but I think he'll be close to ninety nine percent Lewis when is all said and done. The damage was mostly cosmetic, really. Skin and bone are pretty easy to grow back and the little bits of his frontal lobe'll be slower but still not an issue. It sure looked bad though. It's a good thing that pistol was set for simple projectile instead of explosive round or we'd have to rebuild his entire head because it would have gone in all directions."

"I'm sorry I asked." Nick put down his spoon and pushed away his tray. "But I'm glad he'll be alright."

The Gunnery Sergeant picked up a spoonful of greenish jelly that was supposed to be string beans. "This is better than what they serve back on earth." He slurped the jelly off the spoon. "Course green beans that look like green beans *would* be nice."

"You should start a garden, Gunny," Sergeant Mellow said.

"I have no idea how to farm," he remarked as he slurped another spoonful. "What; stick some seeds in the ground and water them? Is that it?"

"Probably," said Sergeant Mellow. "Spread some manure around too, I've read."

"Well, the Marines have taught me how to do *that*."

The young man nodded to his superior. "And move wall lockers. I'm hell at moving wall lockers."

"So," said Nick, taking an official tone. He banged his spoon on the table. "Welcome to the first official training meeting. Heads of sections, what do you have planned for the remainder of this cruise?" He looked at the half dozen sitting at the table. "Starting on the right and moving around, then. Sergeant Mellow?"

The young sergeant nodded. "Well Chief, my corporal and I are cross training two more troops to man the station so we can get a little more time off. That way we can get to the combatives training and the weapon ranges. We'll be on a regular schedule by the end of the week."

Nick nodded at him. "Sciences?"

"And security," reminded Brian Sanderson. "Sciences, I'm working with the medical section on our one patient to make sure he doesn't hit any snags. I've got the latest feeds from the probe uploaded on the net. Your son asked for it," he said with his customary wink. "Plus I'm ready to start some sleep training for key leaders of the local language." He paused again. "We're at eighth grade level and holding, which I think is plenty for what we're going to do." He rubbed his chin. "Security, I've developed an algorithm that will run through the personnel files to see if anyone kicks up a red flag for possible association with, or propensity to act for any OneGen folks we have aboard."

"And if we find any?"

Brian nodded at Nick. "We've got two sleeping births at the end of the living quarters we're going to set up with quad bunks that we can turn into an impromptu brig if we need it. The two opposing berths are going to become a guard post and a small galley for them."

"I prefer the Chief's brig," remarked Sergeant Mellow. "No guards necessary."

"Well, it's always good to have options," said Brian. He thought for a moment. "That's about it, pending any hiccups that need addressed."

"Engineering?"

The young warrant at the end of the table leaned forward. "The LINACs are running at about ninety percent efficiency so we've plenty of fuel to make the Arcturus to Earth run twice so they won't need to refuel the feeder-pile when the ship goes back." He shrugged. "Quicker turn-around that way, I suppose. The one after that'll be slower though." He put his hands on the table. "Had a mess to clean up down there thanks to our recently departed visitors that's got me pissed off. Nothing damaged though, so it's just mopping and such." He thought for a moment. "I'm having a new security glass fabricated for the door that'll be done tomorrow and installed an hour after it arrives. I'm doubling the guards until it's done and both guards will be armed from now on."

Nick nodded at him. "Thanks Warrant." Per military custom, the senior Warrant on a vessel or a section was called 'Chief', the others were referred to as 'warrant' or 'mister.'

"Medical?"

The doctor across from the engineer leaned forward. "We've got our one patient taken care of, as Doctor Sanderson explained," she said. "And we've got a second tank prepped just in case. Two more full tanks are on standby and could be up and running within half an hour. We also have six limb tanks set up and ready to go." She smiled. "As long as we don't have some sort of extended firefight, we'll be fine."

"Thanks Doc. Gunny?"

"We've downloaded the files on the indigenous population so we can go over physical characteristics, vulnerabilities and possible courses of

action. Two ranges, pistol and long gun will go hot in a week. We'll have some competitions for the hell of it. We're not doing any breaching drills since these things seem to be docile and the buildings are mud and wood. Clearing operations'll be pretty straightforward stuff. Plus, the obligatory vehicle, weapons, and 'bot maintenance."

Nick nodded at him. "I wouldn't mind some time on the ranges either. And… navigation? I don't think we've met," Nick said to the attractive astrophysicist.

The woman smiled warmly at Nick. She wasn't sure if he was aware of the crush she had on him or not but she figured she would try and hint as much as possible during the course of the flight. Even though she was half his age. "We are tracking several potential November Mikes later on this month. As we get closer, we'll make any course recommendations when the numbers are tight." She leaned forward even though she didn't need to, but she knew that it made the front of her uniform open up more. She was happy to see the Chief's eyes dart down to her breasts as she continued. "Those and several other potential near misses that might show later in the flight are already on our board as well, but I don't think it's anything serious. We'll put those down when we get to them." She put her hands on her lap as she leaned back, lifting her breasts. She noticed Nick look again. "We're also running algorithms for the Arcturus system now so when we get close we can make an easy entry. Since the planet is actually the moon of a larger body, it will make our insertion a little tricky but I think I've got a good grip on it. If you want to come down to the astro-labs, I can run you through my insertion plan. One on one."

"That's not all she wants him to do one on one," the engineering Warrant whispered across the table to the doctor with a wink.

She kicked him under the table.

"Thanks Doctor Hawking," said Nick. He wasn't sure if Rebeca Hawking intentionally included entendres in her brief or was just innocently including them. Secretly, he hoped she knew exactly what she was doing. "It all sounds well and good, team." He looked down at his food again. "I can't wait to get to Arcturus." He slid off the bench and picked up his tray. "We'll do this once a week unless something unusual comes up. Hate to have too many meetings." He nodded at the astrophysicist. "How about I come down tomorrow around twenty hundred hours for that brief?"

She nodded at him. "You can come down to my section any time you want, Chief."

The doctor kicked the engineer under the table again because of his smile.

Nick left the leaders at the table, making a mental note to make sure he shaved and put on a fresh uniform for the scientist's briefing. Just in case.

It took just over a month before Nick and Rebecca began to spend their off-time together in the astrophysics laboratory and each other's quarters. The engineer and doctor wondered why it took them that long; they had started their tryst almost immediately.

~~~~ Six Months Later, Ship's Time ~~~~

~ Four Days Later, Planet's Time ~
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Chapter 33

Tolen stepped out of his home and looked at the sky. It was clear blue. *Perfect weather for the festival*, he thought. The people he passed, he noticed, were already dressed in their most colorful clothes for the festivities commencement- which wouldn't start until nightfall. As he had expected, news that this festival would be marked by the welcoming of visitors from another planet had spread like wildfire throughout the planet's population. It seemed that everyone who was close enough to arrive by the festival's start, had made the trip to Rudens.

Tolen had prayed about the festival daily and he felt that the rumor mill had perhaps gotten that bit of information correct. The mill had however, embellished the appearance of the visitors with most now expecting visitors with brightly-colored skins who were anywhere from twice to five times taller than them, depending on who told the tale.

"Good morning Tolen," said a passerby. She was dressed in bright greens and blues- the colors of her lineage. "Today's the day!"

Tolen smiled at her. "I think it may actually be tomorrow, but even so, it will be a wonderful start to the festival with so many in attendance here."

She clapped her hands as she moved off. "Today's the day!" She said to another passerby as she continued to clap.

Tolen smiled at her back as she practically skipped away. He had had several other similar interactions by the time he arrived at the temple. There were hundreds of people milling about in the area even though the official start was hours away- at nightfall.

A large elevated platform had been constructed for the sacrifices and a massive brass-lined pit already had a roaring fire in it- started with coals

brought from the holy fire within the temple that was never allowed to go out. The plaza was filled with tables and benches that looked to be enough to accommodate the town's populace half-again over.

"Like all the benches?" Asked a carpenter. He twirled his hammer in his hand. "Finished the last of them just now."

"I must confess that this is more benches and tables than I have ever seen in one place." Tolen took in the large plaza. "Why did you make this many?"

The carpenter looked at the area. "Well, that was all that would fit. The rest of the people will have to share the rooftops of the people around the plaza," he said matter-of-factly. "Of course."

"We are expecting this many?" Tolen gaped at the man.

"Well, Paramus said he had his priests do a quick census and it seems that over a thousand have come to the festival." He looked around again. "So far. Apparently more are coming each day."

"The last I heard from Paramus was that five hundred were going to visit us."

"When was that?" The carpenter slid the hammer into a worn leather loop on his tool belt.

"Yesterday."

The man smiled at Tolen. "Did you ask in the morning or the afternoon? More are arriving all the time." He spread his arms out wide. "It will be glorious, I think."

Tolen smiled at him. "It will indeed. As long as everyone has a place to sleep, that is." He patted the carpenter on the shoulder. "If you will excuse me, I need to make sure that the sleeping arrangements have been looked into."

The man gave Tolen a short bow. "We will wait here in the plaza through lunch if you are in need of us."

"As usual, my job is made easy by the wonderful people in this town."

The carpenter grinned at him. "Just give a mighty shout, Tolen, and we carpenters will come." He ran his hand down a table, admiring his work, as he walked off.

Tolen shook his head. He looked toward his office. Usually if someone had pressing business with him, they would be seated on the benches in front of the double doors of his office. He was relieved to see no one was there. He decided to find his chief priest instead, so he walked toward that set of double doors.

As he expected, Paramus was in the main worshiping area, speaking with a cluster of priests. He moved silently to the group, not wanting to interrupt whatever instructions he was giving.

When Paramus dismissed the priests, Tolen stepped toward him. "I heard your census takers have said that there will be over a thousand coming."

"No, no. That estimate is not accurate, apparently."

Tolen sighed. "Thank the Father. I was worried we would be overwhelmed. How many are there? Will it be closer to the five hundred we initially expected?"

Paramus stared at him then smiled. "No, no. Of course, that estimate is also not accurate." He spread his arms out. "We are expecting, Tolen my dear friend and glorious leader, two-thousand to arrive by tomorrow."

"Two… two thousand?" Tolen stepped back. "What?"

Paramus nodded. "Oh yes. I have been receiving dispatches from the other towns. From the temples there. The numbers increase every day. If they continue to increase at the same pace, then by tomorrow, two thousand pilgrims will be here for the festival."

"That will be…" Tolen was at a loss for words.

"Historic," offered Paramus.

"Unbelievable," countered Tolen. "Where will they all sleep?"

"Well, when I realized that would become a problem, I returned the messengers with a note saying that the pilgrims needed to bring tents and bedrolls with them. I had copies of the note made and I sent them flying back as soon as they arrived. I am sure the message has reached most everyone."

"But where will they stay?" Tolen looked out at the plaza. "There's no space out there thanks to all the tables and benches."

Paramus nodded. "True. But we can set them up in the streets and they will share the facilities with whatever home they are near." He looked up. "But with the weather like it is, sleeping out under the stars is also a good option." He gestured around. "And the temple will always be open, of course."

"Of course." Tolen whistled. "But two thousand."

"I think it will be a great showing for our visitors that so many have arrived."

"What about the sacrifices?"

Paramus nodded. "The sacrifices will begin tonight as planned with the spotless Odivers. We will also cook more meat to be served to eat along with the sacrifices. The two wild Odivers and Lirpa that were brought back from the hunt will be sacrificed after the visitors arrive so they can partake as well." He put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "But there will be plenty of food and drink for all."

Tolen nodded. "That is good to hear." He couldn't resist smiling. "This *is* historic. Now I think I will ensure that the shopkeepers and artisans are also prepared." He took his friend's forearm with his hand. "I will see you tonight."

Paramus returned the greeting. "Until tonight. And if any more homing Esters come in with updated numbers of pilgrims, I will send word to you."

"Thanks Paramus. Until tonight." Tolen hurried off to check on the shops around the temple. He had spoken with them earlier in the week to ensure they would be open until the festival started, but he now felt he needed to warn them about the increased number of customers.

Chapter 34

Paramus looked up at the clear night as he moved to the front of the platform. There was still a sea of people in front of him even at such a late hour. The sacrifices had been made. Offerings burnt. Singing and prayers had gone on for several hours. Even the pillar of fire that had moved around the outer edges of the area signifying the Father's presence had long since dissipated. Now the people had moved into groups and were talking among themselves as the large fires burned down to red embers.

"Paramus," Tolen said as he approached his friend.

Paramus turned and smiled at him. "Good evening! What a festival this is starting out to be."

Tolen put his arm around his friend and the two looked out at the crowds. "Two cities worth of people. All here before us."

"And more will be here tomorrow."

Tolen looked at him. "Do you know about how many?"

"Maybe five hundred. Everyone else is too far away to make it here by tomorrow."

The two looked out at the people in silence. Finally, Tolen spoke: "In the morning, I'll see about getting tents set up at the outskirts of town for anyone that needs it. All might not have heard that space is limited."

"A good idea." He smiled. "I have to tell you, I saw Argus here at the front of the crowds and he looked like he was going to jump out of his own skin. What is troubling him?"

"He feels that he needs to be the one to bring the visitors to the festival tomorrow."

"Him alone?" Paramus put his arm on his friend's shoulder "How would he manage that?"

"Well, he will have to have someone else since he can't drive a wagon." Tolen sighed. "He told me he has prayed about it and he is adamant that he must be the one to do it and no other."

"Then, I suppose he is the one that must do it." Paramus patted his friend's shoulder. "Do you want me to drive the wagon to keep an eye on him? I think I may be able to convince him of that."

"That would make me feel better," Tolen said. "I know that the Father looks out for us and I should not worry, but it is difficult sometimes."

"As parents, it is our duty to worry about our children." Paramus turned to face his friend. "But I'll be with him to make sure all goes well."

Tolen exhaled loudly. "Well, I will go let him know that you will accompany him."

"Ahhh, when am I to accompany him?"

Tolen hesitated. "I… I am not sure." He smiled. "I haven't asked him that; I was too preoccupied with him going and it slipped my mind."

"Well, I can come visit him tomorrow in the morning to discuss it with him." He shook his head. "I'm sorry to say that I'm in need of an animal; my beast is as stubborn as ever. Giles is at his wits end. Our visitors would starve waiting for our wagon to arrive."

"Well, I will make sure that I have a proper beast and wagon at your disposal when you are supposed to go." Tolen laughed. "The antics between you and your stubborn Weiss…"

Paramus smiled. "Yes, well, let us save that for ourselves. Bring your best behaved beast so that we will start off with a good impression. Having me yell at some beast as Argus greets them would probably not be a good first impression."

Tolen nodded. "Unless they also have a good sense of humor."

"We can always hope."

Tolen patted the High Priest on the shoulder. "Until tomorrow then."

"Until tomorrow."

The two parted ways- Paramus to his family, Tolen to his.

Chapter 35

Paramus knocked on the thick wood door. After a moment it opened slowly. Paramus looked down at Parton. "Good morning to you, Parton."

Parton bowed to the High Priest then he pushed the heavy door open even wider. "I welcome you as a guest to our home," he said in a serious tone.

Paramus put on a serious face and bowed as well. "I am truly honored to enter."

The youth stared at Paramus for a moment. When the High Priest didn't say anything else, he beckoned him in. "Well, come inside; my eggs are getting cold!" He scolded.

Paramus laughed. "That is indeed a serious problem. Lead the way, Parton." He stepped forward as the youth turned and ran back to the kitchen. Paramus shut the door behind him then quickly washed his feet. By the time he got to the kitchen, Parton had the last half of a hard-boiled egg in his hand. "Good morning, all," Paramus said, "how goes the day so far?"

"Good morning," said Loren. "It goes well. Tolen wanted to make sure all the tents are in place so he left early. It was a mighty crowd yesterday." She gestured to a seat. "I don't think I've ever seen that many in one place."

Paramus sat. "It was a sight to see and the homing Esters we received last night indicate we should have another three hundred show up by tomorrow evening." He raised his hands plaintively. "I told Tolen it would be five hundred yesterday but it seems that I had over-estimated."

"It's better to have too many than not enough when dealing with tents," said Loren. "Tea?"

Paramus nodded. "Please. Is Argus about?"

"*He went to the bathroom*," said Parton in a loud whisper. He pointed in that direction.

Loren put a cup in front of the High Priest as she turned to fetch the tea pot. Paramus splashed a little milk into the cup. He smiled at Parton. "I see. Well I suppose I'll just wait out here for him." He put one of the cloth tea bags from the basket on the table into his cup.

Parton's eyes got large. "Yes! Do not go back there; it's private!"

Paramus laughed loudly. "Indeed."

"And you will accompany him today?" Loren asked as she poured hot water into the cup.

Paramus scooped some sugar into the tea and then steeped the bag. "Yes, I shall drive the wagon but let Argus do the speaking as he has been told by the Father."

"Argus will speak to them? Tolen and I discussed that earlier; we weren't sure they would be able to understand each other."

"Well, I have put my confidence in Argus, but just in case some drawings have been made that can be used to invite our brothers to the festival."

"Tolen told me. It is a brilliant idea. It never would have occurred to me."

Argus entered the room. "Good morning, Paramus," he said with a smile. He hobbled to a chair and eased himself into it. He leaned his cane against the table. "I'm sorry if I've kept you waiting."

Paramus shook his head. "I only just arrived." He lifted his teabag out of the cup and put it on his spoon. He wrapped the twine holding it around both to squeeze out the excess liquid. "In fact, I haven't even started my tea."

Argus smiled at him. "I appreciate that you are allowing me to do this. I'm sorry; it's… it's hard to explain but I feel in my heart that I must be the one that speaks to the visitors."

Paramus picked up his cup. "There is nothing to apologize for, Argus. As I told you when your leg was injured, everything happens for a reason." He put his hands on the table. "Just as I am absolutely sure of your injury, I am sure that your needing to be the one to speak to them is also for a reason."

"But why?" Argus sat back. "I do not understand it at all. Why must it be me?"

Paramus startled. "Oh really? You don't know why you are supposed to speak with them?"

Argus leaned forward. "Oh! So you know? That is a relief…"

"No, I just assumed that the Father had explained why you needed to do it."

Argus shook his head. "He did not. Only that I must."

Paramus drank some of his tea as he thought. "Well, we must not doubt the Father's will. There is probably a good explanation."

"Is there?"

"Maybe they would be more comfortable speaking at first to someone who is younger," offered Paramus.

"Maybe they will like his cane," tried Parton. "Or his limping."

Argus reached over and tussled his brother's hair. "I do not think that it is."

"Well, perhaps Parton is right."

"I am?" Parton beamed.

"Perhaps. Remember, they are coming from far away and our ways will be strange to them. The Father has indicated that they are not entirely like us…"

"They are green; I knew it!"

Paramus shook his head at Parton. "No, they are not green. What I mean is that their ways are different than ours. They are…" He paused, unsure of how much he should say to Argus and especially what he should say in front of Parton. He looked at Loren. "It is delicate, the situation," he said finally.

Loren nodded at him. "Parton, why don't you take the rest of your breakfast and eat it while you start your chores in the garden?"

Parton scooted off his chair. "Eating in the garden? Alright!" He picked up another egg and a piece of bread. "Then it does not matter if I drop anything." He ran from the room.

"Thank you, Loren."

"What is the trouble with our visitors?" Loren asked, worried.

Paramus took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. "These brothers of ours are not like us at all."

Argus laughed. "They aren't green, are they?"

Paramus shook his head. "That would be a blessing. These brothers are violent and do not listen to the Father's will."

"Violent?" Loren rubbed her hands together. "How? Why?"

"I do not know." He thought for a moment. "They are like the Clindam; they attack their own to guard what is theirs. They attack others to take things that are not theirs because they feel they want it more."

"That's horrible! And Argus is to deal with them?"

"Everything happens for a reason," Paramus said again.

"The Clindam eat their injured!"

"Loren, you must remain calm and trust in the Father."

"It will be alright, Mother," said Argus. "You do not need to worry."

"Not worry? I will remember you said that and I will remind you when you have children of your own." She gestured at Paramus. "Not worry. That is easy advice, no?"

"As I told Tolen earlier today; it is a parent's right to worry. But even when one worries, one must still trust in the Father."

"I am not worried," said Argus. He stifled a smile. "As long as you aren't bringing your Weiss."

Loren laughed.

Paramus feigned offence. "Well, Tober is a proud and noble beast. A tribute to his kind… but I think we would make a better impression with a more… trained one."

"I thought you were going to use the word stupid," said Argus. Now he was smiling broadly.

"That is also a good word to describe Tober. A noble, stupid beast." He snapped his fingers. "Oh! When are we to ride to meet our new brothers?"

"My father asked me the same thing; it will be at dusk."

"I must be back for the start of the festival, Argus. I really must."

Argus nodded. "Yes, I know. We will not be far off; we are to meet them about an hour's ride by wagon beyond the tents that are being set up for the pilgrims that at are arriving today. Towards the cliffs."

Paramus nodded. "Well, then it will be an easy walk from there to the temple. Everything will already be prepared so I can arrive right when it starts." A thought occurred to him. "I will make sure there are two empty tables in the front for our new guests." Another thought occurred to him. "Do you, by chance, know how many will be coming to the festival?"

Argus looked at the ceiling as he replayed the discussion in the garden. "I do not think it is more than twenty." He closed his eyes as he thought back. "It is more than a handful, but not much more."

"Then two tables should be plenty of space." He leaned forward. "You don't know what they look like, do you?"

Argus shook his head. "I am sorry, I do not."

Paramus snapped his fingers. "Well, it was worth asking." He downed the rest of his now cooled tea. "I shall be back before dusk." He smiled. "And Tolen said he would have a well-trained beast hitched to a wagon ready and waiting."

"Do you always have such trouble with beasts?" Loren asked playfully.

Paramus stood. "Not once they're fully cooked," he deadpanned.

Loren laughed out loud. "Well, there will be no cooking of our beasts of burden."

"If you say so." Paramus gave a short bow. "I shall see you at dusk."

"Until then, Paramus," Loren waved at him.

Paramus left the house and veered by the garden on his way to the street. "How go the chores, Parton?"

Parton frowned. "The vegetables are not growing as fast as I would like them to."

"Well, if you are able to figure out how to get them to grow faster than they want to, you will be the talk of the town."

"I will see what I can do."

"Excellent. I will see you tonight." Paramus waved at the youth.

Parton waved back then returned to pulling weeds.

"Tonight is the night," Paramus said under his breath. He looked at the brightening morning skies. "You know I trust in you, Father, but if you will permit me some worrying today, I would appreciate your understanding." With a final look back at the house, he went to the temple to make sure there would be empty tables at the front of the platform.

Chapter 36

Space Ten glided into orbit around the blue and green planet. Thanks to several maneuvers as they entered the system, they practically fell into a geosynchronous orbit around the city that had been selected for first contact.

"Status?" Nick asked Lieutenant Simpsons. He was standing in front of Doctor Sanderson's console with Gunnery Sergeant and Doctor Hawking. He had once again allowed the Lieutenant to handle the ship as it entered the system.

"We've pulled into orbit right over the target town," said the Lieutenant as he engaged the autopilot and stood. "Local time is roughly fifteen hundred hours," he said as he moved to the sciences and security console. "Nice work Doctor Hawking."

"I try to get my figures tight like a glove," she said.

Nick had discovered that the woman was completely unaware of her entendre-laced speech. "Good work, Doc," he said to her.

"Sundown will be in about four hours on that part of the planet. We head down now?" the Lieutenant asked.

"We can, but I'd advise against it," said the Gunnery Sergeant

"Why's that?"

"Haste is the killer of grunts, Sir. We've just gone thirty-five light years in a leisurely six months, seeing the sights, enjoying the quiet life, then here, right at the end of the mission is when folk'll want to start rushing things all of a sudden. It's just not a good idea." The Gunnery Sergeant put his hands on the console. "You ever been involved in occupying a city, El Tee?"

"No, I can't say I have."

"Well, you're on unfamiliar ground, with troops that are tired from a day's activities and then you set down. There's no time to get anything set up and then all of a sudden it's dark. Now you're on unfamiliar ground, dealing with an enemy that's on their home turf, at night and you haven't set up anything that looks remotely like good security. Your troops realize that right away of course, so none of them get a good night's sleep 'cause they're now worried about getting their throats cut, so you start day two of the occupation with tired, sloppy troops." He leaned back in his chair. "Or you wait a few hours, let everyone get a good night's sleep safe and cozy in their bunks, then put a good breakfast in them and show up just after dawn. All fresh and happy. You've got *all day* to get your occupation going, knock down any heavy-hitters and plenty of time to set up some good security so you don't lose a bunch of your troops your first night."

"Wow, Gunny."

"Right. I think we should wait and clear out this town in the morning. There's a big festival that started yesterday and because of it, there's a whole lot of the 'digineaous pop' in one place. We can hit them first thing while they're tired and hung over and make quick work of it." He smiled. "Besides, that gives them one last good party before we wipe them all out."

"That's considerate of you, Gunny," said the Lieutenant.

"That's me; mister considerate before genocide."

"Well," said Nick, "I hate to go against you Gunny, but from everything we've gotten from sciences, these people don't even have weapons. Don't even know what violence is. We can start this any time and they'll be like rabbits running around. Like you said, they've got a big festival going on since yesterday so we might as well catch a bunch of them all together in one of the main cities. What you say makes perfect sense and if we were going to try and take Detroit, it would be spot on."

"Well, that's my experience. That's how Detroit, Boulder, Los Angeles, hell Athens even, went down," said the Gunnery Sergeant. "I'm not tied to day or night; it's just what's worked in the past with a less than friendly population." He considered Nick's statement. "Course, you are right that they're like a bunch of hamsters down there. We can probably go down now in these circumstances with a high probability of success." He shrugged. "Besides, we've got night vision. These aliens couldn't even spell it. We just need to plan a quick strike and containment operation to finish off everyone here, then move to the next town."

Nick smiled. "Yeah, there's nothing like having a good plan to implement, right? That's when things start to happen."

"What things?" Asked Lieutenant Simpsons.

"Usually all hell breaks loose as the plan falls spectacularly apart." Nick stood. "Drop time is eighteen hundred hours local." He looked at Doctor Hawkins. "When's sundown?"

"We're running into fall so the days are getting shorter." She shrugged. "About nineteen thirty, twenty hundred."

Nick nodded at her. "Three hours enough to be prepped, Gunny?"

"You kidding, Chief? With six months sitting in this lousy twenty-five mile can, doing drills? After I tell those grunts we're going planet-side, we'll have to guard the airlocks or they might just COJ it down."

Nick crossed his arms. "Say, you *want* to do a COJ?" He smiled. "Been a while since I've done a Close Orbit Jump. Jumping the cable chute is getting old." He looked at the lieutenant. "You in for a jump, El Tee?"

The lieutenant blinked. He wasn't sure if they were joking or not. Just to be sure he answered: "I think I'll get the next one, Chief. Once I've actually been to airborne school."

Gunny laughed. "Can't fault you for that, Sir. I'll check the records to see who's certified and current and I'll meet you at ramp twelve."

"Yeah, you too?" Nick grinned. "Nice."

The Gunnery Sergeant stood. "If this planet is a peaceful as they say, this might be my last chance for a combat jump."

"Here's hoping, Gunny. Drop ship in three." He looked at Hawkins. "Hey Doc, what's the jump time from our current altitude?"

Doctor Hawkins considered that for a moment. "Well, two-hundred seventy miles, geosynchronous orbit…" She paused as she calculated the speed of the troops and their distance to the ground. "You're looking at about forty-five minutes of free fall." She continued to do the math in her head. "You'll reach fifteen hundred miles per hour, I'd imagine."

"Mach two." The Gunnery Sergeant looked at Nick. "Real nice. You sure you don't want to come, El Tee?"

The Lieutenant shook his head. "Now I'm really sure."

Hawkins pursed her lips. "I'll come up with an exit point that will get you to the drop zone if you'll give me the coordinates." She smiled. "Plus I'll run the numbers through more than my head to make sure I'm right."

"The numbers in your head are usually spot on, Doc," Nick said. "Hear that Gunny? Drop ship in three, jump will be in two oh five so we arrive about the same time?"

"Hell yes; I'll gen up the manifest. Send me the exact figures, Doctor Hawkins when you get them."

"You get to pilot in to the surface too, El Tee. You're loaded with hours, huh?"

The Lieutenant nodded. "Can't say thanks enough for that, Chief."

"All part of the service, Ground Zero." Nick moved around to the ladder and started down it. "I'm going to get my gear; I'd hate to miss the pre-jump inspection."

"Don't get cozy; you got an hour, Chief," warned the Gunnery Sergeant.

"An?" Nick looked up at him. "An hour?"

The sergeant pointed from himself to the warrant and back. "There's only us two old timers that are qualified jump masters for a COJ. I can tell you *that* without even looking at any training records."

"Old timer?"

"Last COJ was twenty-five years ago. We jumped into…"

"Bucharest," finished Nick. "Holy hell, was that really twenty-five years ago?"

"You got an hour so we can run through the pre-jump checks and a quick refresher of a space jump with the troops."

Nick shook his head as he started down the ladder. "Twenty-five years," he said again with a head shake.

Chapter 37

A group of pilgrims from the small farming settlement of Tomer, fifteen miles west of Rudens, stopped to watch as pinpricks of whitish-yellow lights appeared in the sky above them.

"What are those?" Asked a child. The pinpricks grew yellow tails. "Meteors?"

"It is early for the annual showers." The adult put his hand on his son's head. "I… I do not know."

"It could be our brothers arriving," offered another. "We should wait for them in case it is."

Nods from the others made them all sit to watch the streaks of light. As the group sat and watched, the tails on the falling objects grew in length and took on a reddish color for a full thirty minutes then they finally began to shrink. Behind the cluster, a large white light appeared. It seemed to hang in the sky.

"It *must* be them!" Exclaimed one of the Tomerites.

"Let us go closer to where they are going to land!" Said another. The entire group stood and started to move.

"Stop! All of you need to continue to go to the festival in Rudens!" Paramus shouted.

The pilgrims all turned.

"Who are you?"

Paramus stood on the front of the wagon. "High Priest Paramus of Rudens." He gave a welcoming smile. "Who are you, good sir?"

"I… I am Onbox…" he hesitated because he did not have an imposing title. "I am a carpenter from Tomer and we were coming to the

festival to see our new brothers." He looked over his shoulder. The trails behind the lights had all but disappeared. The only light remaining in the sky was the large one that was behind them. It seemed larger but was in the same place "Pardon me for asking, High Priest, but… why are you driving that young man around in that wagon?"

Paramus looked back. It was an unusual sight, he had to admit. "This young man is our emissary to our visiting brothers from afar."

"Really?" Onbox asked, perplexed. "Him?"

Paramus brought his hands up plaintively and smiled. "I must admit, it does seem unusual." He looked up. The small lights in the sky- there had been at least fifteen of them- were now gone and only one large one remained. "But that is the Father's will." He hopped off the wagon and approached the group. "And it must be only him. Even I will not speak with them."

Onbox looked over his shoulder at the large light in the sky. It was even larger now. His shoulders sagged. "We cannot stay?"

Paramus shook his head. "We will be bringing them to the festival once they arrive. I am truly sorry; only Argus here is to speak to them." He pointed at the young man. "And the only reason I am here is because he cannot drive the wagon on his own due to an injury."

"We are welcoming our brothers from afar with a young man who is injured?" Onbox frowned. "I am sorry, High Priest, but I do not understand."

"Neither do I," admitted Paramus. "But the time is getting short. The sun is almost gone and I must drive the wagon for our young friend and be back for the recommencement of the festival." He put his hand on Onbox's shoulder. "I ask you again, please continue on with haste to the festival and we will meet you there with our special guests."

"Of course, High Priest. Of course." Onbox gave a short bow. "We are sorry to have delayed you on your duties." He waved. "And good luck to you, you lucky young man!"

Argus waved back even though he still did not feel lucky.

Onbox gestured to the others in his group. "Let us get to the festival!" He started to walk off then stopped. "May we tell everyone there that our brothers have arrived?"

"I do not see why not."

The man smiled broadly. "We shall see you there, High Priest Paramus!" He gave another bow to Argus. "And we shall see you there as well, youngster. I pray you heal quickly."

The group shuffled off at a quick jog.

Paramus returned to the wagon. "That was quite strange."

Argus shook his head "I do not wish to alarm you, Paramus, but what just happened will not seem strange when you look over there." He pointed above and behind the High Priest.

Paramus turned and looked into the sky. High in the air were a large number of white disks. They seemed to be floating in the air. He did not know their size so he had no way of knowing their size.

"What are those?"

"I have no idea, Argus. But we need to go toward them." Paramus hopped onto the front of the wagon. "Hold on!" He took the whip and cracked it above the Odiver's head. "Go!"

The beast took to a trot as Argus held on tightly. He reclined in his chair- which had been padded with several pillows. A long box had been tied onto the wagon and padded so he could rest his leg on it.

As the two approached the falling disks- they were able to count eighteen of them- they saw that they were indeed large and, as they got closer, they realized that there were objects hanging under them that swayed

back and forth. Even more alarming was the fact that the large light above them had moved closer and they could now see that it was massive compared to the large disks.

After another five minutes, Paramus stopped the wagon because it was obvious that the disks were going to hit the ground less than a hundred feet from them. They could also tell that there were actual people hanging under the disks.

"Should we get closer?" Argus asked.

Paramus shook his head. "I do not know where that vessel will land and it looks so large, I do not want to get close to it." Even with the disks fairly close together, the vessel that floated above them -without its own disks to support it- extended far past them. It was at least a hundred feet long and half that wide. It was a large grey box that seemed to float on light. "That is amazing," he remarked as the people under the disks hit the ground. When they did, the disks, which he could now see were curved on top, billowed and collapsed as the men bundled them up. "They seem to be made of merely cloth. Round instead of shaped like a glider. Interesting." He shook his head. "I can see you young ones doing that very same thing that from cliffs in six months' time."

"Well, I will be healed by then," said Argus with a smile.

"Your poor parents." He hazarded a glance back at the youth. "Make sure you start low to the ground or over water until you figure out how to make those things properly."

Argus laughed. "We will."

Paramus laughed as well. "I see; now it is *we*. Soon all the youths of Rudens will be floating in the air like the Iders."

Paramus and Argus watched as the visitors each bundled up their cloth disks and shoved them into large green bags. By the time they had piled them up, the large vessel had landed silently nearby. Within moments of

reaching the ground, the light under it went out. The entire area went dark until lights around the vessel turned on, bathing the entire area in bright white light.

Argus shielded his eyes. "I do not understand, Father, but I will do what you have asked of me."

"Argus?" Paramus hadn't been paying attention to him because he was too busy watching what looked like giants come from a ramp that extended from the vessel. Even more alarming, several equally massive wagons rolled from one end of the vessel. They did not seem to have beasts pulling them, or any visible driver, but they still managed to exit the vessel and move around the milling giants and stop near them in a cluster.

"Let us go to them Paramus," Argus said as he steeled himself. "Time is growing short."

Chapter 38

"Check out the welcoming committee these critters came up with, Chief." The Gunnery Sergeant tapped Nick on the shoulder. "I mean, just *look* at that. It's embarrassing is what it is."

The pair turned as a lone wagon approached. A four-legged animal which looked like it was a cross between a camel and a buffalo was pulling it. There seemed to be one alien driving the wagon and another sitting in the back.

"What the hell? That's what we get after traveling billions of miles and making an entrance the likes they've never seen?" He lifted his rifle and pulled back on the charging handle, loading a round into the chamber. "I might just shoot them on principle."

Nick chuckled. "There's no telling. Gunny. Hey- maybe there's a bunch of warriors hidden in the back of that thing."

"That'd be something at least."

"Well, if there are Gunny, just cut them all down. I didn't come all this way to get speared by some primitive."

The Gunnery Sergeant thumbed his rifle's safety off. A red dot appeared at his feet where the muzzle was pointed. "Got it Chief. Anything happens, you hit the deck and I'll take care of the rest."

"Sounds like a plan." Nick exhaled loudly. "Might as well get this show on the road, see who's who in the… wagon." He smiled. "Hey, how about I give the El Tee his first contact?"

"You're spoiling that kid."

Nick nodded. "Don't tell anyone I've gone soft. People are liable to start pushing me around." He turned to face the Marines that were milling around. "Lieutenant?" He called.

Lieutenant Simpsons jogged up to him. "What's up Chie…" He stopped as he saw the wagon approaching. "What the hell?"

"Gunny, get the men ready to move." He pointed at the armored transports. "Not sure we're going to need armor on this job, but it beats walking. El Tee, you and I'll go say hello to these two." He looked at the young Lieutenant. "Ready for your first contact?"

The Lieutenant still hadn't taken his eyes off the wagon. "I suppose?"

"If you want them dropped, just hit the deck to get out of the way," said Gunnery Sergeant. "Got it, sir?"

The Lieutenant nodded. "Got it."

"You going to shoot the lame one or you want me to? Tell you what, I'll shoot the lame one. You get anyone else that jumps out." Nick put his thumb on the safety of his rifle but he did not turn it off.

"We're going to shoot everyone soon enough, might as well start with the ones that are easy to hit," remarked the Gunnery Sergeant. "Festival's going on. That's what I like to call a target rich environment. I imagine we can wipe out half the town by midnight. Then we come back to the ship, park in a five-hundred-foot hover till morning."

"Nice and easy." Nick glanced at his lieutenant. "We don't need a *ground zero* out here."

The Lieutenant smirked at him. "Nice."

"Let's go," said Nick.

The pair walked toward the wagon, which had finally stopped after turning sideways. The older alien that was driving the wagon did not even make eye contact with the two Humans as they approached.

Argus twisted in his seat as the two giants approached. They were almost twice his height. He picked up the satchel which contained the drawings.

"That little one is in charge?"

Nick shrugged. "Seems like it. Let's go talk to the runt and see who's who in the alien zoo." He turned and gave the sergeant a thumb's up.

The Gunnery Sergeant gave one back, then turned around. As he approached the Marines, he began to shout at them.

Lieutenant Simpsons put his hand on his pistol.

"Just don't shoot anyone until we know what they are doing out here." Nevertheless, Nick put his hand on the butt of his Mönchshof Seven Zero Three he had slung over his shoulder.

As they approached, the small alien in the back stood shakily, then slung a bag over his shoulder. He then reached down and grabbed a cane.

"*He's* in charge of the planet?"

"Don't jump to conclusions, El Tee," warned Nick. "Oftentimes it's not what it looks like. Let's get over there."

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After walking the hundred yards, they reached the wagon. They stopped and stared at the small, crippled alien- he seemed to have a large wrapping around his knee.

The alien looked to the front of the wagon to the older alien that still was looking down at the rear end of the beast that had been pulling the wagon. After a moment, he returned to staring at the Humans. Finally, he rummaged in his satchel and pulled out a parchment. Leaning back on the chair for support, he unrolled it. There was a nicely drawn representation of a town on it.

"That's the town not five miles from here. They're having that festival," said Nick. "Somehow they knew we were coming."
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"How is that possible?"

Nick shrugged at his lieutenant. "Maybe they spotted the probe as it whizzed by. It's been doing it for a year now."

The alien smiled at them.

"Yeah, right back at'cha." Nick smiled. "We come in peace, shoot to kill."

"Sure, sure. You can trust us; we're officers," said the Lieutenant. Then he smiled as well.

Chapter 39

Argus watched at the two brothers approached. They seemed massive. He looked to Paramus for support, but true to his word, he was leaving the entire greeting to him. With a sigh, Argus looked into the satchel and removed the first drawing- of Rudens. He leaned back on the chair for support as he unrolled it.

The two brothers looked at it for a moment then spoke to each other in a language that seemed completely foreign to him. Argus smiled; he was the first person on the planet to hear the brothers speak!

When the brothers smiled at him, he was elated; they understood that was his town. He dropped the sketch as he reached into the bag and pulled out the second parchment. This one was a sketch of the festival.

Nick and Simpsons watched as the alien youth dropped the first drawing and then pulled another from the satchel. It seemed to be of a large temple with long tables set in front of it. Hundreds of aliens seemed to be celebrating.

"Hey- that's the festival. They're inviting us to the festival. I'm beginning to like this kid. I just might feel a little bad when I shoot him."

"These critters are pretty smart," remarked the Lieutenant.

Nick pointed in the direction of the town. "I suppose so." Nick nodded. He knew from the briefings, that a nod also meant yes to the aliens.

Argus held up the drawing of the festival. Once again, the two brothers spoke to each other in a strange tongue. The older looking of the two pointed toward Rudens then nodded. He knew about the festival? He dropped that drawing into the wagon and reached for the last one that

showed the wagon and the brothers walking together toward a smaller depiction of the festival. "Yes, the festival is going on. Come to it with us," said Argus.

"He's digging for another drawing, Chief. This could go on all night. I expected first contact to be a little more… I don't know. Exciting?"

"Welcome to my world; expect excitement, get boredom. Expect nice and calm, get shot at." He sighed loudly. " 'Course, now I'm interested in what this next drawing is."

The alien pulled out another drawing. It was of what seemed to be Humans accompanying the wagon to the festival.

"They're a little off on the scale, but still, that's pretty accurate. How did they figure that out?" Asked the Lieutenant.

"I have no idea," said Nick. "I think I'm going to hang those up in my house after we wipe these things out. I kind of like those sketches."

'Yes, the festival is going on. Come to it with us', said the alien.

"Oh, the hell with it," said Nick. He switched to Sivulliikian. "Yes, the festival is going on now. *We know*."

Argus was looking from one brother to the other as they spoke, hoping they understood what he was asking them to do when he heard the taller one say 'Yes, the festival is going on now. We know' in his own tongue! His accent was unusual, but the words were all correct! Stunned, he sat back on the seat.

"I'm just going to shoot these two, Chief," said the Lieutenant. "Then we can head to town."

Nick shook his head. "That other group isn't that far off. They'll see what happened and then they'll scatter. If any of them get to town, we'll be chasing them around the entire countryside. I don't want to be searching the hills for hundreds of these little critters." He looked at the alien and said in Sivulliik "Just a moment."

The alien nodded dumbly at him.

Nick put his arm on the Lieutenant and guided him around and started walking toward the troops. "We'll go into town with this little cripple; he's no threat at all. Take a dozen or so troops. Once we get there, we can start working our way out. We can have the remaining troops spaced around the town and start working their way in. Then we can start working our rings towards each other and get probably eighty percent of them before midnight. Reports are that there's just over six-thousand of them in the town; that's almost ten percent of the planet's pop in one place. We can get some shuteye while they're dealing with the dead and then we clean up the rest in the morning. We can set up remotes to make sure no one gets out during the night."

The lieutenant nodded at him. "That's a great plan, Chief." He looked at the Marines. They all seemed to be waiting for orders. Even Gunnery Sergeant had stopped shouting.

Nick tapped his comm-link. "Gunny," he said.

After only a moment, the Gunnery Sergeant answered. "What's the deal, Sir? Is this really all they sent?"

"Beats a bunch of angry warriors. He's our ticket to get us to the middle of town."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, Gunny. We're going to go into town with them with two squads. The rest of the troops will spread out around the town with remotes in between them. When we get there, we'll clear outward and they'll clear inward. When we meet, we'll call it a night and set up remotes to keep anyone from running off."

The Gunnery Sergeant considered that for a moment. "Sounds like a plan. With the size difference, telling friend from foe will be a breeze. We can jump jet our troops around the town. You take twelve plus you two for

fourteen. I'll take the other…" He paused as he did the math. "Other eighty-seven and put them a couple hundred yards apart around the town."

"How many remotes you have?"

"Brought two-hundred Em-Squats. I can stick them between the troops and have a nice tight cordon." The Gunnery Sergeant smirked. "Cheap labor, remotes." He gestured at a mass of eleven-foot tall, mostly matte grey robots. They had two thick, five-foot long legs that ended in four massive claws. The legs were attached to four-foot wide, four-foot tall barrel chests that were more ammo containers than anything else. In all, the Multipurpose Sentry-Cordon-Quarantine Automated Turret Soldiers, or 'Em Squats' held eighty thousand rounds and enough battery reserves to remain on duty for six months. Instead of traditional arms, they had four articulated barrels that could shoot independently in all directions. A series of sensors on its stubby head provided imaging through the entire spectrum of light – seen and unseen. "I'll alternate the Em-Squats with every other second Grunt. The Squats have a thousand-yard range and we can just pull them back and leave them in place overnight. Once they cut down a few of them who try to run for it, they'll get the point."

Nick nodded. "How long to set up?"

"Well, I'd say forty-five to do a loop of the city and rappel in my grunts and shove out the remotes. If we fly around fifty feet, you can just pitch the bastards out." He grinned even though he knew Nick could not see him doing it. "Squats not Grunts."

Nick nodded. "Let's get this show on the road." He turned back to the young alien and said in Sivulliikian loudly: "We will accompany you to the festival."

Argus looked at him. "All of you?" He thought back to what Paramus had said about allocating two tables for the visitors and his feeling that there would be a small number of brothers coming with him.

Nick shook his head. "The two of us and a very small group. Twelve of our soldiers will go."

"Twelve?" Argus beamed. "Twelve?"

Nick glanced at the lieutenant. "That's weird," he said in English. "Give us a moment to get ready to go," he said to the alien.

"I am Lieutenant Jeffrey Simpsons," said the Lieutenant in Sivulliikian. He had been listening to the language feeds every night and was excited to actually speak to an alien.

Argus did a double take at the other brother who also seemed to speak his language. His accent was strange as well, but strange in a different way. Even so, the words were all correct. "I am Argus." Argus gave a short bow.

"Be right back," Nick said in Sivulliikian. He put his arm on the lieutenant's shoulder and turned him around again. "Ever been on a farm, El Tee?" He asked as they walked toward the Gunnery Sergeant.

"Uhm, no?"

"You don't name the animals you're going to be eating later in the season."

"Oh, sorry." He grinned. "I just got excited back there."

Nick nodded. "It happens. Let's pick the mystical twelve who'll go with us."

The pair walked toward the Gunnery Sergeant. He was now yelling at the Marines about target acquisition and muzzle awareness.

"Gunny, who you want to send with us?" Nick asked.

"Should we take an em-squat?" The Simpsons smiled. "Just in case?"

Nick shrugged. "If you want to make a grand entrance, we could. Bringing an eleven-foot tall robot to an Iron-Age festival would just about do the trick."

"Got them programmed for anything not human with two legs, so they're ready to go." The Gunnery Sergeant gestured toward them. "Grab

one on the way to the wagon and I'll have twelve Devil Dogs meet you there." Without waiting for a response, he turned and began to shout out names.

"Let's get this show on the road," said Nick again. "It's getting late."

Chapter 40

"It's getting late, Argus," said Paramus. "We must start back very soon."

Argus nodded at him. "This is going well, I think. *Did you hear that they speak our language*?"

"I did. They sounded strange, but I understood them."

"And those grey beasts there!" He pointed at the em-squats. "What sort of creatures are those?"

"I believe they are mechanical. Like the gristmill that runs on water or a wind-up toy."

Argus gaped. "Here they come and… and they are bringing one with them!"

They turned to look at the two brothers as they approached. It was strange but beside the grey beast, they looked tiny, even though Argus knew they themselves were giants.

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Nick and the lieutenant walked to the crowd of remotes. "Which color you want?" They looked at the em-squats. As they often did, they shifted their weight from leg to leg, turned and tracked anyone that walked past and even occasionally moved their articulated weapons. One even absently scratched its side with one of its barrels. The programmers of the robots had discovered that they were more imposing when they appeared to be more 'alive' so they had added algorithms that made them fidget and look around at their environment when they were not doing anything in particular. It was an effective way to keep trespassers at bay- especially low-
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intelligence aliens who might mistake a stationary robot for one that was deactivated.

"Kinda like the stripes," said Nick. It had become a tradition with the Marines to paint the robots when they took them on missions, oftentimes right over the paint of a previous squad. Because of this, they were covered in a hodgepodge of random patterns and designs after only a year of service.

"How about the red striped one?"

"Sure." Nick knew that they were for all intents and purposes, identical. He did have to admit that the black and red stripes that streaked down from the top of the robot's head to the ends of its arms and legs was done quite well. Nick leaned to read the number stenciled on its side. "Em two oh nine." He said to it.

Upon hearing its designation, the machine rose to its full height and ran its weapons through their functions checks. When it was satisfied it was operating properly, it responded: "Mike two oh nine, operating at peak efficiency," it growled at Nick. "Instructions?"

"Accompany to town. Provide crowd control. Engage local populace only on command."

The robot nodded its squat head at him. "Orders fit mission parameters. Complying."

"Let's go, Mike." Nick gestured at the wagon. "That-a-way."

The em-squat turned as the two Humans started to walk, falling in step behind them, claws making deep gouges in the soft earth as its thousand-plus pounds moved along.

"El Tee?" Nick gestured. "It's all yours."

"We will accompany you, Argus" he said in Sivulliikian.

"That will not fit in the wagon," Argus said, pointing at the machine.

"That can run faster than your beast there for four months straight. It will just follow on its own. We will ride in the wagon with you, and the others will follow along as well."

"It is a long way."

Nick nodded at the alien. "They are also able to run for long distances without tiring." He pointed at the Marines as they approached.

Argus looked at them- both men and women. They seemed to have grey bars running along their arms and legs that attached to a small grey box on their backs. "Because of the devices?"

Nick nodded. "Yes." He looked at the sky. "It is getting late. We should go."

Paramus picked up the reins. "I agree. We must go now," he said. "I will not be made late."

Nick looked from the older alien to the youth. He was now unsure who was in charge. "Then let's go." He moved to the front of the wagon and hopped on beside the old alien. "Waiting on you now."

The Lieutenant climbed into the back next to the youth. "We're moving out, Marines," he said.

"Let's go," Nick said to the alien beside him impatiently.

After they had rode only half a minute, the sound of rifle fire cracked overhead. The older alien reined in the beast and the wagon came to a halt. Everyone turned to look.

Nick flipped down the visor on his helmet and increased the magnification. The Marines and several em-squats seemed to be firing at something in the distance. He increased the magnification and followed the tracer rounds and saw a large group of aliens running away. They were unaccustomed to the weapons that were firing at them and had no idea what to do. Because of this they ran in a straight line for the next hill. They were practically lining themselves up to be massacred. As they ran, shots

dug gouges in the ground around them. This continued until the last of them had cleared a hill that put them out of sight of their attackers.

Nick watched flabbergasted as his Marines were unable to hit even one of the aliens as they ran. He glanced back and saw that the Lieutenant was also watching. "We're still sitting at fifty thousand, it seems. Gunny's gonna put those grunts on permanent range duty."

"I can't believe they missed every one of them." The Lieutenant said. "The Em-Squats too. That's crazy." he said in English.

"What is that?" Asked Argus.

"Celebratory fire," lied Nick.

"I do not know what that is," said Argus.

Nick shrugged. "When our soldiers celebrate, they fire their weapons into the air." He was confident that the pair of aliens were unable to see what has occurred since it was almost two miles away. "It's nothing to worry about. Right Simpsons?"

Simpsons nodded. "Right, Chief."

"You are a chief?" the older alien asked.

Nick nodded. "I am indeed."

The older alien nodded then snapped the reins. The creature obliged by picking up a trot.

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The group rode in relative silence for almost five minutes when a warm wind suddenly swirled around the wagon. Paramus closed his eyes but did not stop the wagon. Nick looked back. The Lieutenant gave him a shrug.

After a minute or so, the wind died down and the older alien nodded.

"Paramus?" Argus asked.

Great, thought Nick. Another name.
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"It is nothing to be concerned about, Argus," Paramus said. "We continue to the festival." He turned and looked at Nick. He seemed sad.

"Everything alright, Paramus?" Nick asked. He dropped his hand to the butt of his rifle.

"It is, chief," Paramus responded.

Nick nodded at the alien. "Good."

Paramus looked forward and concentrated on the way ahead even though there did not seem to be a road for him to follow. The group rode in silence with only sporadic banter from the Marines to interrupt the quiet.

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As they approached the town, Nick's his collar chirped. The sound seemed blaring in the silence.

Paramus startled. "What was that?"

"Someone is calling me," he explained. "Chief here," he said in English.

"Chief," said the Gunnery Sergeant. "The cordon is set. Just give the word and the fireworks'll start."

"Sounds good, Gunny. Just try to leave as many of the buildings as possible; we're going to need a place to sleep." He surveyed the town. "The places are kind of short since these aliens are, but it's better than nothing until we get some fabrication centers up and running."

"Roger that," replied the Gunnery Sergeant. Another chirp from Nick's collar indicated that the man had closed the connection.

"Is there any problem?" Paramus asked.

"No. Just a routine check by my men," lied Nick. "Let's get to the festival."

Paramus nodded. "We are almost there."

"Gunny didn't mention the marksmanship issue they had." Simpsons remarked.
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"I wouldn't either if I were him. Damned embarrassing."

As they entered the town, the group snaked through several intersections before reaching the temple depicted in the sketch.

Nick and Simpsons hopped out of the wagon. "Thanks for the lift, Paramus," Nick said.

Chapter 41

"Just relax until I say so," said Nick. "Give me a perimeter." The Marines moved out to provide a circle of security. They were severely outnumbered. He looked as another alien approached them. "Here we go. This will be a cakewalk, Marines. By now the first ships are on their way and we can send ours back in a month once we're settled in."

"We are here from far away," Lieutenant Simpsons said in Sivulliikian to the approaching alien.

The alien stopped in front of the two. "I am Tolen, the leader of this town. Rudens."

"We are from Earth," said the Lieutenant.

"No small talk, El Tee," Nick said in English. He looked at Tolen. "I want to make an announcement to your people, Tolen." He gave a nod to the Marines. They thumbed the safeties on their weapons and they hummed to life. "Just wait here."

Tolen shook his head. "No, you will not. You will not speak to anyone."

Nick tapped the butt of his rifle. "Yes, I will. You wait here. You're not in charge anymore. Things are changing here in Rudens. On all of Sivulliik, in fact."

Tolen shook his head again. "That is not how things are going to work out."

"Really? You sure about that?" Nick put his hands on his hips. His left hand was right beside the butt stock of his rifle. It was already loaded, the safety was off, and it was set for explosive rounds. He was now planning to

shoot the annoying creature from the platform as an example to the others so they could all see the power of his rifle. "Real sure, Tolen?"

Tolen nodded. "It was all explained to me." He crossed his arms casually, either ignorant of how close to death he was, or not caring. "And the fact of the matter is that you are not welcome here. You were given opportunities. A lot of opportunities to change your ways and you made bad decisions all along."

Nick put his hand on his rifle. "Well, I'm really good at making bad decisions. And sticking by them."

"And," Tolen continued as if he hadn't been interrupted, "I've been told your decision now has two paths." Tolen moved forward. The fire crackled behind him, sending embers skyward. He pointed up. "You can see where you came from, from our planet, yes?" He asked amicably.

Nick blinked at the alien, unsure of what to think of the sudden change in topic. He slipped his hand down to the grip of his rifle. He was sure the Arcturian was stalling, but he wasn't sure why. "You're stalling."

"I'm not sure I understand what you are saying," said Tolen. "I'm just relaying the message as it was given to me."

"Then I want to talk to whoever is in charge if it's not you." Nick looked around the fire. There were about a dozen inhabitants milling close to them. "Which of you is in charge?" He lifted his rifle and panned across them. "Who?"

"The One in charge is here. But you are not to speak to Him."

"It's one of those deals, huh?" Nick trained his gun on Tolen. "Someone else pulls the strings. Well, I'm tired of pussyfooting around. I've got a job to do and only a short time to do it. So..."

"You can see your home from here. I was told you could," interrupted Tolen. "Correct?"

Nick exhaled loudly. Stalling wouldn't get the inhabitants any real extra time; they were on the verge of extinction and didn't even know it. Giving him a few more minutes would mean nothing in the grand scheme of things. "Yes, yes we can. Not that you'd understand it." He turned and pointed up at the sky. "There, that star there. See it?"

Tolen moved beside Nick. "Which one? I was told I needed to see it as well."

Nick moved the alien to his right shoulder- away from his rifle- "It's there. See the one that's shaped like a pot with the handle pointing to the side?" He gestured with his finger as he traced the constellation.

"I see the pot." The Arcturian closed one eye as he traced it with his finger as well. "It's the pot?"

"*No*. Now if you go from the handle of the pot two stars over, that's our sun." He pointed to make sure he knew where he was pointing. "That bright one there. Not that it makes any difference, or that you'd understand, but that's our sun. It's about thirty-six lightyears away. A light year is the distance light travels in a year. That's a little over 36 lightyears distance away."

Tolen craned his neck to look at Nick. "Light moves as light moves. You cannot see it move from one place to another."

"I told you, you wouldn't understand. What you are seeing is the light from our sun that was cast off from it about thirty-six and a half years ago. Not that it makes any difference to you because..." As Nick looked upward, the Sun winked out. "... Because you'll..." Nick hesitated. "... Never..."

"I understand now, why I was supposed to know where your sun was."

Nick turned on Tolen. "What do you mean *was*?" Being 36 light years away, the light he was seeing was history- only a few years after he joined the service. He had married his wife about that time. Had there been a

telescope strong enough, he could have looked back at his own ceremony there on the roof of his apartment building, thirty-six years ago. There was no way that the light from then would go out since Nick himself had been there- the light in the sky included him. And everyone else he knew. He looked back up. There was a black space in the night sky where Sol was supposed to be. "What is going on?"

Tolen moved away from the human. "I was told to tell you that you have but one more chance to decide your fate. Just one." He crossed his arms again. This time it was not in any way casual. "I am also supposed to tell you to leave here. You are not welcome. You and all your people are free to go to one of the other places..." He panned his hand across the night sky. "... that you also found. You are to be fruitful and multiply there."

As if on cue, Paramus approached. He had a thick leather satchel in his hands. "You are to take this with you to guide you in your decisions. I was told you would understand it." Paramus held the satchel out. "As for myself, I cannot read it," he said matter-of-factly. Without ceremony, he held it out for Nick.

Nick staggered back. Was the Earth gone? How could it be? It was there not six months ago while he himself was there! He looked up again. "What?" His hands tightened on his rifle. "What is happening?"

"If you do not take this and leave, you will also..." Tolen let his voice trail off, leaving the threat as mysterious as the black space in the sky that used to have the Earth's sun in it.

Nick staggered forward and took the satchel in numb hands. His rifle clattered against his hip hanging from its sling but he didn't seem to notice.

"Chief?" Asked Lieutenant Simpsons. "What do we do?"

Nick looked from Tolen to the Lieutenant and back. "What do we do?"

"Take the satchel with you," said Tolen. "You will go see where your home was because you are doubters." He uncrossed his arms. "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."

Nick looked down at the satchel.

"And you are not to come back unless you believe." He pointed at the human. "It is time for you to go. Now," he said with finality. The Arcturians who had been milling around the fire moved farther away. Tolen turned and without another word, walked toward the wagon.

"Chief? What just happened?"

Nick turned to look at Simpsons. "I don't know." He shook his head. "I don't know." He looked up at the sky again; hoping that whatever trick had been played was over. The spot in the night sky was still dark. "But we're going back to look. Now!"

"You heard the Chief," barked the Lieutenant. "Back to the boat!"

The Marines standing guard had moved out to where they didn't hear the interaction between Nick and the Arcturian so they hesitated.

"We are leaving, Marines," said Lieutenant Simpsons. "Asses and elbows!" The Lieutenant looked up at the sky- he was close enough to hear the conversation the two leaders had just had. He moved beside Nick. "Chief, what just happened?"

Nick shook his head. "I'm not sure." He looked up again. "But we need to get back to Earth."

"Then what?"

Nick opened the satchel as they walked back the way they had come, toward the landing craft. The satchel was filled with several hundred sheets of thin parchments. He pulled one out. It was written in an elaborate script. In English. He read the first few lines, eyes wide.

"Chief?" Asked Simpsons. "What's the deal?"

Nick looked at the young officer. "Apparently…" He looked back up at the night sky. Where the Earth used to be.

"Chief?"

"In the beginning, there was darkness."

END

Reviews are the lifeblood of a writer. If you enjoyed the story, please take a moment and leave a review on Amazon.com, Amazon.co.uk, and GoodReads.com.

Thanks very much.

The final two books in this series are finished and available on Amazon; Remnants of Sol, and Jordan.

For more books by me visit www.RobertPWills.com or my Amazon page amazon.com/author/robertwills.

About the Author and Illustrator

Sara Allen is a new edition to Robert's pool of illustrators. Lots of talented artists running around the clan. By marriage not blood, which is why Robert's sketches are easy to spot. Sara's art has received accolades in various shows and is also available for sale. Please visit her on FaceBook at **SaraAllensArt**.

Robert P. Wills is a retired U.S. Army, Chief Warrant Officer Four. He and his long-suffering wife have retired to Kissimmee, Florida where they are spending far too much time walking around the various theme parks in the area.

Except Sea World.

The employees there tend to yell at Robert for petting the dolphins. At the dolphin petting pool. No, he doesn't understand it either.



He plans to continue his writing antics while retired with several books in the works. Book five in his wildly popular Tales From a Second Hand Wand Shop series, *Grimbledung and the No Good, Terrible, Horrible Mine*, will be published in mid/late 2015 with Book 6- *It's the Election, Stupid* moving along with a publishing date in early 2016. Along with unstable Gnomes, his rollicking -violent- pirate story *The Sailings of Pirate Nonn* should be ready for publishing by mid-2016.

Unless he is eaten by a shark first.

Thanks for reading all the way down to here.