

Strays



Ron Lynne

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For Mimi

Strays is a collection of short stories masquerading
as a novel.

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This book is dedicated to all the strays waiting for
homes.

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Klaan

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“Ready to jump, Captain.” The statement brought Captain Alex Gardner back to the present. He had been playing out the last 11 months in his head, wondering if they’d missed anything. No, but their sensor limitations made him question even that. Not his crew, they were the best of the best. But the UEF Shepherd was on the edge of their technology, prone to going just a little too far at times, out pacing its safety limits. But here they were.

“Make the FTL jump Commander.”

Commander Klein made the standard announcement to the ship. FTL jumps were pretty common by now, but felt unsettling if you weren’t prepared. Some crew members said they felt stretched out, which was technically accurate, but not a good description. The ship darkened a moment due to the power drain that happened while the FTL engines fired up. A moment later and they had covered a massive distance that would have taken several years in the old colony ships.

The colony ships were so hastily made and haphazardly launched that there was really no guarantee they’d find one, let alone the dozens they expected to be out here. Many carried limited or outdated communication. Few had location beacons. The ‘Shepherd’, the first FTL ship to launch from Earth, skipped along with short jumps, then spent days or weeks scanning as far as they could with their limited sensors. It was slow and tedious.

Captain Gardner moved to the scanner station with Commander Klein. “Start a standard search pattern.” They studied the map layout ahead of them. “How far to Proxima Centauri?”

Commander Klein did some calculations, checking

numbers and formulas. "A little over three light years."

Captain Gardner grimaced. "It's taking so long."

Commander Klein turned to face him. They'd had this discussion before, so they both knew the response. "Our sensors can't scan during a jump, so we have to..."

Captain Gardner sighed and cut him off. "I know, and we must be thorough. I'm just..."

In turn, Commander Klein cut him off. "You're impatient."

The Captain responded defensively. "I want to see results!" They'd traveled a full light year and had not seen any sign of a colony ship. Not that they expected one this close, but it was still discouraging. Their mission was to track and locate any colony ships launched from Earth in the past 40 years. None should have reached Proxima Centauri yet.

"Captain, I believe we have found... two ships?" Commander Klein looked at the Captain as a restrained excitement spread across the bridge.

"Mr Klein, send coordinates to navigation. Pilot, best speed."

Two hours later the Shepherd had reached their destination. As an image came on the monitor screens Commander Klein let out a quick breath. Gardner moved to a screen. "Commander?"

Klein studied his monitor. "Sir, one appears to be a cargo section from a colony ship. It's dead in space, the other appears to be... alien?"

The entire bridge crew looked at each other. Although the possibility of first contact was on everyone's mind, no one really expected to find actual

aliens. There was still no indication they even existed, let alone frequented this part of the galaxy. After a moment of stunned silence Captain Gardner jumped up. "OK people, first contact protocols. Let's go. Open all channels. Charge forward repelling plating. Let's hope they're friendly."

Despite a flurry of activity it was deathly silent on the bridge. Gardner and Klein moved to a communication station and Klein began looking at signals. "Sir, from what I can tell the cargo section was cut loose. It's partially empty. Maybe the ship had an automated repair protocol?" He was interrupted by a signal from the comms station. Gardner looked at him expectantly. "It seems to be a signal from the other ship. I'll see if I can connect."

After a moment an image appeared on the screen. They were greeted by their very first vision of an alien. A thin humanoid shape with a round head. Dark skin, thick like leather, and an expression that seemed to show no emotion. Facial features similar to human, but spread out and a little less defined. A garbled string of words came through, with a computer voice seemingly translating words to English that didn't make any sense.

Klein studied the screen. "Sir, our translator is trying, and I believe theirs is too. We never expected to use this with aliens, it's only ever used Earth languages."

"Brat shine greet loop talk"

They looked at each other. "Greet? Talk?" Gardner asked and Klein nodded. Captain Gardner faced the camera and spoke slowly. "Hello, I am Captain Alex

Gardner of the United Earth Federation ship Shepherd. We are on a mission looking for ships launched from our planet before we had FTL capabilities.” He waited, more garble was heard as the alien waited patiently.

The alien spoke, with what appeared to be a smile. It was hard to tell as he had no lips so the smile was simply a wide expression. Finally he looked to the side and spoke again, the computer speaking over alien words.

“I am Captain Sassen. Translate... have more talk?”

Klein looked at the Captain. “They probably need more speech from us to learn the language. I can send the histories that we have on file.”

“Do it” Captain Gardner turned back to Sassen. “Captain, we are sending several audio and video files that detail our recent history, if that will help.”

Captain Sassen waved his hands toward him, and looked off to the side, while holding up both hands, seemingly asking them to wait. Finally he spoke, the translator working much better. “Captain Gardner, again, I am Captain Sassen of the Klaan Collective. We understand you are looking for ships that launched without FTL? Generation ships or hibernation ships?”

“Hibernation, we developed FTL shortly after the last ship left and we’re going to try to find them. They were not the best quality at times, hastily launched and built.”

Sassen looked curiously, “According to these histories you sent, your planet was in a worldwide war and people feared they would perish?”

Captain Gardner took a deep breath, realizing that Earth’s last 100 years were not particularly impressive beyond the last 30 or so. “Yes Captain, it was a dark time. We hope that they may choose to return with us

to Earth to continue rebuilding our world.”

Captain Sassen held up a hand again as someone spoke, then faced them again. “Captain Gardner, where were these ships headed?”

Gardner pulled up a visual, detailing the sector, he pointed to Earth, then to the Alpha Centauri system. “This is Earth, they were headed here, the nearest star system to ours.”

Sassen nodded. “Your files indicate you have the FTL capabilities to jump there, why are you so far away?”

Gardner nodded, “We can jump, but our sensors are limited. Also, our navigation is experimental, so we’ve been doing smaller jumps for the last eleven months.”

Captain Sassen waited for another translation then seemingly laughed, a sort of musical cough and grunt. “You are moving so slow, but I understand, if these colony ships were poorly built they may be off course. I assume this is a part of one of your ships?”

Gardner nodded, “So it would seem. We’re not sure why it was ejected.”

Captain Sassen listened again to someone off screen, then resumed. “Captain, we rarely visit this quadrant, you are the first FTL capable species here, and from what we can tell, possibly the only sentient species for hundreds of light speed units.” The translator buzzed, then repeated, “light years.” Sassen continued. “We have scanned this ship, there is a substantial amount of an intriguing material. Some sort of organic originated polymer in various shapes and sizes.”

Gardner looked at Klein, who shrugged and guessed, “Plastic? There would be a lot of it from that time and if they cleared out necessities they may have left some

behind.”

Gardner faced Sassen again, “Yes, I believe you’re referring to what we call plastic. It’s made from petroleum at a base level which I suppose has an organic origination point.”

Sassen waited, reading something. “Petroleum, interesting, we will study that in your library. I see you have a section on your planet. Substantial water, Oxygen and Nitrogen atmosphere. Fascinating. Extensive volcanic and seismic activity.” Gardner and Klein looked moderately surprised. “Also, extensive predators among your fauna, how unusual. You...” Sassen tested the word directly, without the translator. “Humans... must be resilient. Your world is intriguing.”

Gardner spoke, “We’d be happy to share more information if you’d like.”

Sassen nodded, “Yes, we’ve already copied more of your history files. We will study them.” Klein looked at his monitor, realizing the aliens had indeed been scanning their archives. Sassen continued, “In the meantime I have an offer for you.”

Gardner looked at Klein and they both looked forward. “Yes Captain, what is that?”

Sassen gestured a crew member on screen. “This is Lieutenant Bren. He currently serves in our diplomatic corps. We are on our way to a meeting with another member of our collective, and will be gone for several months before we come back this way. If you would allow us to take the contents of this cargo ship with its plastic, I would like to assign Lieutenant Bren to your ship until we return. My science officer assures me that our species share similar survival needs, oxygen, sustenance, basic physiology. Mr. Bren can assist you with your sensors to better detect your colony ships,

and we can learn more from each other.” Sassen smiled. “A diplomatic exchange?”

Gardner looked at Klein who shrugged. “Protocols state that first contact should involve learning whatever we can.”

Gardner nodded. “Captain Sassen and Lt. Bren, we would gladly welcome the Lieutenant on our ship. Please send along any information that you can. And we will treat him as an Ambassador.” Sassen laughed his guttural laugh.

Without warning Lt. Bren and a few large cases materialized on the bridge. A stunned Captain Gardner greeted him. Bren spoke to the Captain in perfect English. “Captain, I am happy to be here, pardon the quick transport but I’m afraid our ship is in a hurry, as we dropped out of FTL to investigate this ship.” As he spoke Klein motioned to the Captain and they watched as the Klaan ship pulled the colony ship section into a launch bay and disappeared. Lt. Bren smiled the strange wide smile and pointed at the sensor station. “May I take a look?”

Gardner, still a bit put off by Bren’s sudden appearance, gestured at his cases. “Would you like to see where you’ll be staying? Perhaps unpack and get a quick tour of the ship?”

Bren waved his hands down. “No thank you, that can wait. Let’s see if we can improve your sensor range.”

Klein led him to the sensor station. “I am Commander Klein, first officer here. If there’s anything you need please ask. How are you able to speak our language?”

Bren produced a small data device from his jacket and began scanning. “I have an implant. As a member

of the diplomatic corp I am required to speak clearly in many languages. I loaded your new language protocols before coming aboard.” He grunted. “Your carrier waves are extremely inefficient. Have you not developed FTL communications?”

Klein looked at Gardner who shrugged. “No, we haven’t.” Klein looked on as Bren’s device caused the sensor screen to jump. Klein’s eyes widened as he began to receive notifications.. “That should be helpful.”

Klein looked on as new data began appearing on screen. “What did you do?” Bren was scanning the workstation. “I compressed your carrier waves. Although digital waves carry a small footprint, ultimately they are harder to compress, so I converted them to analog, for the travel protocols. Analog waves can be compressed without as much data loss...” He stopped, and turned to Gardner, “Forgive me Captain, I just made a substantial upgrade to your systems without asking. If you would like to confine me to quarters I will understand.”

Captain Gardner smiled and looked at Klein, who was excitedly opening files. “Sir, our normal automated pings to Earth are arriving in near real time. I’ve already received a return ping. No more month long delays.”

Captain Gardner turned to Lt. Bren. “Lieutenant Bren, while I would expect you to ask next time, there is no need for any reprimand, you have given us a great gift.”

Lt. Bren looked quite relieved. “Thank you sir, I could have lost my commission for such an insubordinate act on my ship. It was a simple fix therefore it didn’t occur to me that it was a major change. I completely...”

Bren was interrupted by an excited shout from Klein. "Captain I found one!" He pointed at a map, with a small flashing dot. "Four hours travel from here at maximum sub-light. Sending coordinates to navigation. It would have been a week before we searched that sector."

Gardner turned to Bren. "It looks like your help is already paying off."

Lt. Bren's skin darkened to an almost black color and he smiled his wide smile. "Captain I am so gratified. I must tell you it was my suggestion that I come here. I was so impressed that you would go looking for your people. Most races in the collective send out colony ships and if they don't hear from them, they simply consider them a loss. We have almost a trillion people on over 90 planets." Gardner nodded as he indicated to the navigator to depart.

Bren continued, "Especially in this ship with this technology." He laughed, then noticed Gardner and Klein looking at him curiously. "I apologize, I meant no offense. It's just that your ship has FTL without all the support systems that FTL usually requires. I don't even understand your jump technology. You just hurl yourselves across space, not knowing exactly where you'll land, or what you've passed through." He smiled. "You're fearless!"

Gardner smiled, "Yes, fearless. I suppose. Commander, would you give Lt. Bren a quick tour and assign him quarters? See to any of his needs."

Bren nodded, "Thank you Captain, and again, apologies for my insubordination. I assure you it won't happen again." Gardner nodded as Bren and Klein picked up Bren's cases and left the bridge. Gardner returned to his chair to look over the navigational

plans, wondering what they'd find when they arrive.

As Bren and Klein moved through the ship Bren fired questions as fast as Klein could answer. "What do you eat?"

Klein paused, "We carry stocks of preserved foods, and we recycle water and food byproducts. Essentially we make a base that contains all of our needed nutrients, then flavor it so it's... palatable."

Bren nodded, "You reconstitute your waste products. Efficient. I can offer some help there." He looked at his data device, "We scanned your ship, aside from the propeller guns, do you have other weapons?"

Klein thought a moment, "I'm not sure how much I can tell you, we have the... rail guns, and we do carry some other types of weapons, but we are not a warship. Most of our ship is quarters and storage, so that we can carry refugees and supplies."

Bren nodded, "What if your refugees don't want to return home?"

Klein tilted his head, "We did anticipate that, if they have the means to survive, we will take them to Proxima Centauri, but I'm hoping they return to Earth. We came very close to destroying Earth, our population was cut down substantially. In a way we need them back."

As two women passed them Bren turned curiously to Klein. "It appears you have genders. How many?"

Klein responded, "Two primary genders, with some variations."

Bren looked surprised, "Only two?" Klein nodded as Bren continued, "Your logs say these ships had a maximum speed of around 5% light speed. That means it would take them just over 87 of your years to get

there. Would any have arrived? I see no record of any launch information in your histories.” Klein was relieved to reach Bren’s room.

“Unfortunately, due to the war, records were either lost or never filed. We only know the first few ships, which began leaving forty years ago.” Klein gestured into the simple quarters. “Here we are Lieutenant.”

Bren nodded, “One more question, well, two, if I may?” Klein forced a smile. “The histories state that the Mars accident of 2067 effectively ended the wars. Can you elaborate?” Klein hesitated. “If that’s a difficult subject you can direct me to any histories I could read, commander.” Bren waited, finally Klein spoke.

“The frequency of colony ship launches became overwhelming, many countries had descended into anarchy and if a group could get a ship together, they would just leave. Many left with untested systems, limited supplies, fuel was becoming scarce. But many people felt that our world was nearing its end. They were desperate. In 2067 the largest ship ever carried 16,000 people into space. As it circled Mars, waiting for its launch window, something failed and the ship crashed into a station on Mars.”

Bren was surprised to see Klein’s emotional display. He shifted uncomfortably until Klein composed himself. “We don’t know who was on the ship, we don’t know if the ship had a name even. We only know there were 16,000 people. Humans who were so afraid of our own destructive nature that jumping into a giant tin can and, as you put it, hurling themselves into space, seemed a reasonable choice.” There was silence as Bren waited. He continued, “The accident made us realize what was happening and changed the course of our

history.”

Bren examined Klein’s reaction. He could see that humans carried empathy for their fellow humans of a type that he had never experienced. Caring for others was mostly a matter of efficiency. Everyone dies, and while it was sad to lose a comrade, it was more difficult to replace a pilot or comms officer.

Finally Klein spoke. “And the second question?”

Bren was almost startled, taking a moment to remember. “Ah, yes, would it be acceptable to send written communications to my captain? He asked for full reports if possible.”

Klein smiled at his observance of protocol, something that was far more relaxed on the Shepherd. “Yes of course. I will show you how to use the computers, and send you a communication regarding our duty schedules. I assume you’ll want to work on the same schedule as the Captain and me?”

Bren smiled again. “Yes, please. I am looking forward to your food! I have brought some of my own, perhaps we can share some of our favorites?”

Klein laughed, “I don’t have any favorites on the ship! I eat simply because I must.” He leaned in close to Bren, “It tastes like garbage.” He laughed heartily and after realizing the joke Bren joined him.

Bren sat down at his workstation, looking at the controls. He had already unpacked the few personal items he carried, and set out some small machines and devices, before exploring the quarters. He was fascinated that a military transport had what appeared to be artwork on the walls. He also used his implant for a refresh session, speaking the human word “nap.” He required a minimum of one unit per day, and had taken

twice that time. He noted that humans apparently slept three to four times more every cycle, or day.

Using his own device he managed to interface with the human workstation, and connected to the communication program. He spoke into his device, as the words appeared on the screen.

“Dictate report.

Lieutenant Bren, temporary assignment: UEF Shepherd.

To Captain Sassen, KCC Victory.

“Captain, my first few hours on the Shepherd have been fruitful. I was able to upgrade their communications capabilities and they believe they’ve found their first colony ship. The crew calls them ‘Strays.’ Something to do with the human practice of domesticating animals as companions. The humans are fascinating. They seem to have great empathy, perhaps even love, for everyone.

“Commander Klein got emotional when discussing the Mars accident that brought about the end of the last war. While emotions are typically a liability when unchecked, as was the case with the Banezz people, for the humans I believe it is their strength. They truly care. Their emotions, while deep, don’t seem to be incapacitating. It is a sign of that empathy and love that they are willing to travel in this ship. Somehow it is functioning perfectly, despite the unbalanced nature of the systems.”

Bren paused to rub his throat, finding the pressure point that relaxes a Klaan. “I do think we will need to

watch them. I do not think they are dangerous, but they are decidedly reckless, and naive. I am still surprised that they have not only invited me to their ship, but actually left me alone for several units. I am not under guard, or any substantial restrictions. I tested their protocols and they seem willing to set aside rules if the benefit is worthwhile.

“I do not believe they are near being ready to apply for membership in the collective, but I don’t believe we can leave them to their own designs. They went from 5% light speed to FTL technology in about a third of the time that most races do. They figured it out so fast that other technologies are simply not ready for space travel. They did this as they were determined to save their Strays. It’s truly impressive, and a little ridiculous.”

Bren looked at the screen and realized he couldn’t read it. He had left his translator in Human language mode. He let out a string of expletives that mostly translated into pops and buzzes. “Aefg oiobn oaei jhiuui!” He pushed a few buttons on his device and the letters garbled into characters he knew on the big screen by the desk. After a moment, he was satisfied.

He was about to start again when a buzz came over a speaker and Captain Gardner’s voice piped in. “Lieutenant Bren, please report to the bridge.”

Bren arrived on the bridge as Klein and Gardner looked at a view screen. “Sir?”

Gardner turned, “Lieutenant, I thought you’d want to see this.”

On the screen was a ship. It was unlike any ship that Bren had seen. It was a long cylinder with a blunted nose. There were engines on each end, and

aside from that, nothing much to look at. The outer hull was a mismatched patchwork of different metals and colors. "Captain, is this one of yours?"

Gardner nodded as Klein provided an answer. "I see no markings, and the hull is a haphazard mix of titanium, steel, and... aluminum? The ship appears to be intact and undamaged. However, it is off course."

Bren looked over his shoulder and chimed in. "They will not reach the Alpha Centauri system on their current trajectory."

Bren had a sudden thought. "Did your people know that there was a habitable planet around Proxima?"

Klein nodded, "We did, although we didn't know exact atmospheric conditions. The second planet is in the habitable zone, and appears to have water, oxygen, and similar gravity to Earth. But that's all we knew back then. Now we know it is uninhabited, and there do seem to be areas where humans could survive. Resources are scarce, but the Strays knew that going in. It was a long shot..." Klein trailed off as the computer beeped. "Wait! I am reading an oxygen atmosphere inside the ship. Breathable." Klein looked at Bren. "Is this what I believe it is?"

Bren looked. "Life signs, four life signs."

Gardner exhaled sharply. "Only four?"

Bren touched a few buttons. "423 hibernation modules, intact and functioning. Four conscious life signs."

Klein looked at Gardner curiously. "Four people are awake."

Gardner paced, looking at the ship. "Can you hail them?"

Klein nodded, "I have, but they may have shut down

their comms. There's no reason to believe they'd need them." They were interrupted by another beep. "Sir, I'm getting a... a radio signal."

"Radio?" Gardner repeated. They all stood still as audio crunched into the bridge, scratchy and weak.

"This is a distress call. This is Earth Ship New Denver. We are en route to Proxima Centauri but have drifted off course. We've spent as much fuel as we can but have not fully corrected. If you can assist please send a visual signal to the front of the ship where there is a small window. This is an automated, repeating signal." More static, then silence.

"Find that window Lieutenant Jeffries!" Gardner excitedly directed the ship's pilot. She nodded and moved the ship slowly as Klein and Bren looked for a window.

Bren saw it first. "There?"

Klein agreed. "That's it, full stop Lieutenant." The ship came face to face with the top of the New Denver, looking at two small portals. The bridge crew stood silently.

Gardner thought out loud, "How do we get their attention?" The bridge was silent.

Bren asked "Can you signal with a light?"

Gardner and Klein exchanged a look, as Gardner turned back to Bren. "We left without installing the lights, we haven't needed them and so they are still in the maintenance section."

Suddenly Klein jumped up. "We can hit them with a grapppler" Bren looked confused but Klein continued. "That ship has minimal shielding. Like a submarine, a noise would echo throughout the ship."

Gardner nodded excitedly. "Commander, prepare the grapppler. Jeffries, ease up into range."

Everyone rushed to their assigned stations and after a few minutes, were ready. Captain Gardner sat in front of a view screen. "Commander, knock on the door... gently, let's not punch a hole."

Klein nodded, "I have identified a reinforced titanium section, it should be fine, and hopefully loud."

"Proceed" said Gardner. They waited in anticipation, eyes glued to the monitors. The grappler moved to the New Denver and bounced off the front of the ship. Klein retracted it and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Minutes went by and Klein asked, "another knock sir?"

Gardner was about to answer when Lt. Jeffries squealed. "Light!" Everyone looked to see a small light flashing from inside a portal. It was making a pattern: three short flashes, three long, then three short. After a moment it repeated.

Gardner recognized the pattern. "Morse code."

Klein added, "S.O.S." Bren looked confused. "It's a distress call,"

Captain Gardner moved to Bren's station. "How do we reply?" There was thoughtful silence until Gardner joked, "Anybody got a flashlight?"

Klein laughed, as Bren piped in. "Captain, you have magnetized shielding on the front of the ship, correct?"

Gardner nodded. "Will it hold an electrical charge?"

Klein looked curiously, and nodded. "It should, but why?"

Bren moved to a workstation. "This area has a high concentration of a type of dust that can be luminous when charged. It is typically harmless but if we could apply an electrical charge to the front of the ship we may be able to create a bit of incandescence. Not enough to direct a beam of light, but enough to show that we heard their message perhaps. It should look... unusual."

Gardner smiled at Bren, "Do it!" Bren made some calculations, then flipped a switch. An external camera showed a slight colorful glow on the front of the ship. A multicolored, shimmering cloud. Not bright, but noticeable. Gardner continued "If we turn the charge on and off could we do quick flashes like they did?"

Bren looked. "Perhaps a few, the dust is losing it's luminosity." Gardner looked around, "What do we send? Something short."

Klein suggested "Earth." Gardner pointed at him as he took Bren's seat. He thought for a moment then began switching the charge on and off. They waited.

After a moment the light on the New Denver came back on, waving excitedly back and forth, before making circles, then pointing toward the nearest side to the portal. Gardner stood up and flipped on a communicator. "Colony rescue team one, please report to airlock two." He then turned to Jeffries, "Lieutenant, put the forward airlock up against whatever door or hatch they were pointing at. Mr Klein, let's install those lights - soon." Gardner nodded at Bren. "You coming?"

Bren jumped excitedly then stopped. "Do you think

it's wise to have me there? Their first sight of an alien?"

Klein laughed, "Our first alien was just a few hours ago, they'll be fine. Plus, they may want to thank you. Your upgrade found them!" Bren smiled his wide smile and followed them.

The rescue team was waiting as the three arrived from the bridge. They looked excitedly at Bren. Gardner realized not everyone had seen him. "OK, folks, we can make formal introductions later, but this is Lieutenant Bren of the Klaat collective."

Bren raised his hands and spoke, "Greetings! I look forward to working with you all." The rescue team were in pressurized suits, and the Captain and Commander began putting theirs on. Bren looked a little uncomfortable. "Captain, I've not worn a pressure suit for many cycles. I'm not sure how these work." One of the rescue team looked him over quickly and directed him in donning the suit. He explained the functions.

Gardner tapped on his helmet. "Can you all hear me?" Everyone but Bren nodded. Klein reached over and pushed a button on his arm. "How about now?" Bren nodded.

The rescue team approached the airlock and investigated the small tunnel. Once the entire team was in the lock, they closed the door. The Captain nodded and there was a slight thump as the airlock re-pressurized. The team lead approached the connection to the New Denver. There was a circular port, with a few mechanisms. She looked at the captain again when she heard a tapping from inside the New Denver.

Commander Klein spoke up. "Morse code again. Safe

— Open.” One of the levers jiggled. Then jiggled again. The team leader grabbed it and pulled, it didn’t move at first but then slowly flipped up and the door popped out a few centimeters. There was a seal, and as a vent of air drifted out the seal separated and the door pushed open.

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New Denver

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The Shepherd team were face to face, or helmet to helmet, with someone in an older pressure suit. The visor was dull but human features could be made out and they excitedly waved everyone inside the New Denver. After everyone crammed into the airlock the New Denver passenger pulled the airlock closed. They pushed a button and the airlock balanced its pressure. They crammed into the small area until the inner door opened. Three more humans stood inside the next room. They were a bit ragged but seemingly healthy. All three were smiling and barely able to contain themselves.

The Shepherd team pulled off their helmets, and Gardner held Bren from removing his, holding up a hand. He faced the group. "Hello! I am Captain Alex Gardner of the..." He paused, speaking slowly for emphasis, "United Earth Federation." He let it sink in.

The woman in front spoke immediately. "Captain! We are so unbelievably excited to see you. I'm the mayor of New Denver." She looked at the others. "Temporarily." The others shook their heads. She continued. "My name is Caroline Gilmour. Are you able to help us? Did you receive our message? Wait, how did you catch up to us?"

Gardner held out a hand for a handshake, greeting her. "Miss Gilmour..."

She interrupted, "Caroline, please." Gardner nodded and continued. "Caroline, we have a lot to tell you. But first, I need to introduce you to someone." He nodded to Bren who removed his helmet and smiled even wider than usual. "This is Lieutenant Bren. He is an ambassador from the Klaan Collective and he is the one who helped us find you." Bren held up his hands as the

four colonists grinned in excitement.

Gardner continued. "We are from a different Earth than when you left. We have developed faster than light travel. We are the first Earth ship with FTL, our mission is to collect our Strays and bring them home." The four colonists looked at each other and breathed a heavy sigh of relief.

Caroline exhaled. "Captain, you have no idea how happy that makes me." The other three men approached the Shepherd team and pulled them into hugs and embraces. Caroline looked at Bren. "Mr Bren, it is so exciting to meet you."

She turned to the Captain, "We had detected evidence of another ship a while back, but we couldn't communicate with them. They may have seen us as space junk. We have torn apart our comms to keep other systems going. When we drifted off course we were awakened from hibernation.

In our attempt to course correct we realized that we couldn't do enough. So we decided to remain awake and limit energy usage. We cannibalized systems to keep life support functioning, but we won't survive the whole trip, especially not on this course."

Gardner looked at her. "You were hoping to figure something out?"

Another man spoke, his beard and hair the scraggiest of them. "We were working on a solar sail. We have most of what we need but..."

Klein finished for him. "No way to install it."

The man nodded. "I'm Tom Smith. I was an engineer on Earth. I built the majority of this ship."

Klein looked again. "Was this a missile?"

Smith grinned. "Three of 'em."

Caroline looked at Gardner. "Do you have mag

boots?” Gardner nodded as the Shepherd crew flipped a switch on their suits (Klein showed Bren where the button was) and their feet clicked down to the deck. They hadn’t realized they were weightless, as there wasn’t room to move.

Smith stuck his head back into the space. “Come on folks, come see my ship!”

Smith led the group through a small series of hallways before reaching the main part of the ship. As the Shepherd crew entered the cargo space they all looked shocked. Smith squeezed out in front of them. “We managed to fit everything in!”

Indeed, the main cargo hold, while efficiently organized, still looked like a haphazard crush of hibernation chambers and cargo containers. No space was wasted, every square centimeter had something in it.

Smith continued, “430 sleep pods, and enough supplies for a year. We planned to cannibalize the ship after we touched down.”

Klein was taking it in. “Parachutes?”

Smith nodded, “Six on each end, which should allow for a side landing. There are emergency ports on all sides so we don’t land on the only exit.”

Bren was scanning with his device. “Your oxygen mixture is low.”

Caroline spoke up “We are running on minimal oxygen, recycling as much as possible. We were supposed to be asleep until we reached Proxima. We had to adapt.”

Bren was curious, “According to my readings you would run out before reaching the planet at this rate.” The four looked at each other, silently acknowledging what they already knew.

Gardner broke the uncomfortable silence. “Yes, well, it doesn’t matter now. We are here, so there will be oxygen for all.”

Caroline smiled. “We agreed that two of us would go back to hibernation soon, hopefully after correcting our course. It was still being figured out.”

Smith turned to the Shepherd crew. “Do you have the capability to transfer the hibernation pods as they are now?”

Klein responded, “No, we will have to wake everyone up.”

Smith exhaled sharply. “That will take some time. As you can see they are packed tight in here. But I suppose we can get rolling.”

Gardner indicated the rescue team leader. “This is Lieutenant Chen, she is the leader of the rescue team. We have plenty of people to assist, and we can get this process moving. Caroline, could I speak to you?”

Gardner and Caroline moved aside as Chen began discussing the process with Smith and the others. “Caroline, we are hoping that you will all come back to Earth with us. While we have made great strides, we have substantial work still to do, and we want to bring everyone home. What are your thoughts?”

Caroline stepped into a small nook. “Captain, I know that some folks here will want to go on to Proxima, but I really don’t think it will be the majority opinion. We are under-supplied, and off course. We were in for a serious hard time going to Proxima. If we were unable to find other colonists we might not have made it.”

Gardner nodded as she continued. “I don’t know what it’s like now, but Captain, we really thought it

was over. Earth was dying. Another five years would have been irreversible. It was a lousy choice.”

Gardner nodded. “When did you leave?”

She rattled off the date easily, “July 24th, 2067. We managed to get ahead of the Behemoth at the SpaceX Texas station.”

Gardner furrowed his brow. “The Behemoth?”

Caroline nodded, “That wasn’t its name, but it was a damn behemoth. It was enormous and they were having trouble finding enough fuel. They offered to take us with them if we’d give them our fuel but that ship seemed troublesome. We declined and skipped them in line.”

Gardner sighed. “I believe that was the right decision. It sounds like that ship ended the war.” Caroline looked confused.

Gardner continued. “In August the - Behemoth - launched, and a few hours later it crashed into Mars, killing 16,000 people. It caused the world to take a step back. A cease fire was called for mourning, and that was the end of hostilities.”

Caroline looked shocked. “It still feels like a few weeks ago, but it was... how many years ago was that?”

Gardner moved next to her. “Thirty-three years ago. It’s 2100 now. We’ve been looking for you and the others for the last eleven months.”

Caroline thought a moment, taking it all in. Gardner moved toward the cargo area. “But there will be time for all of that. We have detailed audio and video histories of the last 40 years that you and your people can catch up on. The progress we’ve made is remarkable. I’m not sure who you have on board, but it’s important to note that Earth is now a unified

federation, there are no more hostilities between nations or tribes. The Mars tragedy served as a wake up call, a catalyst for our future unity.”

When Caroline and Gardner returned to the cargo area the rescue team and New Denver crew had already awakened around 25 passengers, who were in the re-orientation process, coming to, and taking in their surroundings. Bren was attempting to help, but he was the main attraction, and people circled him, firing off questions and treating him like a celebrity. As soon as Klein or Smith would shoo them away another group would come up. Bren was smiling, it didn’t seem to bother him.

Gardner approached Chen. “Lieutenant, moving quickly I see?”

Chen grinned, “Mr Smith is on top of it. He has charts and protocols and we should have everyone awake within the day.” Gardner nodded in approval. “Unfortunately Captain, it will take longer to retrieve the supplies.”

Gardner nodded, “Well, we will retrieve as much as we can, but if the colonists return to Earth, the supplies won’t be necessary.”

Smith had just returned and heard the last comment. “Earth? We can go back? I figured it’d be a dead planet and any survivors would live on the Moon stations or Mars.”

Gardner smiled, “Mr. Smith, the engineering progress of the last thirty years has been remarkable. You’ll be impressed.”

“Captain?” Smith quietly asked, “Did any cities survive? Denver?”

Another voice chimed in, “What about Paris?”

Gardner held up his hands. "Folks, there will be a time for answers to all these questions, for now, let's get everyone up and over to the Shepherd." He turned to Smith, winked and nodded with a thumbs up, then asked, "What was your profession on Earth? I assume an engineer, but...?"

Smith smiled, "I was a General in the Canadian Space Exploration Force." Gardner looked surprised. "Yes, I was a General, but - in name only, because I led the stellar exploration projects. I was not a military man. Once I saw what was happening I began planning the New Denver."

Gardner smiled, "So I don't have to salute?"

Smith laughed. "I was an engineer, nobody saluted me. I avoided my uniform whenever possible."

Gardner continued. "Why Denver? You're Canadian?"

Smith smiled wide. "My wife is from Denver. I think you'll be able to meet her, and my son, within the hour."

Gardner smiled and turned to Chen. "Lieutenant, do you have what you need?"

Chen nodded, "Yes sir, permission to bring cargo teams over?"

Gardner nodded, "Proceed, the rest of you, if you don't need to be here, come with me."

Caroline and one other colonist turned to follow Gardner, Klein turned to follow but noticed Bren deep in thought. "Lieutenant? Coming back to the ship?"

Bren exhaled and turned. "Yes Commander." He was visibly effected by the experience.

Klein spoke quietly, "Are you all right Mr. Bren?"

Bren nodded, wiping away moisture from his eyes and nose area. "I am surprisingly moved by this

experience.”

Klein nodded. “Our first rescue. And it’s thanks to you.”

Bren smiled, trying to decide if he would share his analysis that the New Denver would have run out of oxygen in mere weeks, while still decades from their destination.

Back in his quarters, hours later, Bren continued his letter to Captain Sassen. “Captain, we have completed our first rescue operation. The ship was named “New Denver,” after a city on Earth. There were 427 surviving passengers, three had perished during the flight. The ship was remarkable. A conglomeration of three weapons, guided missiles that were originally loaded with nuclear fusion devices. Aside from the propeller guns, which they call rail guns, they have other weapons, perhaps nuclear, but have not shared details with me. I do not believe they have a large supply. They have no energy weapons, and as we saw initially, no energy dispersion shielding.

“Their compassion and absolute commitment to each other is remarkable. The colonists and the Shepherd crew are acting as if they are all tribal family. This despite just meeting for the first time, and just over 30 Earth years from a worldwide war. They call it World War Three, so not the first large scale conflict, but their first war to feature such destruction, this war yielded hundreds of nuclear fusion detonations. Prior to this war only two nuclear devices had been detonated in a war.”

Bren read through some of the words before continuing. “Tonight the Captain is hosting a celebration for finding their first strays, who have

already unanimously agreed to return to Earth. I am to be an honored guest, surprisingly.” Bren grinned, then closed down his smile. “Of course, I will remain focused and continue my mission. However, Captain, I must admit that I am enjoying the company of these humans. At the party tonight the Captain has said that I will learn about an Earth entertainment, a fictional narrative video known as a movie, as well as a pastime known as bowling.”

There was a beep indicating a visitor, and Bren pushed a button to release the door. Gardner, Klein, Caroline and Smith stood outside. Bren noticed that Smith’s hair on his head and face had been cut short. As they stood waiting another woman and a young child joined them, presumably Smith’s family.

“Ready Mr. Bren?” The captain smiled warmly.

“Yes sir, one moment please.” Bren looked over his device, nodded and sent the message. He smiled his wide smile and followed them toward the celebration.

* * *

Welcome Home Strays

* * *

“Hello, my name is Derek Williams. I am the Executive Officer of the STRAYS program for the United Earth Federation. Welcome to the UEF Shepherd. As you may already know this is the first faster than light ship commissioned by the UEF. You are about to see a brief presentation to answer some common questions regarding the STRAYS Program, and recent Earth history since you left.

“You’re probably wondering, what is the UEF, what is the STRAYS program? Well, we’ll get to that, but first, let’s talk about the last 50 years or so.

“As you know, Mars colonization began in 2049 with the advent of advanced sub-light engines. Trips to Mars were possible in days instead of months. Moon bases were built, it was a new generation of space travel. As sub light engines got faster and more efficient, plans for hibernation ships to travel to distant stars began to take shape.

“In 2055 tensions in the USA and Europe came to a head, as the financial crisis of 2038 continued. The Civil Cold War in the US finally spilled over to Europe, Russia, and Asia. You were all here on Earth for that, but it’s worth noting for the timeline. In 2060 the first colony ships began their journeys, an 87 year trip to Proxima Centauri, the same year several countries declared war.

“Two years later the first nuclear weapons were used, destroying Los Angeles, and killing millions. Thus began the nuclear nightmare of the 2060s. As World War Three continued, dozens of cities around the world were targeted, millions more were killed. During this time things seemed hopeless. The US, North America, and most of Europe had descended into chaos and

anarchy.

“Then, people started to leave. It appeared that this war would destroy the Earth and thousands of people, just like you, simply left. The first ships to leave were built by the big three Aerospace companies, however, as time went on, people began building their own ships. They re-purposed Mars cargo ships, early Mars ships, really, anything that could make the trip. The chaos made this possible, albeit difficult.

“By 2067 as many as 200 colony ships had left. Some from Earth, some from the Lunar stations or even Mars. Ships launched under-prepared, with too many passengers as the resources for space travel became scarce. Due to the chaos, and a lack of record keeping, we don’t really know how many ships and people left, nor do we know when they left. We only know one date for sure. August fifth, 2067.

“On August fifth, a ship carrying 16,000 humans crashed on Mars, killing everyone on board, as well as 27 people on Mars. We don’t know who they were. No records ever emerged.

“August Fifth is now an International holiday. Unity Day. After the tragedy on Mars an immediate cease fire was declared. The world took their first collective breath of peace in nearly twelve years. We looked around and realized what we had done, and we were determined to be better. Temporary treaties were signed, and in 2068, the United Earth Federation was established. Initially designed as an updated United Nations, it quickly grew into a cooperative federation of every nation worldwide. Sovereign nations still exist, but all have agreed to the charters established by the UEF.

* * *

“The UEF initially drew up a three pronged plan to rebuild. These became the tenets by which the UEF operates.

“Number one. Rebuild. Clean up after ourselves. It was clear that simply fencing off radioactive or dangerous areas would not be sufficient. New technologies emerged as a technological renaissance began to take place. Cities and lands were made safe again, and new buildings and communities began to emerge. Many cities, such as Los Angeles, are preserved as memorials to those who died.

“Number two. Revive. Take care of our people. All people. After years of chaos the old system of greed and capitalism was not appealing to anyone. We transformed our world economy, using technology to give people the ability to do what they wanted: work, start a business, raise a family. People had options as technology assisted in keeping society functioning. Poverty, starvation, homelessness, all things of the past. Education, innovation, art and culture are the new benchmarks of success.

“And finally, number three. Return. That’s YOU! Our third, and many feel most important pillar of the UEF is to bring our travelers home. Strays is a nickname that stuck, and seemed appropriate. The Strays Project objective required the biggest technological leap of all: Faster Than Light travel, or FTL. We knew that colony ships would begin reaching Proxima Centauri around 2147, and we set a goal of launching the Strays Project by 2100. We succeeded.

“In the late 2080s, “Snap” technology was discovered. It allowed us to make large jumps in mere seconds. After years of perfecting it, we were finally ready, and here we are. The UEF Shepherd launched on November 19, 2099, six weeks before our self imposed deadline.

“If you’re watching this, it means we found you, and we are so very excited to invite you home. Of course, continuing on to Proxima is an option, and we will supply you as best we can, and get you there within days. Proxima 2 is a fairly dry planet, but it has breathable air, water, and many regions that are habitable. It will not be easy, but colonizing the Proxima system is a future goal for the UEF.

“However, if you choose to return to Earth we will welcome you with open arms. You will be revered travelers, returning home. Your knowledge of our past will be used to fill in the gaps in our history that were lost. You may find your hometowns rebuilt, your families a few generations further along, and the world a wonderful place to live. The population of Earth was severely reduced, and the truth is, we need you back. And we really hope you will join us here on Earth. The Earth humanity always dreamed of.

“We’re here, and we can’t wait to meet you.”

Manifest

Bren struggled to focus on his letter, but another expulsion interrupted him. “Sneeze” he said to himself. That’s the human word for it. He leaned back in his chair, rubbing the pressure point in his neck. As he took a deep breath the door buzzed. “Enter!” he yelled, triggering a coughing fit.

Commander Klein appeared in the doorway. “Bren, feeling any better?” Klein smiled that sorrowful smile that all the humans had been giving him the last two days. He didn’t quite understand it, but it seemed to be an expression of empathy. Human empathy still surprised him. They felt everything, good, bad, or otherwise. Bren sat up straight.

“Yes Commander,” he wheezed and caught his breath, “A little.” He leaned back in his chair.

Commander Klein checked the medication on his desk, shaking the bottle of pills. “Are you taking the meds?”

“Yes Commander, I’m taking them, and the nasal spray.” Bren tried to sit up again but gave up and sighed heavily. “Our scans indicated similar viral agents, but they all seemed harmless. I am heavily inoculated due to my role in the diplomatic corps. Our medications and antivirals are quite advanced and adaptable.”

Klein grinned. “It’s a cold, it’s not serious, and it’ll go away soon.” Bren smiled weakly, as Klein continued. “I’m sorry you weren’t able to join us on Earth for the ceremony and celebrations.” Bren sneezed and Klein responded, “Gesundheit!” Bren looked at him curiously.

“What language is that? It doesn’t translate.” Bren looked thoughtful a moment before speaking. “Good health. German language.”

Klein smiled. “My family’s common response. My

father is German, my mother Dutch. I learned English and German growing up. So you did have the translation?”

Bren nodded. “Yes, but it was delayed. Curious.” Another buzz from the door. Klein moved to open the door. Captain Gardner was waiting.

“Mr. Klein, checking in on our patient?” Gardner stepped in, moving to Bren’s side. “Feeling any better Bren?”

Bren nodded. “I believe a few extra sleep cycles should help.” He stood up and Gardner offered a hand. Bren took it to steady himself. “Sorry Captain, the medication effects my balance.” Gardner helped him across the room where Bren sat on his bed. Gardner moved himself and Klein toward the door.

“Sleep Bren, we will be jumping within the hour.”

Bren grimaced. “I’m glad I’ll miss that, it was... unsettling.” Klein nodded as he and Gardner left the room. Bren rubbed his neck a moment, before laying down and drifting off to sleep.

On the bridge Klein was scanning the sensor readouts when a small dot appeared. Klein magnified, adding a more detailed scan to that region. He smiled. “Captain, I think I found another. Two hours at standard sub light. Sending coordinates.”

Gardner stood up. “Lay in a course, let’s go.” He walked to Klein’s station. “Any details Mr. Klein?” Klein shook his head. Gardner examined the scanner readouts. “Are they on course?”

Klein furrowed his brow. “They are on course Captain, but they seem to be moving at lower power. Their sub light engines are at... around 70%.”

Gardner tilted his head. “But they were up to speed

at one point?”

Klein shrugged. “Hard to say. But I’m guessing they’re far behind schedule. They are moving at around 3.5 percent light speed. Even if they started faster they’ve added a few decades to the trip.”

Gardner stepped back to his chair. “I guess we’ll find out soon enough.”

Two hours later the bridge crew examined the Stray ship next to them. It was the nicest of the three they’d rescued so far. After rescuing the New Denver they quickly found two more. All three ships’ passengers unanimously chose to return. When they arrived at Earth, it was all Gardner could do to keep things orderly. The space station was prepared for arrivals, that was one of its primary functions, but nobody expected the level of enthusiasm from the Strays, as well as the ceremony involved with the first humans returning to Earth. As they checked people in there was excitement, many had grandchildren to meet. The space elevator could only carry 100 at a time, which made for a long wait for the nearly 800 people.

“Captain” Klein’s voice brought Gardner back to the present. “This ship was built by Northrup-Hercules. This is one of the first ships to leave I’d guess.” The ship was a sleek design, clean, white, and advanced for the time. These ships were designed for long term travel but once people started leaving they all quickly launched. It was a stark contrast to the first three ships they’d encountered, cobbled together from various rockets and space vessels.

Gardner nodded, “Any life signs?”

Klein studied the screen. “63 in hibernation. All pods functional. Sir, I am detecting an open comms

channel.”

“Hail them.” Klein acknowledged Gardner’s command. After a moment a message came through.

“This is Earth ship Jennifer. We are traveling to the Alpha Centauri system, a trinary star system four light years from our origination point. We are unarmed colonists in hibernation. Please allow us to continue unless there is a pressing need. If it is absolutely necessary send the following code on this channel. 8675309.”

Klein look at the Captain. Gardner smiled. “Jenny, I got your number.” Klein looked confused. “An old song Commander, from the 1980s I think. My mother was an amateur music historian. She had a vinyl record player.” Gardner was smiling but the bridge crew were all looking at him curiously. “Late 20th Century popular music?” He was met with blank stares. “Anyway, Commander, send the code. They’re behind schedule and we can help them.” Klein smiled at the Captain’s whistling as he sent the code.

A short time later the comms chimed. Klein pushed a button and looked at the Captain. “Audio only sir, they are blocking the video.” Gardner nodded.

“Hello Earth ship Jennifer. I am Captain Alex Gardner of the United Earth Federation ship Shepherd. The year is 2100 and we are here to assist you.” They were met with minutes of silence, although movement could be heard over the open channel. “Mr Klein, did they receive the message?” Suddenly the video sputtered to life, an image of a standard cockpit and a single human man appeared. The man spoke.

“This is the Jenny, I’m Mike. Why did you wake me?”

Gardner responded. "You are traveling at reduced speed. You are far behind schedule. That seemed pressing. Also, we are from Earth, and our mission is to find the people who left during the war. We..."

Gardner was cut off by Mike. "Which party?"

Gardner smiled and took a breath. "The divisions are gone, Mike. After the war ended we changed our society. I can explain everything if you'd like to come aboard."

Mike furrowed his brow, obviously trying to get a read on Gardner's story. "I'm not leaving Jenny. You come over here. You and one other. No weapons or I'll space you."

Gardner sighed. "That's fine Mike, I assure you the war, the factions, parties, all in the past. But Commander Klein here, and I, will come over. Which airlock?"

Mike pushed a button. "Starboard side. It's lit up. Push the green button when your airlock is secure." He cut the comms.

Gardner shook his head as Jeffries navigated to the airlock. "Come on Commander. Let's go negotiate our first peace treaty."

As Klein and Gardner pulled on their suits Bren excitedly joined them near the airlock. Gardner smiled. "Lieutenant, glad to see you feeling better."

Bren smiled his wide smile. "Yes sir, three sleep cycles did it. I believe my implant is also working again." Bren frowned. "I studied the scans, there is substantial weaponry on board sir. Projectile weapons."

Gardner took a breath, "Yes, I kind of expected that. We knew this sort of thing was likely, our first three rescues were easy. But, that's why they sent a

diplomat.” Bren looked confused, Gardner continued. “My background is diplomacy. When the FTL program began I joined the Space Program.”

Klein smiled. “Fastest cadet to Captain in history.”

Gardner looked back to Bren, “In any case Bren, thank you for the information, but I assure you we will be fine. Mr. Klein, you have the vid pad?” Klein nodded as he pulled on his helmet. Gardner did the same and they headed into the airlock. Bren looked on, worried but unsure what he could do.

Klein and Gardner stepped out of the Jenny’s airlock. Mike and three other men stood in the room. Klein and Gardner removed their helmets. The three men raised guns. Assault rifles from Earth’s past. Gardner spoke. “We are unarmed, and we mean you no harm. We are here to help.”

Mike stepped forward. “Captain, you tell a fascinating tale but why should I believe you?” Gardner nodded to Klein who slowly pulled a small video pad out of his front pouch. He tapped the screen and handed it to Mike. On the screen was a quick history of Earth since the war. As he watched the others gathered around, lowering their weapons, engrossed in the images of their home being rebuilt. The video finished and Mike handed the pad back to Klein. Gardner spoke.

“I assure you every word is true. Mike, where are you from?”

“Chicago.”

Klein tapped the screen a few times then showed him images of Chicago as it was now. Clean, updated, rebuilt. Mike was softening.

Gardner spoke again. “Any of you men leave children on Earth?” The men looked hesitantly at each

other, finally a tall man spoke up.

"I did, my wife and daughter. Ella didn't want to leave. She thought I was crazy."

Klein tapped the screen. "Their names? City? Any other information?" The tall man looked at Mike who nodded.

"Ella Jean Stanley, daughter's name is Christine Marie. Um, Ella's maiden name was Campbell. They lived in Indianapolis. Christine was born there."

Klein asked. "Christine's birthday?"

He thought, "May 10, 2064" Klein tapped a few more times, shook his head a few times. Then smiled. He looked up at the man.

"Your daughter is alive." He showed the man a picture. "What's your name?"

"David"

Klein continued. "David, Christine is married, and she has two sons, Rafe is six, and David is eight." He showed David another photo. "Congratulations... Grandpa!" David teared up.

"Ella?"

Klein lowered his eyes. "Unfortunately, Ella died of cancer in 2079. That was fairly common the first 10-15 years." After a moment he spoke again. "Christine is married to an environmental engineer, they've moved around a bit for his work but it looks like they're in Seattle right now."

Mike composed himself. "I think you proved your point Captain. What can you do for us?"

As the last team moved into the ship, about half of the people had been awakened. Gardner went to Mike. "Mike, do you have a passenger manifest?" Mike grabbed a folder. It was a handwritten ledger, detailing

items and the people who brought them.

He handed it to Gardner. "I just have this. You had to buy your way onto the ship, and this is what everyone contributed." Gardner scanned the log carefully, after a moment he handed it back. "You looking for someone Captain?" Mike put the folder away.

Gardner nodded. "Yes, but it's a long shot. Thank you." He knew it was against the odds, but he still had hope.

Lt. Chen approached him. "Sir, we're halfway, but still encountering resistance. Some of these people don't believe us."

Gardner nodded. "To be expected, this ship left during the height of hostilities. The divisions were well established, things hadn't fallen apart yet. These people will be distrustful. Make sure you have Mike or David nearby if there's trouble." Gardner smiled sadly. This would only get more difficult as they encountered ships that launched in the early days of the war. He looked again at the remaining sleep pods before moving back toward the Shepherd, hoping that somewhere along the way he would find his Grandparents.

The List

* * *

-Sixteen Months Ago, 2099-

“Step forward Commander.” Admiral Price reached out to now Captain Gardner, pinning his rank pin to his collar. He saluted and she returned his salute. Normally these things were far less ceremonial, and almost never broadcast on the web, but Captain Gardner was now the face of the STRAYS Project, so ceremony was warranted. They shook hands, smiled for a photo op, then walked out of the camera view. Admiral Price unbuttoned her top shirt button, loosened her scarf and took off her hat. “I hate wearing the dress unis. So old school military.”

Captain Gardner smiled, leaving his formal look in place. “Amanda, you are definitely not old school military.” She patted his shoulder as they entered the command center. Across the room in a simulator Commander Klein was directing a newly assembled crew through a simulation. A red light began flashing and an alarm sounded. A flurry of activity as the simulator shook and swayed, then, the light and alarm went off, and the simulator stabilized. Gardner and Price took notice.

The pilot was a new addition to the team, Lieutenant Isabella Jeffries. She took a deep steadying breath and looked up, seeing Gardner and Price for the first time, before grinning. “That was fun!”

Klein looked serious for a moment then smiled. “Not dying in space is fun.” He stepped out of the simulator and greeted Gardner, saluting the Admiral, who waved him off.

“Not necessary in here James.”

Klein turned to Gardner, saluting. “How about you

Captain? You finally outrank me.” Gardner returned his salute. Klein laughed, “I feel like you’ve already been ordering me around for months anyway.” He turned to Admiral Price. “As have you, although marrying my uncle does give you a little authority, even without the stars.”

Admiral Price swatted him. “Careful Commander. You might get busted down to pilot again!”

Gardner pointed at Jeffries, “She seems good, which scenario was that?”

Klein replied, “Rogue asteroid.”

Price looked at Jeffries then back to the Captain, “Maybe you have your pilot?” Gardner nodded as the crew received briefings from the scientists monitoring the simulation.

A cadet entered the room and approached Gardner, saluting. “Captain, I have a message for you. I normally would have filed it away, especially today--” His eyes looked to the Captain’s new rank insignias, “--But he said it was regarding your family? Something from the past?”

Gardner took the note and stuffed it in his pocket as the cadet left. He turned back to Klein, “Smart, good pilot, dodged the asteroid, is she the one Commander?” Klein half-smiled, Gardner continued. “Good, that was taking too long. We launch in a few months, I want a command crew in place.” Gardner turned to the Admiral, “Amanda, I’m going home. Too much ceremony makes me hungry.” He pulled out the note as he left the room.

Gardner shifted in his desk chair. He picked at the remaining food on his plate, trying to decide if he wanted to call the person on the note sitting in front of

him. Finally he sat up straight, pushed his empty plate to the side, and fired up his communication center. He entered the email address and hit send. On the computer screen in front of him he looked at the small image of himself as the 'waiting' animation looped in front of him. Finally the call connected and a young man appeared onscreen.

The young man spoke. "Captain Gardner, thank you for responding."

Gardner was polite but quick. "Yes, of course, what can I do for you Mister..." Gardner looked at the note, "Mr. Allen?"

"Jeremy Allen. Yes sir. I saw you on TV and it clicked." Gardner waited impatiently, his association with the STRAYS program made him a celebrity. It was the most hopeful some people had been in years. Jeremy continued, "My Grandfather left Earth before I was born. Four years ago my mother died of cancer."

Gardner nodded, sadly, a pretty common family tree these days. "I'm sorry Mr. Allen."

Jeremy smiled, and held up a sheet of paper with handwriting. "My Grandfather was a list maker. Apparently he was borderline obsessed with lists and documenting everything." He smiled a moment, "My mother passed this on to me. Grandpa made this list of people who were leaving Earth, but hadn't been able to contact any family. He got it to my mother before he left." Gardner sat up. Maybe Jeremy had something. Jeremy read from the list.

"Was your mother's name Sophie?" Gardner nodded. "And your mother's parents were Larry and Kit?"

"Katherine... yes, Kit" Gardner was fully involved now. He waited.

Jeremy continued. "From Minnesota?" Gardner

nodded as Jeremy read, "Larry and Kit Jennings, daughter Sophie Gardner, grandson Alex Gardner. They were scheduled to leave on a ship in March of 2065." Jeremy made a note on his paper. He looked up again at Gardner. "Captain, this has been my life for the past four years. I'm sorry that is all the information I have. I have 16 more to go. I plan to find them all."

Gardner was in minor shock at the information. He sputtered as he tried to form a thought. "Mr. Allen, can you send me a copy of your list?" Jeremy nodded, Gardner continued. "If it's all right, I'd like to pass this on to my colleague, Admiral Price. She will contact you and find a way to help. This information may be useful in our program."

Jeremy sat up, as a weight lifted from his shoulders. In this society people could determine what they spent their time on, although most found a way to work at something they enjoyed. Jeremy had been going through a meticulously collected handwritten list, over 30 years old. It was a nearly impossible task for one man, especially with the lack of historical records, but for the Space Program it could be done easily. Jeremy smiled a tired smile, "Captain, that would be amazing." His eyes ringed with tears, "I would be so happy to finish this list. It is my family's small legacy."

Gardner examined the list as it printed out in front of him. Around 40 lines, with names and years. Many checked, but the remaining 16 Jeremy mentioned still waiting. "Jeremy, this is amazing. You have no idea what this is worth. Don't be surprised if people are moved by your story." Jeremy sat up straighter and wiped his eyes. Gardner talked as he read, "I will keep all these people in mind while we're out there, maybe we'll find them all and reunite some families."

* * *

-Present Day, 2100-

Captain Gardner smiled as he approached the Captain of the Starlight. It was the seventh ship they had found, small, only 24 passengers, and barely enough fuel and supplies to succeed. "Captain, do you have a passenger manifest?"

The Starlight Captain pointed at a wall near the cockpit where a clipboard hung. "On the clipboard, such as it was. It's just name and pod number."

Gardner smiled and thanked him as he walked over. He pulled down the clipboard and scrolled through, he stopped, smiled, and replaced the clipboard. Turning back to the storage area he scanned for Chen, spotting her near a bank of pods. "Lieutenant!" He walked over to her. "Everything good?" She nodded. He continued, "I'm looking for pods 17 and 19?"

Chen looked at him curiously. "We haven't gotten to them yet. These are homemade sleeper units, and it's a bit tricky reviving them. 17 and 19, probably in about 90 minutes."

Gardner smiled. "Great, call me when you get to them!" With that he nearly skipped away. Chen watched him stop for a quick word with Klein, who seemed just as excited.

Chen spoke before Klein could ask for a progress report. "Commander, what's all that about?"

Klein answered excitedly. "He found some people on the list."

"The list?"

Klein hesitated, "Oh, he didn't tell you? Well, I guess I can. Right before we launched a guy named Jeremy Allen sent the Captain a list. It had the names of people

who had left Earth without being able to contact their families, to let them know they'd made it onto a ship. As they investigated, the list grew to over a hundred names between the first list and others that turned up after."

Chen recalled something she had noticed, "That's why he checks the manifest of every ship we find."

Klein nodded, "Yep, he's checking to see if he can cross any names off. This is the first."

Chen furrowed her brow, "But I watched him look at the last one, he didn't have a list with him, he just looked it over and shook his head."

Klein smiled, "He memorized the names, the people who had shipped off planet, their families, any other details. They're all in his head."

Chen whispered, "Amazing." Klein turned but Chen stopped him. "Commander, we'll need radiation scrubbers and treatment for the passengers. This ship is heavily irradiated. Our inoculations should protect us, but I'll need everyone to get tested when we leave."

Klein looked around. "Are we taking any supplies?"

Chen shook her head. "Personal items only, and limited at that."

Klein suddenly smiled. "Which pods?"

Chen responded, "Sir?"

"Which pods did the Captain ask about?"

"Oh, right, 17 and 19. Probably a bit over an hour"

Klein walked over to pods 17 and 19 to see who the Captain's first names were off the list.

Back in his quarters, Captain Gardner opened a communication window to send a message to Earth. Pings were nearly instantaneous, but regular communications still took 12-16 hours. He spoke into

the transcriber.

“From Captain Alex Gardner, UEF Shepherd.

“To Carl and Deanna Brennan.

“Dear Carl, I am happy to say I believe I have located your Aunt and Uncle. I will confirm in a few hours. If you’d like to send a message please go ahead, keeping in mind the delay. I will send another message as soon as we confirm.”

Gardner checked the message and sent it. He sat back, looking up at the list, hanging on his wall.

As people come out of hibernation a few things always happen. First is a brain fog, confusion, then the coughing starts. Once that shakes off they blink, realizing their vision is blurred. A few moments later and they’re ready to stand, although it’s not easy at first, much like a baby giraffe, off balance, unable to control your knees. Fortunately if the pods weren’t equipped with an automatic shot, the medical team can provide the adrenalin. It’s not just adrenalin, there are a variety of medications and they work very well, but it still takes around 10-15 minutes before a person really knows what is happening.

As Steve Brennan came around his first look was for his wife Melissa, who was just a few moments behind him in recovery. He made his way to her carefully and they embraced. Both for love and balance.

Captain Gardner approached them. “Hello, I am Captain Alex Gardner. You’ve just come out of hibernation. The year is 2100 and we are from Earth. You will certainly have many questions, but please be patient, we want to make sure you’re in good shape, then we can explain what is happening.”

A doctor came up to them, and gave them a quick

look over. Gardner spoke, “You are Steve and Melissa Brennan?” They both nodded, Steve still coughing a little. “Do you recall meeting a man who was keeping a list of people who wanted to contact their families before they left?”

Melissa looked thoughtful. She turned to her husband, “We did, what was his name, Alan or something?”

Steve cleared his throat, “Brian Allen.” He paused, “Captain, we certainly haven’t made it to Proxima 2. Not this quickly.”

Gardner nodded, “That is correct, and I promise we’ll explain soon. Right now we’re getting everyone up and awake. We are trying to move quickly because this ship is heavily irradiated. But don’t worry, we have the medications now to clean that up.”

Steve and Melissa nodded OK, as people moved around them, quickly, but not rushing.

Captain Gardner spoke again. “I am sorry to say I was only able to find one person on your list, your nephew Carl. But, he and his wife Deanna are looking forward to seeing you. If you’ll come with me, I can take you to the medical bay, and answer a few questions. There’s a lot to tell.”

* * *

Harvest

2064 - Brownsville, Texas

Diego and Manuel stood silently while their grandparents spoke to the man. The boys should be celebrating their tenth birthday this week, but that wasn't happening now. As the man started to nod their grandmother returned. She spoke to them in Spanish.

"My little ones. As we had feared we can't send you both. Diego will go, he is younger." Diego thought to himself 'only by seven minutes,' but his grandmother continued quickly. "Manuel will be our representative here, and Diego will go to space and start a new branch of our family tree." Grandfather returned. They spoke in hushed tones a moment then turned back to the boys, shaking in the morning cold, holding hands tightly.

Grandfather knelt in front of the boys, speaking in Spanish as well. "My boys, there are great adventures ahead for you both. I know this is difficult, but you are strong, you have the name of warriors, and you will carry that name and make us proud, wherever you are. You are Tolama, and you represent us all."

He was crying and the boys shook, trying not to cry. Grandma reached down and picked Diego up for a massive hug. Grandpa took him from her, squeezing him before setting him down next to his twin brother. Manuel tried to smile through tears as the boys embraced. Diego understood why he was leaving, and they both knew they might be separated. Hopefully Manuel would get on another ship. It didn't make it easier.

The man that had spoken to his grandparents came over. "Time to go. Which one?" Trying to be brave, Diego turned to face him. He tried to speak but his

ragged breath only made gasping sounds. The man smiled a warm smile. He took Diego's hand. As they walked away he spoke to Diego in English, which, as his second language wasn't that strong, but he understood enough. "Diego, right? I'm sorry I can't take you both. My father decided to stay, demanding I take a child in his place."

This had become common as people began to fear that the end of the world was nearing. Parts of humanity burned the Earth, while others tried to save some aspect of humanity, albeit not on this planet. The man continued.

"My name is Stephen, and you are now a part of my family. My wife and daughter are already on board, so we need to hurry."

On the ship, named "The Exiter," (Stephen said it was a pun but Diego didn't understand,) Stephen closed the top of Diego's sleeper pod. Diego watched him climb into the pod right next to him, looking at his family's pods before closing the lid. Diego's mind raced, what would happen? Where were they going? What kind of person was Stephen? His thoughts drifted to Manuel, and his grand-pa—re—n—

Diego drifted off to hibernation sleep.

2089 - The Exiter

Diego was awakened by a fist slamming on his sleeper pod. His mind was filled with cobwebs, his vision was blurry, and it took him a moment to remember where he was. The pounding continued. A woman was frantically trying to get his attention, he couldn't make out her features, just a general shape. She was pointing at a red handle near his hand. He

took a breath and the air burned. He coughed, which sent a jolt through him. His brain was foggy but he grabbed the handle and pulled, a vague memory that it was important to remember.

His pod opened and Diego smelled cooler air, still stale, but less painful. His eyes were focusing better but he still wasn't sure what was going on. The woman spoke. "Are you the boy Stephen brought on board?" Diego thought a moment then nodded. She breathed a steadying breath. "OK, come on out. I'm Linda, and this is my daughter Cassie. I'm afraid Stephen didn't make it."

She was so frantic that her voice barely cracked, although Cassie was sputtering through tears, holding tight to her mother's leg. "The sleeper system has failed, several people didn't make it." This brought her to full tears as the two held onto each other. Diego was still fuzzy, barely remembering the events that had happened to him yesterday... or maybe longer? He looked up at Linda who pulled him into the embrace with Cassie. She gathered herself and smoothed her shirt before speaking.

"We are not even close to Proxima, this will be our home now. Maybe for the rest of our lives." She looked at Diego, and Cassie, who was a bit taller than him but probably not much older. "And, this is our family. It is the three of us now. What is your name?"

Diego spoke in a hushed tone, "Diego Tolama."

Linda smiled. "That is a wonderful name Diego. Our last name is Kramer. You can use that as a middle name if you'd like, but keep Tolama, you will represent the family you left behind."

Diego felt tears flood his eyes as he began to silently cry.

* * *

2100 - Present Day - The Exiter

Diego was doing the same thing he did every morning, examining his crops. He had quickly learned about growing food in zero gravity, and had rapidly become the leader of the botanical department. It was quite possibly the most important job on the Exiter, or as many now called it, The Last Exit. Of course, the engineers who had managed to increase the speed of the ship got the most excited attention, but without Diego, they would have run out of food years ago.

A cup appeared in front of him, as Cassie joined him. "Coffee!" She smiled. He took the cup from his sister, and wondered how many rations she'd spent on it. Of course it was a special day so it was justified. Although he had managed to engineer several varieties of coffee and tea, coffee was a low yield crop in space, so it was more for special occasions.

Cassie sipped her coffee, smiling. "You know what today is?"

Diego returned her smile. "Of course I do. It's Mom's birthday." She leaned on him as they smiled and sipped their special coffee. Before she passed Linda had loved coffee, often giving up a meal to get one cup in the morning. She was the reason Diego had spent so much time finding a way to grow coffee.

They had launched with more than a year's worth of food and water, as a means to survive the initial colonization on Proxima 2. It was obvious from the start that the food and water wouldn't last. They had to grow food and recycle water.

The supplies they brought from Earth certainly had

everything they needed, but recycling was so much more critical on the ship. They could not rely on finding ways to use local materials and supplies. Water was tricky. Diego had a knack for it all , growing up on his grandparents' farm had apparently left an imprint on him. His sister nudged him.

“What’s your plan for the day?”

Diego smiled. “Tomatoes!”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s always tomatoes, or potatoes, or onions, or beets.”

Diego interrupted her, “Someone has to make the food!”

They were both interrupted as Captain Lee came flying into the storage bay. He had unlocked his mag boots and was yelling to everyone to come into the large chamber. While the majority of the storage bay was dedicated to Diego’s farm, this was the largest space on the ship and still served as a gathering room.

Captain Lee drifted across the room until he bumped into the central beam, grabbing on to stop in the middle of the room. He was in his fifties, (Technically 25 years older, but hibernation doesn’t count,) and not as spry as he had been in his younger days. People aged differently in space, and some people didn’t do well. For him to practice these gymnastics meant he had some kind of good news, maybe another speed increase!

Captain Lee looked around to make sure everyone was present. “Folks, the Last Exit as flown it’s last kilometer. I have just been in communication with a ship from Earth.” The crowd looked around, had they come across another sleeper ship? Lee waited for the murmurs to quiet then continued. “It seems after we left the war ended and humanity rebuilt the Earth.

They also solved faster than light travel and this ship, The Shepherd, has come to save us.” He looked around to gauge the crowd’s excitement. He yelled out “We can go home!” before spinning in the zero gravity.

Cassie approached Diego. “Hey, you haven’t packed.” Diego busied himself around his tomatoes, acting like he didn’t hear. “Diego, I know you don’t want to leave your gardens, but we can go home.” She pulled him to face her and realized he was crying. “What’s wrong?”

Diego took a deep breath, “Manuel died. All of my family is gone.” Cassie hugged him as he stood still, tears flowing. She grabbed his arms.

“I know it’s not the same, but you have me. We can start our families again, Kramer and Tolama, back on Earth. Diego, we can find new people. You can get married, I can get married. We can start new lives!”

Diego huffed, “I like this life. I have a purpose here!”

Cassie paused, “They have farms on Earth, but you can find a new purpose. You can go to school, learn to fly spaceships. You can do anything!”

Diego turned away. Cassie stood silent, unsure what to do. Everyone had already packed the few things to take with them. It was a simple task, and they were ready to leave. Crew members from the Shepherd had helped Diego harvest whatever food was ready. He seemed so happy, but now his garden was half empty. The remaining plants would die, and whenever the time came that a salvage team could retrieve the ship, which could be years, who knows what it would look like in here. Sadly, she put a hand on his shoulder and was about to speak when she heard a click.

Diego turned around and showed her the makeshift manacle he had on his wrist. The other end connected to a chain and was wrapped around the main post of the bay. He sat down, "I'm not going."

She smiled at him sadly and shackled herself next to him.

Commander Klein rushed up to Captain Gardner, who was ushering passengers into their new space for the trip to Earth. They had room to pick up more Strays but if they didn't find a ship in this sector, they would be back at Earth within the week. Commander Klein caught his breath. "Captain, we have a problem." Gardner turned to him and seeing the concern on his face, ushered him to a corner away from the Exiter passengers.

"What is it Commander?"

Klein looked worried. "Remember the garden manager?" Gardner nodded. Klein took another breath, "He and his sister are chained to the ship's structure. They won't leave."

Gardner frowned. It was an impressive garden, they would eat magnificently for a few days as they searched and returned to Earth. "Well let's go talk to them." Klein paused and Gardner realized there was more.

"Bren wanted to go document more of the botanical system, he was quite impressed. They chained him up with them."

Gardner's brow furrowed. "Hostages?" Klein nodded as Gardner turned to go find out what was happening.

As Klein and Gardner walked to the airlock Jeffries joined them. "Captain?" Gardner looked at her, waiting. "Sir, I heard what's happening. I spoke to

Diego when we arrived. I grew up on a farm and Bren and I had taken an interest in his methodology. He's solved several Zero-G botanical issues that we haven't yet."

Gardner grunted, "Yes, I'm sure it is impressive, but we can't leave them."

"Sir" She stepped in front of them causing all three to stop. "Can I try talking to him? I think I understand what he's going through." Gardner paused, waiting for an explanation. "Leaving my farm was the hardest thing I ever did. I knew I wanted to be a pilot but the farm was such a life affirming place. I get it. Maybe I can connect with him."

Gardner thought a minute, looked at Klein, and agreed. "OK Lieutenant, you have fifteen minutes." She nodded with determination and rushed off. Suddenly Gardner had another thought, "Don't get yourself chained to the ship!"

The airlock led into a small room, then directly into the main storage bay. Bren sat on a stool, examining the various beds of vegetables. It really was an impressive setup. Diego stood and faced Jeffries defiantly. Cassie sat near the beam to which they were chained. Jeffries tried to get a read on her but her face was blank.

"Diego, remember me?" Diego nodded. She continued, "My name is Isabella Jeffries, I'm the pilot on The Shepherd."

Diego stood silently. Cassie looked back and forth. Bren poked at chambers full of small green tomatoes, not ready to harvest. Jeffries stepped closer. "Diego, I grew up on a farm. We grew corn, beets, grains, alfalfa. I understand your connection to the gardens. I miss it."

Diego spoke quietly. “No, you don’t understand. I was born in Arizona, but when I was six my parents were killed in a car accident. My twin brother and I went to Mexico to live with my grandparents.” He paused, looking at Cassie for strength. Bren looked on, as he felt the dirt cradles surrounding some root vegetables, too small to tell what they were.

Diego went on, “It was three days before my tenth birthday that I got on this ship, while my brother stayed behind. My new father, Stephen Kramer died in a sleep pod malfunction, as did 33 others. I met my new mother Linda eleven years ago, she passed three years ago due to a simple illness we didn’t have the proper medication for. Today was her birthday. And you know about Manuel.” Cassie stood up and gently hugged him from the side. “My sister is all I have left, and my garden. I can’t leave.”

Cassie chimed in softly, “I go where Diego goes, he’s my only family.”

Jeffries took them in, imagining this must be what it felt like being separated from his brother.

Unfortunately she already knew his brother had passed, she’s the one who looked up his family, and she delivered the news. “Diego, I can’t say I know just how you feel, I’ve lost people, but every story is different. But I did leave my farm, and I know how that felt.”

He interrupted her, his frustration rising, “No you don’t! You had another path. You became a pilot. Your farm kept going. This is my life’s work. I was happy to harvest all that food, but these plants still here, tomatoes, potatoes, lettuce, peppers, they’ll just die, and all this work will be gone.”

Bren noticed when he said potatoes, and examined the dirt cradles, impressed. He spoke up, “Lieutenant,

have you seen his cradles for tubers?" Jeffries nodded. Bren spoke almost to himself, "Quite impressive, the Klaan could learn from Mr. Tolama." Diego looked at Bren, trying not to lose his anger. Bren suddenly stood up, his mag boots clanking as he jumped. "And the tomato chambers, efficient. I understand The Shepherd has a space for botanical research?"

Jeffries picked up on Bren's thought. "Yes Bren, we do, but it's currently extra storage space, we haven't quite mastered Zero-G growing. But, we have all the equipment, lights, irrigation, compost bins."

Diego looked confused but Cassie caught on and turned to Diego. "Diego, what if we could get them to take this all with us, would you go then?"

Diego looked at her sadly, then looked around. "But this is our world."

She took his hand, "I know, but Mom is gone, and the garden can come with us." She looked at him a moment. "Our world is us, wherever we go, it's you and me."

Diego started crying again, as Jeffries got a beep on her communicator. She read a text note. "Diego, I know I told you you had no family, that may not be true." Diego looked at her curiously, his eyes red and tired.

She read from the message on the communicator. "Your brother didn't marry, but it seems he may have had a girlfriend, which isn't in official records. Maria Alvarez, in Guadalajara. She has a daughter. I don't know if that's Manuel's child, but you could at least meet Maria and hear what Manuel's life was like. Her daughter's name is Daniela."

Diego gasped, "That was my mother's name." Cassie looked at him expectantly. Diego looked back at Jeffries, "We can take all of this?"

Jeffries nodded, “Yes, and I’m fairly certain our own botanists back on Earth would love to learn what you’ve done here. Bren seems quite impressed. You may already have a purpose on Earth.”

Bren nodded excitedly. “The irrigation systems are ingenious. Some sort of vacuum driven device?”

Diego nodded and reached down to his wrist, flipping a switch to unlock the cuff. He showed Bren who silently pushed the same switch and his cuff also fell away, floating gently away from him. Cassie flipped hers as well. Diego smiled sheepishly. “They don’t lock. We use them to stay attached when moving up and down in the bay.”

Jeffries breathed a deep sigh, and gave Bren a questioning look. He raised his hands and shook them, a move that seemed equivalent to a shrug. She spoke into the communicator, “Captain, please send a moving team and clear space in the botany lab. We’re taking the gardens with us. Diego will supervise, and then we can all leave.”

Diego looked around the chamber, holding tightly on to Cassie’s hand. He smiled at her, knowing he wouldn’t leave his life's work, and he wouldn't lose another sibling.

* * *

Shaa-a-ren

“From Lieutenant Bren, UEF Shepherd

“To Captain Sassen, KCS Victory

“Captain, I continue to learn many things about the humans. Again, their sense of community is their strength. Their Shaa is strong, although they do not have a similar word and concept in their language, as I learned recently. I would like to continue this assignment beyond the previous estimated time. Please consider an extension, send to the council if necessary.

“I would also like to ask the council to review the request I have submitted to share some aspects of faster than light technology. Their current methodology is primitive, unstable, and, to a certain extent, dangerous. They are very close to discovering standard spacetime warping, and for that reason I don’t believe it will violate our technology sharing guidelines. Further details are in the formal request I submitted.

Bren paused, he knew protocols were against this request, but the humans were so close, he hoped the council would consider it. The council could make exceptions if he could show them that the humans demonstrated a non aggressive attitude. He remembered one more thing to add to his letter.

“Klaan philosophy regarding the deceased is an important part of our culture. While many are matter of fact about it, the rituals and sacraments have allowed us to function more efficiently as a society. I have learned about some human rituals, and their essence of Shaa. Two days ago we came across our thirteenth ship...”

Two Days ago

* * *

“Captain, the ship is on course, and seems to be functioning properly. However, the radiation emanating from the ship is at lethal levels. It’s highly unlikely anyone survived.” Captain Gardner looked at Commander Klein, taking a deep breath before speaking.

“Commander, prepare to scuttle the ship. Full honors. We don’t want to send a dirty bomb across space.” Commander Klein acknowledged the Captain, calling Bren over to his workstation.

“Bren, can you come look through this information?” Bren approached Klein’s station and looked over his shoulder. Klein pointed at the screen. “These readings, that seems to be the deceased passengers, correct?” Bren nodded then pointed at another reading. Klein agreed curiously. “That’s the one I don’t get. It looks like the life sign of a hibernating human, but it’s distorted.”

Gardner turned to Klein. “Is there a problem?”

Klein looked at Bren, then back to Gardner, “Sir, I think we’ll need to investigate, I can’t confirm that everyone is deceased.”

“How many people Mr. Klein?”

Klein and Bren conferred and Bren answered. “That’s the problem sir, we read 36 pods, most of which are non functioning.” Klein finished the thought.

“Most of the pods appear to be unused. The others are not allowing clear readings. Possibly due to the radiation?” They had encountered several ships with various levels of radiation exposure, likely due to a nearby nuclear blast. This one was the heaviest they had encountered. Klein continued. “This ship had to have gone right through an active explosion. The radiation is still intense.”

Gardner grimaced, while they had protections against radiation poisoning, it was tedious. Any items retrieved required scrubbing with radiation protocols. Patients needed extra medication beyond the standard inoculations, which protected against various types of radiation, mostly radiation found in space. But, they had to be sure. “OK commander, only you and one other, make it quick.” Bren volunteered himself.

“Captain, I am better protected against this type of radiation, I could join the Commander.”

Gardner thought a moment. “OK, just the two of you. Take every precaution.”

Markings on the side identified the ship as North Korean. That explained the radiation as a still unknown saboteur had detonated all of North Korea’s nuclear weapons at once. Sadly, the entire country was reduced to rubble. Although humanity had created effective radiation treatments, cleaning North Korea was taking longer, due to the massive amount of radiation released all at once. Some Koreans had survived, but North Korea, as a country, no longer existed. South Korea was now just Korea, having taken on refugees and stewardship over the cleanup. The reunification of Korea was literally a Pyrrhic resolution.

Bren and Klein entered the ship. Although it looked shoddily built, it was one of the few ships they had encountered that was fully functional. As they moved to the cargo area the problem became obvious. Crew members littered the area, some partially in their pods. The radiation had knocked them out before they could enter the pods. Bren scanned the area. “They are dead sir, it looks like 33 humans.”

Klein looked at them, some on the floor, some climbing into pods. He recalled the anomalous readings. "So there are three more pods?" Bren continued scanning, stepping carefully over the bodies.

"Commander, the readings on these hibernation pods is unusual, there appear to be several different metals in use, there is no consistency." As they made their way into the depths of the cargo area they found three pods, hidden away behind stacks of cargo, still functioning. Bren approached them. He scanned, then turned to Klein excitedly.

"Sir, these three are alive, they are quite sick, but the pods appear to have shielded them enough to survive the radiation." Klein stumbled into the area, looking at Bren's scanner.

"If we wake them they won't survive long." Bren agreed. Klein pushed a button on the arm of his protective suit and called Gardner. "Sir, we have three survivors, They won't survive long once they are brought out. We will need shielded gurneys to move them directly to the medical bay. Please send three patient pods and four rescue team members to facilitate the rescue."

Bren and Klein checked their exposure time as they waited for the others to arrive.

Once the rescue team had arrived they cleared out the three crew members quickly, heading straight to the medical bay. Klein and Bren were ordered to undergo more extensive medical tests and spent the night there.

Early in the morning, Bren was explaining Klaan humor to Klein. Klein was not impressed. "So, simple mistakes are funny?"

Bren smiled, “Yes, inverting variables in a navigational equation can be quite satisfying.” Klein looked unsure as Bren added, “But the real humor comes in absurd endeavors, which can take several days or weeks to develop. The payoff is substantial.” Klein was about to speak when they were surprised to see one of the Koreans stir. He looked around, confused, and then startled to see Klein and an alien. Bren had accessed the Korean language program and spoke to him in perfect Korean.

“Do not be afraid. You are on an Earth ship, The Shepherd. Earth is a different world than when you left. I assure you, you are safe here.” The Korean calmed a bit, looking for his comrades. Bren continued, “I am sorry to tell you that only the three of you survived. You have extreme radiation sickness but medical advances have created effective treatments and you are all expected to recover.”

The Korean asked, “What happened?”

Bren turned to Klein, “He wants to know what happened.” They were interrupted by the arrival of Captain Gardner and an Ensign.

“Bren, this is Ensign Choi, she speaks Korean and will be the liaison for these men.” Choi immediately went to the Korean man and began talking. Bren watched as the man apparently learned that his country was gone. The look on his face touched Bren deeply. He appeared to be in physical pain upon hearing the news.

Gardner turned to Klein and Bren, “Are you cleared to resume duties?” Klein nodded and Gardner continued. “I had hoped to avoid a conflict but you may recall the previous rescue of the ship Justice 4.”

Klein grimaced. Just a day before finding the Korean

ship they had rescued a ship that was clearly affiliated with the Justice Party. Although it was never confirmed, the Justice Party claimed responsibility for the three nuclear warheads that decimated Los Angeles to start the war.

The Freedom Party quickly formed in response, but since there were no geographical divides the initial stages of the war were particularly gruesome. Political strongholds of each party were destroyed by nuclear weapons, killing members of both parties, as well as the undeclared; more than half of the country that claimed no connection to either party. The complication was certainly due to the fact that a Freedom Party ship's passengers were already on board. Gardner confirmed Klein's assumption.

"We assigned quarters to the passengers of the ship, Justice 4, and initially there was no problem, until someone saw an insignia on someone's shirt. The Justice group refused to be quartered on the same floor."

Klein grimaced. "The Freedom passengers were on level three, right? Just move the Justice to two?" Gardner smiled.

"The Freedom passengers decided that they wanted to be above them, so they refused to stay on three if the Justice moved to two."

Klein scoffed, "We're in space, there is no above and below, we may be sideways now for all we know." Gardner agreed and as the three men entered the passenger common area, the leaders of each group swarmed them.

As multiple men chattered and made demands at once Gardner raised his hand and finally got them to calm down. "We came across a heavily irradiated ship

and we want to allow the surviving crew to be involved in the Honor ceremony when we scuttle the ship. They are in the medical bay. We could be here for a few days depending on their recovery time. That means you all can't stay here in this room. You will need to accept room assignments."

The men all began shouting again when Bren stepped forward, raising both hands which, somehow, stopped everyone immediately. Bren spoke.

"Captain, I may have a solution." Gardner looked hopeful.

"Go ahead Lieutenant."

Bren lowered his hands. "My people have a method for solving disputes that goes back several thousand years. It is specifically designed for this sort of post war dispute."

Everyone was rapt as Bren continued. He smiled and stuck his arms out to the side, palms up. He spoke loudly in a commanding voice, "Feats of Strength!" As he said 'strength' he raised his arms over his head and clasped his hands together. Shaking them with a determined grimace. The men pumped up their chests and murmured agreement.

Gardner looked at Bren curiously. "Feats of Strength?"

Bren nodded, "Yes, although that is rarely the form it takes. We stopped fighting to the death centuries ago." The men seemed a little less enthused.

Gardner asked, "What does this entail?"

Bren smiled, "We choose a contest, and since it is a test of strength, we add," he paused, searching for the correct word, "complications, as we go." He looked around, and sensing no objections, continued. "I would suggest... bowling!"

Gardner and Klein stifled laughs as Bren looked each group straight on and asked, "Are you prepared to compete for your pride?" Hesitantly each group agreed. Bren went on, "I will administer the contest, the rules are simple, I can add any difficulties I choose."

The leader of one group looked at Bren, confused, "Difficulties?"

Bren nodded, "For example, we could start by bowling with the non dominant hand. Perhaps with eyes closed, or while... singing." As the men started to take Bren less seriously he puffed up and seemed to get taller. "You have accepted the challenge, do you agree to go forward?" The men looked at each other, unsure, but finally nodded and started to get excited.

Bren stated one more rule, "The final outcome is that the winners will be allowed to choose their quarters," the men nodded and mumbled until Bren cut them off, "But the winners must also host the defeated team to a feast in their home." He looked around and felt he had everyone's attention. "There is no human term for this, but the Klaan call it Shaa. It is the knowledge that everyone on the planet is connected. In our case, on this ship. We are all part of one physical organism, collectively called the Shaa-a-ren."

The men looked around, slightly less excited but committed to the contest. Bren stood straight, and addressed the room. "Each team will choose four champions. The contest will start in sixteen hours. Spread the word, in the original Feats of Strength great crowds cheered on their warriors."

With that the groups of passengers separated into huddles, deciding on their champions. Gardner turned to Bren. "Feats of Strength? Shaa-a-ren?" Bren looked at Klein and the Captain.

“Yes sir, the rules are adaptable, but Shaa is a sacred concept to the Klaan. I assure you, this method of conflict resolution has an excellent record on Klaan.” Klein and Gardner shared a curious look, when Bren noted excitedly, “We will need to prepare the bowling lanes for an audience. The crowd is a critical part of this event! Captain?”

Gardner shrugged, “Commander Klein, let the crew know that they are invited to a Klaan Feats of Strength event.” Klein shook his head as he walked toward the bridge to deliver the invitation.

In the medical bay Gardner, Klein, and Choi spoke to the three Korean men. Gardner had offered them several option for disposal of the irradiated ship. Choi translated for the Captain. “They said they are not overly concerned with the ship’s disposal. They only ask to be able to watch as it’s done.” One man, who identified himself as Colonel Han spoke.

“Captain, we do believe you when you say things are different. We also hope you understand that the official stance of our country,” he paused, as the country no longer existed, “The stance is one of no religion. However, there is a thread of Buddhism among us, and a prayer service to commemorate the men who did not survive is kindly requested before the ship is scuttled.”

Gardner nodded and asked Choi if she could make arrangements. Colonel Han spoke again. “Captain, is it possible to finish in time for the contest? Your Mr. Bren extended a personal invitation.”

Gardner was surprised, but agreed.

The next day Choi, Han, Gardner and the other Korean men stood on the bridge, watching a large

monitor. The Shepherd had shut down the ship's engines and shined lights on the ship. Choi had arranged the prayer ceremony, and the three men seemed at peace with the situation. Gardner looked at Colonel Han, who looked at his companions and nodded to the Captain.

"Commander Klein, you may proceed." Klein stood, as did the rest of the crew. Captain Gardner spoke. "It is with great respect that we commit these 33 passengers and their ship to space. This ship served them well, and now all will be committed to the great expanse."

Klein blew a military whistle and launched two missiles. The missiles flew directly to their target, detonating and turning the ship to dust, to scatter among the backdrop of the stars. Gardner spoke again.

"Your lives will be remembered as your final destination has been reached. Godspeed." He saluted and the crew followed his salute. The Korean men somberly saluted. The crew held their salute until Choi had ushered the Koreans off the bridge. The crew resumed their duties silently for a moment until Gardner spoke once again.

"If you have arranged to go to the Feats of Strength event, you are relieved, once the skeleton crew is in place." A few crew members entered to man the bridge as several others headed to Bren's event.

Bren quieted the crowd. Klein was surprised at the turnout. The crew of both ships sat intermingled with Shepherd crew. Choi ushered in the Koreans, stoic, but seemingly looking forward to the distraction the contest would provide. Chairs, benches, and cargo containers had been constructed into makeshift

bleachers, and they were packed. Food and beverages had been prepared and in general, it was a festive atmosphere. Bren entered the center of the space and raised his hands, facing his palms out, and turning in a circle.

“My friends, you have accepted me into your ship and crew and I am grateful. It is with that gratitude that I happily share the Klaan tradition of... FEATS OF STRENGTH!” The crowd cheered and Gardner looked around, wondering if he should have assigned security for the event.

Bren lowered his hands and the crowd silenced. He spoke again in a low voice. “Shaa is a Klaan belief that we are all connected. That the people assembled here are all part of one single living organism. We are all a part of Shaa-a-ren. We are each other. We are one. We are Shaa.”

He smiled and waited as the crowd seemingly held its breath. Then he clasped his hands over his head and shouted, “LET THE GAMES BEGIN!” The crowd roared as the eight men prepared to bowl. Bren explained the rules. “The standard rules of bowling and scoring apply. The automated system will keep score. I will add rules as we go. The first additional rule is that all bowlers are required to throw the ball with both hands. Team Justice won the random generated decision to go first. Proceed.”

As expected, bowling with both hands was awkward, and the bowlers threw gutterballs and generally left a lot of pins standing. No one was bowling well, but the men were laughing at each other anyway. After two frames Bren stood and spoke. “Time for a new rule! You must bowl with your non-dominant hand!” The bowlers grunted and grimaced. Bren was

excited, the concept of a dominant hand was new to him. Human brains fascinated him and when he learned of right or left handedness he had spent hours asking people to use their non-dominant hand for daily tasks.

The teams bowled slightly better than before, but neither team was lighting up the scoreboards. Only one strike had been thrown, and truthfully, it was a mistake. Something went wonky with the magnetic system and changed the ball's trajectory.

The crowd was cheering when a bowler knocked down three or four pins, and the teams were getting irritated, so Bren changed it up again. "Starting now, you must do two complete turns before throwing the ball."

As the bowlers made themselves dizzy, the crowd's excitement escalated. The bowlers had begun cheering each other on, regardless of which team they were on. The difficulties Bren was introducing made the two teams bond over the challenges. The crowd was eating it up. Even the Korean men were enjoying the show. Finally they reached the final round. Team Justice was up by seven points, it was anybody's game.

Bren stood and called for quiet. "I would like to thank you all for joining us tonight. I hope you have felt the Shaa. You are all part of the Shaa-a-ren here on the Shepherd. Even as you go on to other ships or planets, this connection is now a part of you all." Bren looked at the Koreans and bowed deeply, speaking in Korean. "You have lost much, your crew, your country, perhaps family. However, today you have gained Shaa and we are happy to have you here in this Shaa-a-ren." He bowed again and the Korean men bowed deeply back to him. Bren turned to the crowd.

“For the final round, we have the ultimate test. Each team will switch lanes and complete the other team’s final score. However! A gutterball counts as a strike, so you cannot intentionally throw the game. You can choose to bowl with both hands, or your non-dominant hand.”

The teams switched lanes and began, with Team Justice putting up several points for Team Freedom. By the time they reached the last ball the game was tied. The men looked at each other, then conferred. They nodded and each stepped up to the lane, carefully throwing simultaneous - and very intentional - gutterballs. Bren raised his hands, quite pleased with himself.

“The game has ended in a tie!” He called the teams to him. “It seems that the outcome has not solved our problem. How would you like to choose the winning team?” Bren smiled, fairly certain he knew the answer.

The captain of Team Justice spoke. “We will both stay on deck three.”

The captain of Team Freedom joined him. “And we would like to host all of you for a feast on deck three tomorrow!”

The crowd erupted in cheers. Captain Gardner spied Bren speaking with the Korean men, they seemed to be thanking him. Choi moved to the Captain. “Bren knew exactly what to say to them. This Shaa business really made a difference.” Gardner smiled and watched as the men walked to the food and beverage stations and joined in the celebration. Gardner went to Bren, who was now talking to Klein.

“Lieutenant Bren, I must commend you. Your Feats of Strength and Shaa-a-ren was an unqualified success.”

Bren smiled. “Captain, Shaa is a very trusted solution to many problems.” He held his hands out, palms up and fingers sticking up. “We are all digits on the same hand. Once the men started to bond over their shared experience they began to feel the depth of connection. Shaa-a-ren connects us all, sometimes you just need to reach out and feel it.”

Klein nodded, holding out his hands as Bren had done. Bren smiled again. “Commander, you have now experienced Klaan humor, in its long form. How often did you laugh as the men dizzied themselves and fell, or threw bad balls, left difficult splits, or danced with their opponents?”

Klein looked at Bren curiously. “You did this all just to...” He looked at the Captain in shock and finished the thought. “... To tell me a joke?”

Bren smiled, “It was a happy coincidence. Shaa-a-ren is very real, as is Klaan humor.” He hummed a tune as he walked away. Klein and Gardner looked at each other, questioning what had actually taken place tonight. Gardner shook his head as he patted Klein on the back, blending into the celebration.

“It doesn’t matter Mr. Klein, it worked.”

Gaia

“Captain to the bridge.” Bren looked up, he kept all ship-wide announcements turned on in his quarters. “Lieutenant Bren to the bridge.” Bren jumped up and rushed into the hallway, almost bumping into the Captain.

“Mr. Bren, calm down.” Captain Gardner put a hand on his shoulder. “It’s a one minute walk, we’re fine.” He smiled and Bren relaxed. He had been edgy since Captain Sassen had told him they’d be coming through this sector soon. No decision had been made as to whether Bren would be allowed to stay on the Shepherd. As they reached the bridge Commander Klein waved them to his workstation. Klein never sat in the Captain’s chair, even when he was in command for the secondary shift.

“Bren, need your help here!” Gardner and Bren looked at the screen.

Gardner tilted his head. “What are we looking at, Commander?”

Bren studied the readings and answered the Captain’s question. “It’s a signal, a communication carrier wave. It’s weak, maybe an automated distress call.” Suddenly the signal disappeared. Bren looked over the recording of the signal and grimaced. “I believe it is Sellane. But there’s no reason for them to be this far away from their home territory.”

Captain Gardner spoke again, “Origin?”

Klein exhaled sharply. “Holy... Sir, it looks like somewhere in the Alpha Centauri star system. Bren, can we narrow it down?”

Bren clicked a few buttons and made a whistling sound. “No Commander, although I would guess in the Proxima system, based on the distance. The signal is quite weak.”

Klein and Gardner looked at each other. Bren looked back and forth at them, confused. Gardner finally broke the silence. "How long since the first Strays left?" Klein had the answer, as did Gardner, they were working out their next move. Nevertheless Klein answered.

"Forty years."

Again they looked at each other and shook their heads. Klein spoke, "No chance they could have made it." Gardner nodded in agreement.

Finally Bren broke another silence. "So do we investigate?" The statement broke them out of their trances.

Gardner jumped into action as Klein sat down at his station. Gardner barked out an order. "Lieutenant, plot a course for the Proxima system." The pilot nodded. Gardner turned to Klein, "Commander, how long will that take us?"

Klein already had the calculations. "Three jumps, forty-eight hours."

Gardner turned to Bren, "Lieutenant, break that message down, whatever you can learn. You've got two days."

The senior crew stood on the bridge, taking in the red glow of Proxima Centauri. Three planets circled the star, with Proxima 2, as it had been designated, holding two moons in its orbit. Gardner and Klein seemed to be in awe. Bren had a realization. "You haven't been here before."

Klein returned to his station as the Captain turned to Bren. "No, we assumed at some point our actual mission would take us there. This is the first time." Klein was muttering under his breath, drawing Gardner

and Bren to his station. Klein didn't look up.

"Our first real look at the planet. It's nothing like we expected." Gardner looked at him as Klein continued. "There is atmosphere, humans could probably adapt. Oxygen rich." He shook his head. "There's so much we couldn't see. It's tidally locked, the same side always faces the star." He squinted, "There is far more water than we thought. The planet isn't dry, it's frozen. There is no liquid water anywhere that I can see."

Gardner stepped back. This was a bad bit of knowledge. So many of their assumptions were wrong. Bren stepped to another workstation and began studying, suddenly he shouted. "I found it!" Klein and Gardner jumped as Bren continued. "The bigger moon of the planet. There is a power source. Weak, but definitely not naturally occurring."

By now Klein had turned his attention to the moon. "This is more like it. Nitrogen Oxygen atmosphere, strong magnetic fields, liquid water. Sir, I'm unable to read anything from the surface, there's substantial interference from the magnetic fields."

Gardner turned to Jeffries who had already plotted a course. "Get us over there Lieutenant!"

A short time later they were in orbit of Proxima 2's second moon. From orbit it looked much like Earth. A smattering of green and brown surrounded by blue oceans. Ice caps at both poles, although they reached farther out than Earth. Gardner looked at Klein.

Klein grunted, "The magnetic fields are interfering with our scanners. I can't tell you anymore than we can see." Gardner stewed. Not knowing what they'd find concerned him.

"Commander, can we take the Shepherd into the

atmosphere? Klein studied the readings but it was Bren who responded.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea sir. The magnetic field is erratic. The Shepherd doesn’t have sufficient shielding. One of your planetary shuttles could be modified to take a team, although it would be a difficult flight.” Lieutenant Jeffries shifted in her seat anxiously.

Gardner looked at her, “You think you should fly this one? You know, I’m a pretty good pilot.” Klein laughed under his breath. Gardner ignored him. “Lieutenant Jeffries, of course you’re flying.” She jumped up excitedly. “Klein, Bren, let’s go.” Gardner pressed a button on the communication system. “Security team Alpha, report to the shuttle bay.”

As the shuttle dropped through the atmosphere Bren explained the modifications he had made. Mostly he had enabled the vital functions to operate manually. Hopefully it wouldn’t be necessary. Jeffries entered the edge of the atmosphere. “So far so good.”

As they dropped further they got a better view of the planet. It was breathtaking, from this distance very Earth-like. Bren spoke, “I’m reading life signs near the equator. On the edge of the large continent.

Jeffries turned and the shuttle bounced, like a rock skipping on a lake. She regained control as they dropped into more turbulence. Then the lights flashed. Jeffries was holding on tight to the controls, Bren looked over his modifications. “Not much further” A final drop of turbulence and they were out. Suddenly a communication chimed.

“Balkj gsbbbit shler, grwetto flergh”

* * *

Gardner looked at Bren, who punched buttons on his scanner. "Sir, it appears to be a Sellane language, but I don't recognize it." Gardner recalled their first encounter with the Klaan and how long it took to get basic communication. He pushed a button to reply.

"This is Captain Alex Gardner of the UEF Shepherd, we ar—"

He was interrupted by a woman's voice excitedly responding. "You're speaking English! Are you human?"

Gardner looked at Klein uncertainly. "Yes, we are, are you a human colony?"

The woman yipped and cheered. "Yes!" There was a voice behind her in the previous language, short and curt and she quickly spoke again. "Don't drop below 5,000 meters!"

Jeffries glanced down and pulled the shuttle up, hovering in place. "7,000 meters sir."

The woman spoke again. "I'm sending coordinates, don't drop below 5,000 meters until you get to the valley next to the forest. You'll see a baseball diamond, land there."

Gardner quickly replied. "Acknowledged." He turned to Jeffries, "You got the directions?" Jeffries nodded and maneuvered the shuttle. Bren suddenly exclaimed. "Essenaan!" Everyone looked at him. He seemed confused. "There's no mention of this mineral in your histories?" The translation program didn't have a name. He looked up the periodic chart from Earth. "Well, it looks like you've never come across any. It's an incredibly valuable mineral, but in it's raw form it's extremely flammable and unstable. We were over a large deposit. That would not have been a good landing spot." He looked at Gardner who nodded in concerned

agreement.

Jeffries looked below, “A baseball diamond! That’s crazy.” They were over a small village, small buildings, a few roads, and a few larger buildings scattered in a large valley, with a forest on one side and rocky hills on the other. Jeffries manually guided the shuttle down, landing in left field, with a bit of a bump. She smiled, “Sorry, I haven’t landed manually in a while.”

Bren scanned, “It appears that our sensors are still malfunctioning.” He turned to Jeffries, “Nice work Lieutenant!” As they moved to the exit Gardner stopped the two security officers. “Keep your guns holstered, and stay behind the rest of us.” They nodded and stepped back. The shuttle door opened and the fresh smell of grass and mist and mossy trees drifted all around them. Clean air like none they had ever breathed, and a crisp chill in the air. A woman came running up to them.

“Over here!” People were starting to gather and the Captain noticed it was a mix of humans and an alien species, tall and muscular, pale skin, and stern looks. Gardner looked quickly at Bren silently asking the question of who they were. Bren answered in a low voice.

“Sellane, but there’s more to it.” He was cut off by the woman’s arrival at their group.

She quickly figured Gardner as the Captain and went to him. “Captain Gardner I presume?” She smiled and Gardner reached out a hand for a shake. Instead she gave him a giant bear hug.

“Welcome to Gaia!”

She led them to a larger building and they could see

that there were parts of an Earth vessel used as construction materials. As they entered people gathered around, mostly humans, but several Sellane as well. There were also children, who clung to their mothers' skirts, they clearly weren't accustomed to visitors. Gardner winked at a small boy, who giggled and hid behind his mother. The woman led them to a large table. She gestured to seats. Captain Gardner smiled as people brought water and fruits to the table. "In all the hugging you didn't tell us your name."

The woman laughed. "No I didn't. Jessica Leonard. I'm the Governor of this settlement." A Sellane man joined her. "And this is my husband, Ka'llonn." She looked around and directed her gaze at Bren. "Ka'llon says you are Klaan?" Bren nodded. She continued.

"Then you must know the history of Sel." Bren looked at her carefully, unsure of what she had been told. She picked up on his unease. "Mr. Bren, these are former Sellane slaves. There are no Kar'ddaeol here." Bren exhaled.

"Thank you for the clarity. Sel claims to have ended slavery fifty years ago. My captain was on his way to a primary meeting to renew their application for membership in the Collective. How long have you all been here?"

Gardner waited patiently until Bren asked his question, "Yes, how long? And how... how?"

Jessica smiled. "Well, that is a strange tale Captain. Have a snack and get comfortable." She smiled as she sat down and Ka'llon joined her at the table.

The fruit they had been offered was new to them, and delicious, some tart, some overly sweet. The water was fresh and clear. The crew were enjoying the small feast as Jessica told her story.

“We left Earth in July of 2061. Our ship was named Gaia. We all went into hibernation.” She paused “This is the short part of the story.” She smiled as obviously Gardner and the others wanted to know how they got here so fast. 39 years just wasn’t enough time at sub-light speeds. She lingered a moment, allowing the tension to build before she continued.

“When we woke up, our ship had landed in this very field. We checked the logs and the only information we had was that the ship was fully functional and we were here. The Earth date was April 7th, 2073. 12 years. We named the planet Gaia as well.” She paused to take a bite. “Isn’t this delicious? We call it bluefruit, not very creative, I know.” She smiled as she wiped a bit of juice from her mouth.

Gardner had dozens of questions, but started with an obvious one. “And you have no idea how you ended up here?”

She shook her head. “None. Our ship had landed as if it had been gently set down. There was no damage, parachutes had not deployed. As we have sent expeditions further afield it became obvious that we had settled in an ideal spot.”

She smiled at her husband, who had a relaxed but concerned look on his face. He spoke in clear English. “How did you find us?” Jessica looked at the Captain expectantly.

“We received a communication a few days ago.” Ka’llon rose from his chair, muttering under his breath in Sellane. Jessica chastised him and he sat back down, clearly agitated.

She spoke quietly to him. “The message only went out for a few seconds. It was a mistake, we’ll be fine.” She turned back to her guests.

“We tried to follow an Earth calendar but it didn’t make sense because the days are so much different here.” She paused, “We are on a moon around Proxima 2?” Gardner nodded. “We assumed that was the case, from what little we can tell Proxima 2 seems unfriendly.” Gardner nodded, he was about to speak but Jessica continued.

“Whoever put us here had a reason. It was just a short time before the Sellane ship crashed. Just a few kilometers from here.” Ka’llon looked down, and the other Sellane seemed solemn as well.

“We don’t discuss it much, it’s in the past, but they were slaves on their way to a distant mining colony. The Kar’ddaeol scanned the area and saw the Essenaan deposits. They tried to land but ignited a seam. It knocked their ship out.”

Ka’llon finished the story. “The ship had lost controls, I believe due to the strong magnetic fields here.” He looked around, “That same field protects us and keeps our atmosphere in place.” He smiled briefly at his wife then continued. “The other slaves and I took advantage and were able to overpower them.” He paused, all the Sellane looking down silently.

“You must understand Captain, out spiritual practices revere life. We are not... killers.” Jessica put a hand on his knee.

“We took them in Captain. They came out of the ship ready for a fight. Instead we fed them and tended to their wounds. Eventually they became a part of our community.”

Gardner nodded in approval. “How many of you are here?”

Jessica waved a hand, “We’re all one, but there are one hundred twenty-six humans, and thirty-seven

Sellane.” She gestured toward some children. When we landed there were one-hundred and one.” She smiled.

A large Sellane hurried to Ka’llon and whispered something. He cursed again. “They’re coming.” The people gathered began to leave, snatching up their children in barely controlled chaos. Jessica stayed in the room as the Sellane charged out.

“Jessica spoke loudly but calmly, “Head for the caves, don’t panic. We will be fine. Captain, I will understand if you leave, but we could use your help.” She looked at him expectantly.

He asked, “Who’s coming?”

Her answer was cold and he could feel the contempt in her voice.

“Kar’ddaeol”

While most of the women and children were rushing toward the hills nearby, men gathered at the edge of the village. Ka’llon and the Sellane at the front, armed with what appeared to be Sellane energy weapons, and several men and older boys behind them carrying whatever weapon seem appropriate, knives, shovels, hammers, and a few with bows and arrows near the edges. Bren had found a blanket to hide his identity. If the Sellane were going to cause a problem he didn’t want them to see him as an obvious witness and threat.

After long minutes the sound of a small ship entered the atmosphere. Everyone watched in silence as the ship steered toward them. It stopped at what must have been 5 to 10,000 meters above the ground. Another long pause, presumably as they scanned as best they could. Gardner turned to Bren. “Are their scanners shielded better than ours?”

Bren shook his head. “No captain. Although Klaan ships would have an easy time navigating this atmosphere, it would still be through visual navigation.” Gardner breathed a small sigh of relief.

“Well that’s something.”

Suddenly the ship shot a missile toward the Essenaan deposits. Fortunately they simply hit rock. They fired again, missing again. Bren commented, “Their targeting sensors aren’t working, they are shooting visually from that distance. Their accuracy is compromised.” Ka’llon replied.

“That’s a large deposit, they’ll eventually hit it. It’ll take out half the valley, part of the cave system, and all of the deposits.” Jessica turned to Gardner.

“Does your ship have weapons?” Gardner shook his head.

“No, but I have an idea.” He turned to his crew. “Stay here, help if you can. Whatever it takes” He ran toward the ship and Jeffries ran right after him. He reached the ship and turned to see her. “I ordered you all to stay.”

She shot back at him as she entered the shuttle. “I’m sorry sir, bust me down later. I can’t follow that order, you can’t fly this ship.” Gardner grunted as he shut the door to the shuttle. She lifted off and Gardner joined her at the front. She looked at him expectantly. “So, did you actually have a plan, or were you just going to ram them?”

He smiled. “They’re targeting visually right?” She nodded. “Let’s take away their vision. Get above them.” She managed to get past them and hover above. The Sellane ship fired again but missed. Gardner looked down at the ship. “Thank god they have windows.” Set us down right on top of it.

Jeffries lowered the shuttle quickly dropping toward them. They didn't realize she was there until they were on top of them. The Sellane ship shook and twisted as Jeffries engaged the magnetic locks that held the shuttle in place in the shuttle bay. They weren't going anywhere.

Gardner smiled, "Why don't you see what happens when we try to move?" The shuttle trembled, the engines far exceeding their safety limits. The Sellane ship had stopped firing as they fought to keep control of their ship. Gardner thought a moment. "We have parachutes, right?" Jeffries smiled and pushed a button, releasing emergency landing parachutes.

The Sellane ship, their frustration rising, began to climb. If they got into space the shuttle was far over-matched. Suddenly the Sellane ship stopped. Gardner and Jeffries realized there was another ship above them, a ship they recognized. The KCC Victory had arrived.

The Sellane ship stopped fighting. Gardner looked at Jeffries. "Get us off this ship." Jeffries pulled away, dragging one of the parachutes until the cords finally snapped. The other two had released as they were supposed to. She backed off the Sellane ship until fully clear and looked at the captain.

"Down?"

He smiled, "Please."

A small group sat around the big table. Captain Sassen had greeted Gardner warmly, as it was their first in-person meeting. Two Sellane officers sat nearby, angry and humiliated at their defeat. Jessica and Ka'llon sat at the head of the table, while Gardner and Klein sat near Bren. Sassen put a translator on the

table and spoke, the Sellane had translators of their own.

He turned to the Sellane Captain. "I just left your planet, where your Prime Minister assured me that slavery had been dismantled over fifty years ago. And yet, here we are with men who were brought here only twenty-six years ago by Kar'ddaeol." He spat the word out in disgust, then focused on the Sellane Captain. "And here you are, trying to get rid of the evidence, just like a cowardly Kar'ddaeol." He turned his back on them. "You can tell your leaders their application has again been tabled. Possibly for the last time."

The Sellane stood up to leave but Sassen stopped them. "One more thing. Governor, as the duly authorized leader of this moon, I would like to offer you something." Another of his officers appeared with an electronic tablet. He handed it to Sassen who set it in front of Jessica.

"This is a trade agreement. As the ranking officer in this sector I am authorized to initiate this contract. I understand your moon is rich in Essenaan?" Jessica looked at him, starting to sour, as he seemed to be pressuring her into becoming a mining colony. Ka'llon shifted uneasily.

Sassen walked over in front of the Kar'ddaeol. "Of course mining such a volatile mineral would require years of planning perhaps decades. And getting approval to begin the planning might take even longer." Jessica and Ka'llon looked at each other, confused. Sassen continued.

"As the designated trade partner for your mineral rights, the Klaan Collective would, of course, offer your moon protection." He glared at the Sellane officers, then shooed them away. They left and Jessica smiled a

huge smile. Ka'llon also smiled, standing to shake Sassen's hand, who offered both hands in Klaan tradition. Sassen turned the tablet to allow Jessica and Ka'llon to sign. Then he signed it and turned it to face Bren.

"Lieutenant, as you know, any treaty or interplanetary contract must be signed by a diplomatic officer." Bren smiled and spoke.

"Thank you Captain, but that must be a command officer, and I am a junior lieutenant in the diplomatic corps." Sassen jumped, as if he had suddenly remembered something important. He pulled a small emblem from his pocket.

"Oh right, I forgot to mention. Your request to stay with the Shepherd has been approved. You will officially be our acting Earth Ambassador. That comes with a promotion to Commander. He placed the emblem on Bren's uniform, then saluted, a salute unique to Klaan. He took his hands and placed one on the other, extending them into a triangle in front of him, before snapping them down to his sides. Bren returned the salute.

Bren beamed, his skin turning a dark brown color as he signed the document. Sassen turned to Gardner. "Captain, we prefer two witness signatures for such a document. Would you two mind?" He gestured toward Gardner and Klein. Gardner took the document and was about to sign when Sassen stopped him.

"Before you sign, you should know that signing a contract with the Collective, even as just a witness, will elevate you to friendly terms, officially. Of course, having an Ambassador on board will do the same." Gardner signed, as did Klein. Sassen reached out both hands to everyone around the table. Jessica called for

food and drink as it was well past dark, so nobody was leaving.

Gardner approached Klein, who had just shaken Bren's hands and saluted him. Gardner saluted (Klaan style of course) as Bren passed. "Commander." He smiled and turned to Sassen. "So the Shepherd was ok?"

Sassen smiled. "Yes, the Sellane ship went right past them. I suggested they jump away and come back later, which, I understand is a requirement with your jump drives?" Gardner nodded.

"Sixteen hours"

Sassen laughed. "When we entered the atmosphere I didn't know what to expect, but I did not expect to see a small shuttle clamped over the windows of the Sellane ship, pushing them around with your thrusters and parachutes deployed." He laughed again. It did sound ridiculous when he explained it. "Seriously Captain, that is quite a feat of bravery and ingenuity. Many would have departed when the Sellane arrived. Maybe to file a diplomatic complaint at a later date."

Sassen laughed again. "Your Lieutenant was flying?"

Gardner smiled. "Lieutenant Isabella Jeffries, best pilot on Earth." He pointed to where several of the children were weaving a maypole, circling the post, and Jeffries right in the mix. Klein appeared to be explaining the concept to Bren.

Jessica joined them. "I hope you both know that we really would love to have your crews down for a proper feast." She looked at Ka'llon, who was holding a small child. "They have lived the last twenty-six years with one eye over their shoulder. Now, perhaps, they can finally leave that behind and just enjoy their lives. Our

lives."

Gardner looked curiously at the child Ka'llon was holding. He turned to Jessica. "When we return with supplies we will take you up on that. Is that... your child?"

She smiled a knowing smile and nodded. Gardner was about to ask how, but Jessica patted him on the chest. "Gaia, or the spirit, or God, works in mysterious ways. Whoever put us here, put them here, and now you. Whoever she is, she's looking out for us."

She smiled and took a step before turning around. "And if other settlers want to join us, they can, and if they do, Gaia will have brought them as well." She joined her family. Klein and Bren joined the two Captains.

Klein watched as the Sellane giant playfully pulled his daughter's hair. "So, any idea how they got here?"

Sassen laughed. "You heard the woman, Gaia brought them!" And with that, he joined the celebration, dancing into a group of people circling a bonfire.

* * *

Goodnight Mars: The Rise and Fall of the Free Ship 'Ranger'

Kemmerer, Wyoming. February 12, 2067

Larry Noble sat on a bench, smoking a hand rolled cigarette. As it burned down the coughing started. "Garbage tobacco," he mumbled to himself, crushing the butt under his heel. Mitch and Dakota were still inside the town bar, The Stock Market. Larry had a long drive ahead so skipped the celebratory booze-up. He checked his watch. 11:15, time to go. He was about to go inside when Dakota popped out, followed by Mitch. Larry watched as they looked around for him. They seemed sober enough. He waved and they shuffled over to the town triangle. The way the town was designed this triangle shaped park served as the de facto center of town.

Kemmerer was now a ghost town. Since the war started many moved to the relative safety of larger cities. There were several missile silos scattered around southwestern Wyoming and while many warheads had been stolen already, nuclear scavengers still traveled the area occasionally. The coal mine was no longer operating so Kemmerer was not much more than a rest stop.

Larry's team had come for the coal, and to look for the missile part of the nuclear arsenal in this area. It had been a successful trip, as they had secured six missiles, fully functional. When scavengers found a nuclear missile they typically only had the capability to take the warhead; still no easy feat. But they often trashed the missile in the process. To find six was a goldmine. All the warheads had been taken fortunately. One convoy of trona from Green River and three

missiles was already underway, headed for Texas and their sleeper ship.

Brian's giant Hummer appeared in the street, Brian's giant face and upper body hanging out the passenger side. He had a dark, polished, shaved head and dark sunglasses, even at night. He spotted Larry and the Hummer screeched to a stop. "Let's roll! Kim's truck is secure, teams are in place. Christopher is driving the coal. You three get that crane rolling!"

Larry checked his pouch. He probably had three smokes left. "Did you find any..."

Brian interrupted him by tossing a carton of smokes his way. "Found a burned out truck stop down 30 on our security sweep. We managed to get a few cases of canned goods." He looked at his driver and nodded. "We'll meet you at the highway junction. Ten minutes!" With that the Hummer sped away. Mitch and Dakota nodded to Larry and headed for the crane truck.

Larry would probably not have found this group without the crane. Two years ago Jesse Gabriel and a few others, including Brian, had come through Kemmerer. They were looking for missiles and tried to steal Larry's crane. It wasn't actually his, but he was the last operator to use it at the coal mine, and he had parked it at his small farm. After a brief standoff complete with guns pointed all around Larry asked the big question: "Any of you ding dongs know how to operate this thing?"

Jesse lowered his shotgun and everyone hesitantly stood down. After Jesse explained his plan to Larry it wasn't long until Larry found himself pulling a missile out of a silo and onto a truck. Turns out Jesse was another Wyoming boy, having grown up in Green River. Green River had thrived once the sleeper ship

programs started. The hibernation modules required soda ash from trona for filtration, and Green River was the trona Capital of North America. Jesse made connections and after several years of war, he found himself putting together a ship of his own.

By then ships were being cobbled together out of whatever people could find. It was not uncommon to see convoys of trucks hauling missiles and rockets to California or Texas. Cape Canaveral had been flattened, and the few additional launch sites were under the control of the Freedom Party. Edwards Air Force Base and Brownsville were still independent, though mostly managed by Justice party folks. Jesse was building a giant ship in Brownsville. It was going to hold up to ten thousand people. Somehow he had secured experimental pieces of an old prototype called the Sea Dragon. It was huge, but never got close to launching. Now it was back, and they just needed six more missiles.

Larry hopped up onto the step as Mitch and Dakota circled the crane, making sure everything was secure. The crane required a minimum of three people to operate. Mitch had arrived one day from Alaska with a heavy equipment background. Dakota was a mechanic with a golden touch who worked at the coal mine for a few weeks before the bombs started. Although Larry felt like a third wheel with the couple, they were good conversation on long trips.

This would be the longest trip the crane had made. It stayed secured in Kemmerer between trips to Texas. They had acquired the last missiles so now the crane was going to base camp. It would be a long trip for this ragtag convoy. As Larry started up the truck he looked around one last time at his little hometown. He'd

certainly never see it again. He was happy he had found a couple T-shirts representing the local high school, The Kemmerer Rangers. He had found a jacket, but it was too small so he'd passed it to Dakota. He still had his old Rangers hat, which was definitely coming with him.

They were about six months away, just needed to assemble the parts they had gathered. It had taken almost two years but the time was now. Parts of Wyoming were ravaged by nuclear blasts, as scavengers detonated an occasional warhead as they attempted to liberate it. Wyoming and Montana had become the favored ground in the west for the underground silos.

Once Russia had expanded into Europe most nuclear treaties had been abandoned. Russia had only used one nuke in Poland but it was the first volley. Soon after Iran showed the world they had nukes, although their only attempt to use it missed its target of Tel Aviv by hundreds of miles, detonating harmlessly in the Mediterranean Sea. Nevertheless, North Korea, China, and all the standard nuclear capable countries started rattling sabres. It was a shock when ten years later a civil war in the US broke out with three nukes leveling Los Angeles. Until that point the US appeared to be the adult in the room. The Freedom Party popped up from nowhere, taking responsibility for the destruction of the city they viewed as the most sinful, evil city in America.

There were rumors that North Korea had launched the attack, but it was never proven, and when a saboteur triggered every nuke in North Korea to detonate simultaneously, the answer would never come. Everyone expected the newly formed Justice Party to

take responsibility as payback, perhaps having found proof that North Korea had indeed bombed L.A. but none of that occurred. Freedom and Justice just continued to flatten parts of the US indiscriminately. Once the US had launched nukes the gloves were off, and every old rivalry and dispute around the world became a nuclear solution. The worldwide levels of radiation rose, and nuclear winter was a certainty, if not worse.

So people started leaving on hibernation ships. It became commonplace for civilians to build their own ships. Since the late 2020's there had been a billionaire's space race, and once sub-light engines were invented, hibernation ships were all the rage. Since the war began people started leaving on their own ships, you just had to get a little creative.

Larry suspected there were still missiles out there, but they didn't need them. They now had eight of these missiles, and four of the larger rockets. It should be enough to get them into space, then the sub light engines would take them to Mars, to pick up more fuel. The sub light engines didn't burn fuel like the rockets do, but certain minerals and components were easier to load in space, and most bigger ships stopped at Mars. It would also make take off easier as the ship would be lighter. The red planet was becoming home to more people, but spots were limited and there may not be further opportunities to expand. Still, as Mars remained neutral, it was a small, but hopeful spark of humanity's future, limited as it was.

Mitch and Dakota hopped in the cab, with Dakota sliding into the back. Mitch smiled, "Good to go Cap!" Larry nodded, irritated by Mitch's insistence in referring to his Army rank. He'd given up trying to stop

him, but it still grated on him. His time in the Army was not pleasant, having done two tours in North Africa, which was a brutal action that did nothing, like most police actions. Not pleasant was an understatement. Leaving this planet was fine by him, and he'd be OK if all the humans stayed behind as well. Humanity did not impress Larry. He was ready to leave it all behind.

The truck was ready and he pulled forward, easing toward the meeting spot. Three days to Texas, he was wondering what canned food they had from the truck stop. A ravioli or chili meal would be amazing. He imagined chili and fresh bread, as Mitch and Dakota started discussing the practical aspects of the missile attachments. Larry honked as he approached the others, who were ready to roll. They formed a line, moving carefully down the highway as the dark Wyoming sky showed them their future.

Brownsville, Texas. February 20, 2067

Larry woke in a panic, his bed shaking violently. Instinctually, Larry reached for his gun but it wasn't there. Instead he found a handful of oatmeal. Then he heard the laughter. Jesse sputtered between giggles, "Dude, I brought you a spoon." Larry woke enough to see Jesse standing above him. He was eating toast and holding a spoon. Larry wiped his hand on a shirt near his bed and took the spoon from Jesse.

Jesse sat on a nearby chair as Larry dug in, speaking between bites. "How long was I asleep?"

Jesse smiled, "Twelve hours! We were starting to worry. Brian wanted to check on you but I said let him sleep."

Larry paused, letting his food settle. "But no more?"

Jesse stood up. "Nope, we've got work to do." Jesse tossed Larry's pants at him. "Get dressed, your gun's on the cabinet." Larry gulped down the last of his oatmeal and got dressed. He strapped the gun to his belt. Every time he did he had to take a breath. He had been diagnosed with PTSD after his service, and though he'd gotten a grip on it, the last few years made it tough to cope. Jesse insisted his "management team" were always armed, and so he was.

Brian popped his head into the room. He waved another carton of smokes. "Found one more buddy." He sat it on the dresser. "Thought you might have died." He laughed a guttural laugh as if it was the funniest thing he'd ever said, it echoed down the hall behind him as he left.

Jesse grabbed Larry's binder of notebooks and manuals and gestured to the door. "Let's go princess. We're ready for the crane."

Larry lit a smoke and followed Jesse. He was surprised to hear they were ready for assembly. They had made progress while he was gone. Jesse was overseeing the final touches of the ship, but also trying to trade for supplies. The coal was for that trading. People were camped for miles around Brownsville, either working on their ships, or trying to find a way onto one. The war didn't come this way, the two sides left the 'runners' (as they called them) to their work. Despite that, it was far from peaceful. People were desperate, and Jesse had a prime spot. Brian's security teams ran 24 hour patrols, and more than a few gunshots had settled disputes.

There was a queue for the launch pads, and Jesse

had a spot waiting for when they were ready. He was charming and charismatic. He didn't know much about space travel, but he had the ability to get people to work for him. It's how Larry and everyone else came to be on the project. Jesse had made connections through the trona trade and eventually managed to get a job with the crazy billionaire's space company. The other billionaire's company had people coming by frequently, and Jesse chatted with everyone he could. When the shit really hit the fan Jesse started gathering his crew.

The ship was already in progress when Larry joined the team. He was the last person on the "management team." He knew if he hadn't had the crane he might be dead, but when Jesse learned of his engineering background he was welcomed with open arms. Larry pointed out he was a structural engineer, but Jesse didn't care. He just wanted smart people on the team.

And he had the keys to the crane.

As the two men walked through the camp Jesse said hi to everyone. He carried himself like a rock star, complete with long hair and a leather duster. Sometimes people had questions that needed an answer, sometimes they needed reassurance, and sometimes just a friendly smile. Jesse had whatever was needed. He was always happy, even when he was angry. It was impossible to be mad at him. He also had a reputation for getting what he wanted, which frustrated him at times, as other folks were sometimes afraid to say no.

They were constantly trading, sometimes fuel, or food, and quite frequently the return trade was allowing a small group to join the team for a spot on the ship. They navigated to the launch vehicle. The

first thing Jesse had done was secure a launch vehicle. He built the ship on it, knowing there'd be no way to get this giant ship onto one later.

They turned a corner and there she was, the... Larry asked the same question he always did. "Pick a name yet?" Jesse shook his head no and they proceeded. The ship looked ridiculous. A little under 500 feet tall, with a diameter over 70 feet. This ship looked like an over-sized grain silo, stacked on another silo. The lower half would normally have been engines and fuel, but it had been redesigned to put all the boosters on the outside, making the entire ship's interior usable. Jesse was thinking big.

Mariana approached them, relieved to see Larry. She was the primary ship's engineer, a literal rocket scientist. She was smart and adventurous. (No self respecting engineer would have gone along with Jesse's ideas.) She had tasked Larry with designing the interior space. While he was able to do so, the differences between building stability and spaceship stability required hundreds of questions. Mariana was always happy to help, and she was fully capable of explaining theoretical physics to Larry in a way that made sense. She was remarkable, and in another life, Larry would have been trying to date her. But they were trying to escape a dying planet and there was no time for that. Maybe in 80 years when they arrived at Proxima.

She smiled at Larry. (Unbeknownst to him she felt the same way about him.) "Boys, good morning." Larry's designs were done and installed, and fully capable of being expanded as needed. Now to the exterior. Today's issue was attachment methods for the two rocket stages. Jesse nodded as someone called him

away, leaving Larry and Mariana alone. There was a moment of silence before Larry realized she was waiting for a return greeting. He gave her a quick hug and said hello.

Mariana showed Larry some hand drawn designs for the clamps. They were designed to release when the fuel was expended, but still had to be solid obviously. These were not new problems, but there would be twelve rockets of two different sizes strapped to the outside of this grain silo, that part was certainly new. She explained the problem they were having and Larry looked it over before looking up at the ship. "Let's go take a look at it. I want to see it in person, your drawings are terrible."

Mariana hooked her arm through his and smiled. "Of course, I'm an engineer."

Larry looked at the clamps until he wasn't sure what he was looking at anymore. Mariana sat on the scaffolding next to him. He gathered his wits. "They're not going to release." She shook her head. The original clamps would have broken due to the additional thrust. A junior engineer from NASA had given them this design, but the opposite problem was evident. These clamps were designed to be shielded. These would not be shielded. They'd freeze up from exposure.

They continued to stare at it until Dakota appeared below. "Larry! Hey!" Larry looked down at her. She continued "We need to move the crane to the other side, do you want to do it or can Mitch move it?"

Larry looked at her blankly. Mitch could definitely drive the crane, and Larry didn't need to prove his own value anymore. He nodded. "Mitch can move it." Dakota gave a thumbs up and started to walk away.

Larry called after her. "Make sure he secures the main pulley so it doesn't fall off." She gave another thumbs up and skipped away. Larry looked back at the problem clamps and it hit him. He turned to Mariana. "I got it."

He paused to think it through. Would it work? He grabbed his binder and drew a few circles, then recreated the design of the main pulley clamps. He showed it to Mariana. "The main pulley system on this crane has a failsafe. If the load destabilizes the assembly automatically releases. It's simple, but when the final stages burn, they should twist a little, right?" She nodded, trying to follow his thought. "The twist will release the clamps." He pointed to the drawings. "Here, and here, we double them up. They'll stay clamped as long as the rockets don't exert any torque from side to side." He turned the design sideways, shook the page back and forth, then up and down to demonstrate.

She looked at the design for a minute or two then grabbed his face and kissed him. "You did it."

Jesse was overjoyed, he asked a nearby assistant to go find some wine or whiskey. He turned back to Mariana and Larry. "That was the final hangup." The assistant returned with a bottle of red wine and three paper cups. He poured the wine and they each took one. Jesse held his up, and they joined him. "Here's to the journey of a lifetime." They toasted and Jesse turned to Larry. "Larry, I was waiting for something obvious as a name for the ship. It never came to me, until today." He looked at Larry's shirt and hat bearing his high school mascot. "Here's to... The Ranger." He raised another cup. Larry smiled as they both joined him.

Jesse was about to hand the bottle back to the assistant but Mariana grabbed it. “We’ll take that.” With the bottle in one hand she grabbed Larry’s hand with the other and they headed back to the quarters. She smiled at him. “You know I share a room with Caroline.” Larry smiled and they turned toward his building.

Brownsville, Texas. August 3, 2067

Getting people to their sleep pods had turned out to be easier than they had expected. Larry’s design was efficient, and people were cooperative. Although they had the design finalized, manufacturing parts was incredibly difficult. In the end a contingent had traveled all the way to Phoenix before finding everything they needed. Then they spent two weeks building them. By the time they returned Jesse had increased the passenger count to nearly sixteen thousand. Jesse and Mariana had argued constantly about whether they could launch with all that extra weight. Jesse finally gave in and dumped a few supplies. It was a risky move because it meant scavenging everything usable from the ship upon arrival, and there was no guarantee the landing would be smooth enough for that. But in the end, they’d agreed that getting there was the first thing to ensure.

Once the clamps were machined and installed he lifted missiles and rockets onto the ship. It came together quickly and before they knew it, they were ready. Jesse secured a launch date and Mariana and her team began final preparations. Jesse and Larry oversaw loading. The plan was to have all but a few people from the management team asleep in their pods the day

before. With that many people they couldn't sustain them all the way to Mars except in hibernation. Many areas would not have atmosphere, so once they left Earth, they had to remain in hibernation until arrival.

At Mars, they'd pick up what supplies they could, and launch. Then everyone would go to hibernation. Jesse planned to wake every ten years to check on things. It wasn't ideal to wake up that often, but he was convinced it was necessary. They had alarms but he insisted.

There was one ship ahead of them, and once they launched the Ranger would be moved into place. Jesse had tried to secure a trade for fuel with the other ship in return for taking on the additional passengers but the ship leaders declined. Mariana breathed a sigh of relief as she still worried they were over weight. Once they got into space she could exhale. Although Larry and Mariana had escalated their relationship, they were so busy that it really hadn't changed much, aside from sleeping arrangements. Larry didn't think he'd sleep much the next two days, so that was probably the last of that until Proxima.

Mariana suddenly appeared and Larry felt a bit embarrassed, as if she could read his mind. "We have to take a six hour break at midnight, would you like to try to fit some sleep in there?" Larry smiled and nodded. She kissed him and slipped away. "See you in two hours." He looked at his watch, surprised at the time.

Larry woke as a ray of moonlight crept up the end of the bed. Mariana was sleeping soundly. He rubbed his face. He laid still on the bed, listening to Mariana breathing. He leaned over and checked his watch, 3:15

am. Why was he awake? As he focused on her breathing he realized he could hear another familiar sound. Someone was driving the crane. He quickly slid off the bed. Fortunately his clothes were in a pile right below him so he slipped them on, grabbed his gun and fished into the drawer for a flashlight. He walked out into the camp, which was quiet as expected. He looked around for any of Brian's security team. Since he was in the middle of camp there wouldn't be a regular patrol, but he was hoping to find someone.

He turned a corner and was surprised to see Mitch arguing with Dakota. The crane was lowered with the cable hook on the ground. Mitch was trying to keep Dakota quiet and she seemed genuinely upset. Larry turned off the flashlight and stayed out of sight, edging close enough to hear them. He was almost within earshot when he realized what was happening. Mitch had a backpack attached to the crane. He was right below a dual missile attachment. Larry looked around, hoping someone else was around but no luck. He concentrated on the backpack. His suspicions were on edge as he watched Dakota was trying desperately to block Mitch from the crane controls.

Larry's mind went straight to the worst case scenario. Was he going to bomb the Ranger? Larry quickly worked through his history with Mitch, any signs? Dakota was getting louder and Larry figured she'd wake someone at some point. He saw that Mitch was realizing this as well and watched Mitch grab Dakota in an attempt to shut her up. As they struggled Larry tried to decide what he should do. Then it didn't matter.

Mitch pulled out his gun and shot her. It happened so fast Larry didn't have a chance to react. He ran

toward them and pulled out his gun. As he ran Mitch paused to look at Dakota and then turned to the controls. Larry was still running and yelled at Mitch through ragged breaths. "Mitch! What the fuck Mitch?"

Mitch began dragging the arm of the crane sideways before raising it. Once he had it in place he started to raise it and turned the gun toward Larry. Despite Larry's PTSD his combat experience kicked in. Larry was a structural engineer during his tours in Africa, but they were constantly under fire and all of the engineers became soldiers quickly. Despite his command status, Larry was no different. His instincts took over and when Mitch turned toward him Larry fired. At a full run, he was still a solid shot and his bullet ripped through Mitch's shoulder. Mitch reflexively grabbed at his wound, letting go of the crane control. He slouched against the mechanism sending the crane into a swinging motion. With such a light load the cables went past their failsafe position and the release clamps caused it to drop its load. Larry had one moment to see Dakota move her arm before the backpack fell right next to her, exploding in a shower of fire, dirt, and smoke. Mitch raised himself and started to aim the gun when two quick shots from Larry's left took Mitch out permanently.

Brian had heard Mitch's initial shot and had made it out with surprising speed for a man his size. He was wearing gym shorts, a gold chain, and nothing else, but there he was. Larry didn't slow as he ran to Dakota. It appeared the gunshot was in her side and may not have been fatal. Sadly, the explosion was. The small package of explosives would have been secured to the missiles discretely and when they fired, it would trigger a massive explosion. It would have been deadly.

And since Mitch was very dead himself, they may never know why.

Within a minute several people had gathered. Jesse and Brian knelt over Mitch, looking through his pockets for clues. Security patrols encouraged everyone to go back to bed. Half the ship's passengers were already in hibernation and they had to finish the rest by tomorrow night. Everyone needed to sleep. Mariana appeared and ran to Larry, grabbing him tightly. He leaned on her until she was holding him up. She eased him to the ground as one of the security team came and took Larry's gun.

"Did it fire ok? Need any maintenance?"

Larry nodded his head. "It was fine."

The security officer examined the gun. "Want me to clean it, give it a once over and bring it back?"

Larry shook his head. "No thanks son, I will handle that."

Brian appeared. "Larry, let us clean it up. You don't need it right now. We'll have it back tomorrow."

Larry realized they were trying to ease his mental response to this trauma and nodded in agreement. The young officer took off with Larry's gun. He didn't know it, but it was the last time he'd see the gun.

Jesse joined them, kneeling down on the grass. "How did you find them?"

Larry shook his head. "I don't know, I just woke up, and heard the crane. When I got out here she was trying to stop him, and I was trying to figure out what was going on. Then he shot her and it was instinct. Any idea why?"

Brian produced a small card, it was a picture of the Earth on fire. This was a symbol of an extremist group who felt that humans should remain on Earth as

punishment for their sins. (While they went to Proxima to start righteous new lives.)

Jesse put a hand on his shoulder. “You just saved a lot of lives. We could all have been crashing to Earth tomorrow.”

**Brownsville, Texas. August 5, 2067 4:27 am
Central Standard Time**

3-2-1. There was a moment of silence before the first stage missiles fired. Eight former nuclear tipped missiles, strapped onto the Ranger, burned hot and they rose. Jesse, Brian, Larry, and Mariana risked a glance around. Three more from the management team were a deck below, scanning readouts. Someone noted the 30 second mark over the radios. They breathed a sigh of relief as Mariana had noted three “break points.”

The first 20 seconds of the first stage, the first 20 seconds of the second stage, and crossing into space. The first two were when an explosion would most likely occur. The nuclear missiles were burning hotter than they were designed for, and the rockets were pushing more weight. Everything was either over or under-powered. The third point was when they’d escape Earth’s atmosphere. While they did have gauges and readouts to tell them if they were on track, due to the nature of this ship there was no guarantee they were accurate. Basically Mariana had stated, “If we keep floating up, we’re good, if not, we have a couple minutes to make peace with our creator.”

The missiles released, and Mariana gave Larry’s hand a squeeze. The second stage successfully fired and just 90 seconds later, as they reached the edge of

space, everyone held their breath. To their relief they kept going. Mariana slumped in her chair. The hardest part was over. They began making preparations to engage sub-light engines for the trip to Mars. It would take more than 16 hours at the best speed they could make. They couldn't fully engage maximum speed until leaving the solar system, but they'd all be asleep by then. Mariana reached out her hand again and Larry took it. He leaned over to her. "I'm so glad we didn't wait until Proxima." She smiled and they kissed before moving on to their duties.

Mars orbit, August 5, 2067 10:16 pm Eastern Standard Time

As the Ranger approached Mars, Mariana made the calculations to enter orbit. Another hour and they'd dock with the Mars Orbiter Station. Jesse punched up a code on the radio. "Mars Orbiter Station, this is the Free Ship Ranger, requesting instructions for docking." Minutes went by with no response. Jesse called again.

Nothing.

Mariana looked at him questioningly. Jesse shrugged his shoulders. "Keep going, maybe there's a malfunction with their radio?" Mariana continued and Jesse checked in every five minutes or so. Eventually they got visual confirmation of the station. It was there. Jesse tried one more time, and still getting no response he turned to Mariana. "Have the pilot head for the docking arm. It's all automated so unless they turned it off, we'll be OK."

About four minutes out the radio crackled to life. "Who are you?"

Jesse grabbed the radio. "Free Ship Ranger,

requesting permission to dock.”

More silence, then, “Affiliation?”

Jesse looked around. “Does he mean party affiliation?” Larry and Brian shrugged. Jesse sat a moment, “The whole point was we didn’t choose a side. That was the first rule to join the team. No party affiliation.” He hesitated, then replied. “Mars Orbiter, we are a free ship. We have no party affiliation.” He paused, no answer. “Mars, we’re about one minute away from the docking arm, can we discuss this after we dock?”

The docking arm abruptly swung out, taking it away from the first connection to be made for docking. Without the first connection the ship wouldn’t be able to match speed and inclination. That made docking almost impossible, especially for a ship Ranger’s size.

Mariana looked out the window. “Fuck”

A small explosion blew out from the center of the orbiter. Then another. The entire docking mechanism swung back toward the Ranger. Mariana screamed to the pilots. “Evasive maneuvers! Get us away.” The Ranger lurched, but the docking arm scraped along the side of The Ranger. It resonated through the whole ship. Then the ship groaned. Then it spun. The spinning continued, and the ship tumbled.

Jesse looked around. “What’s happening?”

Mariana paused. She looked at Larry, though she spoke to everyone. “The outer hull must be compromised. We’re venting atmosphere.” They all looked at each other. They didn’t have time to get space suits on, having taken them off for the approach to Mars, thinking that the dangerous part was over.

As the Ranger spun they occasionally caught glimpses of the Orbiter. It was also spinning out of

control. Bodies had been expelled into space. Apparently the Earth conflict had reached Mars, which was supposed to be unaligned. Jesse turned to Mariana. “What do we do?”

She smiled sadly and held Larry’s hand tightly. “Make your peace with God. We did our best.”

Jesse sat back, dejected. Brian prayed. Jesse looked around. “All this work to try to escape the conflicts on Earth, and here we are, dying as collateral damage due to the Earth conflict.

By now the Ranger had lost orbit and was veering into the Martian atmosphere. Larry took comfort in Mariana’s presence. As he held Mariana tightly he thought about the thousands of people below deck, asleep. They’d never know. They’d just never wake up. As the ship tore through the atmosphere he envied them.

Mars Station. August 5, 2067 23:29 Mars Standard Time

The remaining pieces of The Ranger burned through the Martian atmosphere. The Commander of Mars station, Zander Thomas, was fully involved in shutting down the insurrection by the Freedom party. Although it appeared they had lost the Orbiter, the station side conflict had been quelled quickly. Mars would remain independent. Suddenly the operations officer yelled out. “Commander Thomas, there’s a large ship coming through the atmosphere. Impact in about four minutes.”

Zander looked at the readouts. “Damnit! Those idiots just killed a bunch of people with their stupid insurrection.” He paused, “Lieutenant, is this the giant

ship that was scheduled to dock today?”

The Lieutenant quickly scrolled through a communication. “Yes sir, there’s very little information, no name listed here, but the manifest says --” He paused, “that can’t be right.”

Zander prodded him, “Lieutenant?”

He continued, “The originally filed manifest says there are 16,190 passengers.”

Zander stood in silence.

The Lieutenant suddenly cried out. “There’s a section headed for the outer arm on the west side.” He paused. “There is an engineering team over there. Thirty-nine people sir.”

The pieces of The Ranger that survived re-entry slammed into the Martian surface in multiple spots. Mostly harmless locations, just making new craters. None of the pieces were more than 7-8 feet across. Despite its size, it was not designed for strength and without the use of its landing engines it broke apart quickly. One larger piece slammed into the outer arm of the Mars station. A section was immediately exposed to the Martian atmosphere. The workers there had been warned and twelve had been close enough to the main corridor that they were able to clear the blast section. The other twenty-seven were too far away.

Mars Station. August 7, 2067 02:23 Mars Standard Time.

Commander Thomas stood in front of the view screen. It was rare to have a face to face call, but this was important. Near real time communication was

possible, but it required redirecting several satellites and it usually wasn't worth the trouble. The quality was also substandard, but it worked. He was looking at a split screen with the leaders of the USA, Germany, China, and Saudi Arabia. These four leaders had been chosen by the rest of the world to direct the ongoing cease fire. The President of the USA spoke again. "Commander, thank you for the report. Aside from the manifest you sent, have you found anything in the wreckage? Or the name of the ship?"

Zander shook his head. "No Ma'am. We have been unable to find anything useful. There are no bodies, nothing even recognizable. Small pieces Ma'am. The angle of descent caused a rapid re-entry. Hopefully the depressurization killed them quickly before the heat." The President nodded.

The German Chancellor spoke. "Commander, we understand the difficulty of your search efforts. You may discontinue your search. Mark the locations. They will now be memorials. You have recovered your own crew members' bodies?" Zander nodded. The Chancellor continued. "Good, please close off that section of the station and leave it for now. Do you need anything?"

Zander shook his head. "No sir, we are in good shape. We will of course, need some resupply at some point, and will need to construct a new orbiter station. However, we can be self sufficient for years. We're fine sir."

The President spoke again. "Thank you Commander. Please stay in contact, we will be quite busy here but we are all determined to find a way to peacefully exist."

The Chinese ambassador spoke up. "Not just exist, we will thrive. We can find strength in our

cooperation. These sixteen thousand people will never know the impact they had on Earth. Already we have scientists traveling to London for the first scientific consortium dedicated to finding new ways to clean radiation.”

The Saudi leader nodded. “Almost every country has signed on, and we should have the first complete worldwide treaty and agreement in history within weeks.”

The President spoke. “Again, Commander, thank you for your efforts. I have already spoken to your crew members’ families, and your letters were well received. I am sorry for the loss of your people. I am also sorry that you are now the Commander of a graveyard. I assure you, we will make this work. Good night Mr. Thomas.” The other leaders nodded and spoke encouragements.

Zander thanked them and saluted as the signal shut down. He nodded to the night crew on the bridge as he retired to his quarters and spoke quietly to no one in particular. “Goodnight, Mars.”

Farmer Bren

“Isn’t it amazing?”

Commander Bren was trying to simply enjoy the view but he struggled to relax, as his brain calculated the volume of water, the speed it reached as it spilled over the edge, and what the rocks must look like under the falls, after centuries of erosion. After Commander Klein’s question Bren managed to shut down the critical thinking for a moment. As he watched the water flow over the falls his imagination led his mind to a space he wasn’t familiar with. He was thinking of the water, and of space. Bits of wood occasionally flowing with the water, like a spaceship in space.

Commander Klein watched as Bren seemed to shut down his mind and just enjoy the view. Klein relaxed as Bren relaxed. Finally. Klein had been about to give up. He had taken Bren to several natural wonders across the eastern parts of North America, and Bren had calculated the years a tree took to grow “that way,” what type of fauna would live in the forest along a rugged mountain river, caves, canyons, gardens, just problems to be solved.

Finally, Bren was enjoying something. Niagara Falls. In the past it had been a tourist trap. Fascinating, but surrounded by tacky gift shops and hot dog stands. Now the natural surroundings made it an uncluttered connection to nature. For long minutes Bren didn’t move, just letting his eyes scan the area, following the flow of water in so many different places, all heading to the same spot eventually.

Klein allowed himself to be hypnotized by the falling water. Finally, Bren broke the silence. “This water, flowing, yet, as you go smaller it becomes droplets, then molecules, Hydrogen and Oxygen bonded

together. Atoms to molecules to drops to gallons to a river to an ocean.”

Klein smiled. Even Bren’s relaxed state was science based, and technically, Bren wasn’t even a scientist. He was a diplomat. A fact driven home over the past week as Bren spent hours discussing protocols and agreements with Earth’s leaders. Although Klein and Captain Gardner spent time in those meetings, Bren was there for all of them. 12-16 hours every day, as Bren kicked into full diplomatic mode.

It was impressive to watch, although incredibly boring. But Bren was as energetic as Klein had seen him. He seemed truly excited to discuss viral threats and currency exchanges while Klein sat waiting to see if they would need him for the next four hour block. He was relieved when it was over, and they got a few days off on Earth. His thoughts were interrupted by Bren, continuing.

“It occurs to me Commander, your method of FTL is like a tree branch going over the falls.” Klein smiled at the analogy. Bren continued, “But most FTL is more akin to the canal upstream. A shortcut across the field that is a far smoother way to negotiate that distance.”

Klein realized Bren was hinting at different methods of FTL in real life. He looked carefully at the canal on his pad, looking at the satellite overview. The canal he spoke of connected two branches of the river, allowing access across a great distance that would not be possible without the canal. “Like a wormhole?”

Bren smiled. “That is a fair analogy, but I was thinking more of the method of propulsion. Engines aren’t allowed in the river, so generated wave movement in the canal pushes the water in either direction, negating the need for motorized transport.”

Klein tapped the screen, looking for more information on the canal. He made a note, and sent the article to his personal message center. He'd have to read it later. "Why don't you just tell me?"

Bren smiled, "Protocol."

Klein nodded. Bren had made his dislike of Snap FTL apparent early on. Clearly other species in the universe didn't use Snap. But Bren couldn't share the details. So he dropped hints for Klein. A puzzle Klein hadn't put together yet.

Bren turned to Klein. "This has been a refreshing break. Quite enjoyable. Shall we travel to meet Lieutenant Jeffries?"

Klein examined Bren. He actually did look refreshed. He smiled. "Yes, let's go. I can't wait until we fly over the Rocky Mountains. Maybe that will impress you." Bren looked confused.

"I have been quite impressed Commander. The diamond mine was very informative. Especially how your people took the hardest mineral on your planet and exploited it for expensive trinkets and jewelry, instead of practical uses."

Klein was unsure what Bren regarded as relaxation as they approached the shuttle.

As expected, the trip over the Rocky Mountains caused Bren to discuss Earth's tectonic movements, as well as a discussion on volcanoes and again, erosion. Some of the canyons along the Utah/Colorado border did get his attention, as Klein flew as low as was allowed. But, as Bren pointed out, his world also had mountains.

As they turned north, they followed the trail of cities and towns along the mountains in Utah. Klein

explained to Bren that somehow, Utah had avoided any major damage during the war. Utah had a history of nuclear testing in the past, but as a low population area, with mountains, there was nothing of value worth destroying.

Other nearby states, flatter states, had missiles located around the area and as such, were overrun in places by groups attempting to commandeer them. Battles played out, with a few warheads detonating underground. Utah had nothing to steal, and mostly fighters just bypassed the state. This was the reason so many farms had survived. As they approached northern Utah Klein marveled. "It's amazing that Bella's family has been on that farm for almost two-hundred years."

Bren noted, "That is not uncommon on Klaan, but we haven't had a major military conflict in over a thousand years."

As they dropped to landing range Jeffries lit a smoke flare on the ground for Klein. There wasn't much wind, but it was a legal requirement in this area, as there was no official landing pad for 100 kilometers.

As Klein and Bren hopped off the shuttle Jeffries charged up to them, excited. She stopped and offered a salute, but Klein dismissed it as they hugged, and she turned to Bren. "I've never asked, is a hug an acceptable form of greeting for Klaan?"

Bren shrugged, "It is not forbidden."

She snickered as she gave him a hug, then pulled them both toward the main farm. "You made it just in time to help me feed the sheep before dinner." Klein rolled his eyes as Bren searched his memory files. She noticed his look and pointed to a field. "Sheep!"

Bren looked up. "Ah, I have the definition of the

word, but have no images to refer to.” This seemed to be what finally caused Bren to relax, as he watched the furry sheep make noise and follow them as they headed to the feed area. He noticed Jeffries speaking to the sheep. “Do they — understand you?”

She chortled. “They don’t know what I’m saying, but they know that I’m about to feed them.” Klein nudged Jeffries as Bren stopped near a few sheep who took an interest in him.

He looked at them curiously. “Hello sheep, lambs, rams, ewes. I’m Bren, and we are here to feed you.” The sheep bleated as they jostled to get closer and Bren seemed delighted. Jeffries came up and pulled a handful of alfalfa from a nearby bale, handing it to Bren and pointing for him to hold it out. As expected, the sheep forced their way to the green treats and nibbled away. Bren was overjoyed. He turned around looking for more. Jeffries pulled another bunch and gave it to Bren, who turned and hand fed the sheep again. He bounced like a child and Jeffries grabbed his arm.

“If you like that you’ll love this.” She entered a feeding area, troughs and platforms lined one side, and she directed Bren toward the feed line. “Do you want to release the levers and load the bins, or distribute the alfalfa?”

Bren looked, “Both!”

She pulled him forward. “At each station pull the lever, it will release the feed pellets into the bins.” Bren pulled one, and it did just as she described, and a few sheep pushed in, while others waited at stations down the line. “Now do the same to the others!” Bren excitedly went down the line releasing levers as the sheep began eating. He got to the end and looked back proudly. Jeffries pointed at a bale of alfalfa on a

hanging trolley. "Take a couple layers off the end and put in the area next to the bins."

Bren pulled at the bailed brick of alfalfa and pulled a few layers off, then put them carefully in the area she had indicated. Jeffries laughed. "This isn't fine dining, you can just toss it in."

Bren smiled as he pulled the trolley down the line, continuing to carefully place the greens in each area. When he reached the end where Klein sat on a bale of alfalfa and Jeffries was grinning, Bren spoke. "I haven't ever seen animals such as these up close. On Klaan we do not keep farm animals. We have designated reserves, but we're not allowed to interact. These animals are deserving of respect, and I treated them as such." He smiled. "We will do more with them?"

Jeffries looked at him, seeing a side of him he hadn't shown in the three months he'd been on the ship. He was always happy when they found a sleeper ship, but he seemed truly moved by his experience feeding sheep. "Yes Commander, we will put them inside tonight, and feed them tomorrow before breakfast."

Bren smiled. "Excellent!" Jeffries took them both by the arm and guided them to the house, where the scent of home cooking was already sneaking out onto the farm.

Bren had never experienced a feast such as was served by Jeffries' mother. He had awkwardly asked if any animal meat was present, and she assured him it was not. After dinner she explained as Bren asked for more details on the food. "We have excellent meat substitutes, but mostly this is just vegetables, grown right here in the ground."

She smiled, "It's a wonder you all can survive out

there, eating the — stuff — you eat.” She looked at her daughter. “Bella has lost too much weight!” Jeffries rolled her eyes. She stood to gather plates, as did Klein. Mrs. Jeffries scolded him to sit. “You are a guest, sit!” She asked for details on everything that had happened and Klein and Bren gladly answered her queries. She seemed very impressed, especially when they told the story of Jeffries clamping a shuttle on top of the Sellane fighter.

She laughed, “That is the only time you can land on top of another vehicle without getting in trouble. Lord knows she turned some tractors sideways here in the past.”

Jeffries looked at her carefully... “Mom, don’t...”

Mrs. Jeffries continued over her daughter’s protests. “Bella once tried to take a tractor into town to buy candy. She was twelve. Of course she drove tractors on the farm, but not on the roads.” Jeffries groaned as the story continued. “She was still dragging a partial trailer load of alfalfa. She trundled down the road into town, went into the store and bought her candy. What was it Belly?”

Jeffries sat down. “Gummy bears.”

Mrs. Jeffries continued, laughing along the way. “She realized that the way she had parked she was stuck. She had to back out onto the street. On a farm you don’t get traffic, but in town...” Jeffries sighed. “So little Bella just backed up. Right onto the car driven by the mayor. This caused the stacked hay to shift and the whole trailer slid to the side, dumping bales of hay onto the main street and the mayor’s car.”

Jeffries stood up. “OK, enough reminiscing, we’re going to put the sheep in for the night.”

Her mother tilted her head. “Just check the cameras

and remote close the barn. No need to go out there.”

Jeffries smiled, “It seems like more fun to go.” She nodded at Bren, “You coming?” Bren jumped up, bowing to Mrs. Jeffries as he stumbled to follow. Jeffries smiled at her mother as she shrugged. “He likes the sheep.” She stopped a moment as she heard her mother speak to Klein.

“Let me show you some pictures James.” Jeffries gathered herself and proceeded to catch up to Bren.

Just before sunrise Jeffries woke and quickly got dressed to go out to the sheep. Her mother was in the kitchen, she pointed at the camera feed. “I already let the sheep out. I checked the timestamps, he’s been waiting out there for an hour.” Jeffries looked and sure enough, there was Bren, strolling up and down the fence line with handfuls of alfalfa, feeding whichever sheep chose to follow him. She went to the hall and pulled on boots, grabbing another pair as she left.

Bren was talking to the sheep as Jeffries approached. He saw her and exclaimed, “Good morning Lieutenant!” She waved.

“Go ahead Bren, just like last night.” Bren excitedly moved down the line, pulling levers and then distributing alfalfa. He reached the end and Jeffries plopped the extra boots down in front of him. “Put these on, you should be able to pull them on over your shoes.” He looked at her curiously. She smiled as she headed for a gate. He stood and she called him over. “Come on Old MacDonald.” They stepped into the area with the sheep as she grabbed a chunk of alfalfa.

They jostled into the middle of the sheep pen and a few sheep took notice, coming to see what was up. They nudged and bleated to get their attention and Jeffries thought Bren might overload. He seemed so

happy. His behavior was unlike anything she had seen. As they fed and petted the sheep a message came across the communication system in the feeding area. It was Commander Klein.

“Can you hear me?” Jeffries looked at the camera and gave a thumbs up. He continued. “Hurry back when you’re done. Change of plans.” Jeffries nodded to Bren who stepped away, somewhat disappointed. She looked curiously as the sheep seemed to line up and nuzzle as he walked past them. She looked at him questioningly.

“Klaan are not telepathic, but we do have strong empathetic projection with some beings. Maybe they sensed my sadness at leaving.” Indeed as they left the sheep lingered, looking at them as they returned to the house.

When they reached the house Klein was gathering bags and packages. Bren had asked for some vegetables and Mrs. Jeffries was more than happy to oblige. Klein waved them inside. “Captain Gardner called. He’s already at the ship, and we have about an hour, instead of picking him up we’ll go straight on. But, no way we get out of here without breakfast.” He grinned as Bren noted the bags full of carrots, onions, potatoes, tomatoes, and other foods to take with them.

As they ate Klein explained. “We received an automated distress call, definitely an Earth ship, and an actual distress call. So we are going to investigate.” They had planned one more day on the farm and a day spent in the Seattle area with Gardner before returning to the ship. That would have to wait. Mrs. Jeffries piled up the food, pancakes, breads and fruits, as well as traditional breakfast items, (without meat for Bren) all asking to be consumed.

After gorging themselves they packed the shuttle and Mrs. Jeffries stood with them as they prepared to leave. Jeffries hugged her mother and they held the embrace. Mrs. Jeffries spoke. "I received a note from your Captain. He is quite impressed with you. I'm so proud, but I still miss you." They both teared up a little before Jeffries moved inside.

As she prepared to fly back to the Shepard, her mother lit the requisite smoke flare. They lifted and Klein looked down. He was a bit unnerved. "What did you guys do with the sheep? I feel like they're watching us?" Bren smiled wide as Jeffries laughed.

"Apparently Bren can communicate with sheep." She laughed again as Klein looked at him curiously before they pulled away from the staring eyes of a few dozen sheep on the Jeffries' farm.

Distress

Lieutenant Jeffries navigated into the Shepherd's shuttle bay. She parked the shuttle next to the other three, facing out. As soon as the airlock sealed Captain Gardner and two ensigns rushed into the bay. As Jeffries, Klein, and Bren hopped out Gardner waved them to him. "They'll get your bags. I need you all on the bridge now."

As they followed, Gardner filled in the details. Not that there were many. "We detected an automated distress call. It was a default message designed to trigger if there was a problem with the ship." He seemed more rushed than usual. Klein picked up on it.

"Captain, is there something else?"

Gardner turned the last corner onto the bridge. Jeffries was about to take her usual station but Gardner stopped her. "We also received a message from the Klaan collective, and a message from Jessica on Gaia. Apparently there is a civil war beginning on Sel. It started with a slave revolt, driven by the news that Sel had been disqualified from joining the Collective — again." He turned to Jeffries. "I'm sorry to say Lieutenant that there are warrants for you and me. From our antics on Gaia. We're war criminals." He made the quotation marks gesture as he said it. Jeffries smiled.

"So, I'm famous?"

Gardner frowned. "Not for the best reason I'm afraid. Bren, the council sent a longer message for you, they just gave me the basic details. The message is in your comm center." Bren quickly pulled out his pad device and began reading. Gardner directed Jeffries to take her station.

"Jessica told me that a few slaves had made their way to Gaia. She believes it is Gaia's will, but we'll need

to keep an eye on them. Like it or not, we're getting dragged into this." Gardner sat in his chair and turned to Jeffries. "Ready to jump?"

"Ready." She waited, finger poised to push the button. Klein made the announcement and Gardner nodded. Jeffries pushed the button, and they snapped away.

The Shepherd dropped into empty space in front of a medium sized Stray ship. It was adrift and rotating off axis. Gardner looked at Klein. "Is this the origin of the distress call?" Klein looked.

"Yes, yes it is. Sir, the ship is adrift, and open to space. There are no signs of hibernation pods or life signs. There is a large section of the hull that appears to have been cut open"

Gardner sighed. "I'm guessing they didn't go out for dinner. Klein, Bren, go see what you can find out." Jeffries popped up out of her seat.

"Captain, matching the ship's rotation might be tricky, I have experience." Gardner frowned but agreed, waving her to join the other two.

Matching the rotation was indeed tricky, and it took several minutes for Jeffries to lock on to the ship. Finally she was able to dock. The ship was open to space, so they all had environment suits on, stepping carefully into the wrecked ship. As they entered it was clear that the hatch had been cut open. They moved slowly, mag boots clamping onto the floor as the ship twirled. They reached the main storage bay and saw the empty spots where hibernation pods had once sat,

clamped down to the floor in rows.

Another door sat across the bay and Klein headed over. He found what he was looking for, the ship's manifest. He gathered any other pertinent papers, glanced around the control area and rejoined Bren and Jeffries. They were examining the pod areas. Bren pushed a button on his suit's arm. "It appears the pods were functioning when they were taken. I've looked at three machines and they all show nominal until abruptly going offline."

Klein looked at a nearby readout. "Any way to tell how long ago?" Bren pushed a few buttons and the readout came to life. It showed an error message as there was no pod to operate. Bren looked, then stopped. "Commander, I recognize numbers and I can speak your language, but I haven't learned to read it, would you mind?" Klein laughed and stepped over to Bren. He looked at an old style digital readout.

"It just says 'error'" Klein pushed a few buttons and found what he was looking for. A timestamp. He pushed a few more buttons and did some mental math. "About three hours. We were very close." He was about to report to the Shepherd when a message came in from Gardner.

"Mr. Klein, unless you need more time get back here. We just got another distress call. This one appears to be live."

Jonah Davis was jolted awake by a surge of adrenalin, as part of the wake up procedure. He lay in his pod, waiting. After a few minutes the brain fog lifted. He flipped the handle and the pod opened. He exited carefully, allowing his body to adapt to the

movement. Being weightless made it easier, but it still took time. He made his way to a machine and found a switch, lighting up this section of the cargo area. He grabbed the jacket hanging up and slipped on the thick boots, flinching as the cold material touched his body. The ship automatically turned life support on before waking him, but it was always cold. It didn't matter what the temperature readout said. It was cold.

He opened a small box and pulled out the water and protein bar he had set aside last time. He would only be awake for two days, so needed to make sure he didn't eat or drink too much. Just enough to take the edge off before going back into hibernation. This was the third time he had awakened. He knew that he could have relied on the alarm system instead of regular inspections, but he was afraid the alarm might go off too late, so every ten years he walked through the ship, checking every station and system.

He climbed the ladder to each level, checking the pods. He had lost three people so far, mostly natural causes, so to speak. Not everyone can survive 90 years of hibernation. He held a simple ceremony before releasing their bodies to space, as had been agreed upon by all passengers prior to leaving Earth. There were no hibernation issues and he made his way to the cockpit area. He floated along the central frame of the ship. He reached the end and suddenly heard a thump. He figured it was either a bit of space debris, or just metal shifting as the life support brought the interior temperature up. But then he heard another sound. Then another.

He quickly jumped to the cockpit, finding the only gun on the ship. Using a gun inside was a dangerous maneuver so he hoped it wouldn't be necessary. He

checked his communication system, and seeing nothing he hid behind a row of cabinets and waited. Before long he saw a shower of sparks emerge from around the central hatch. Someone was cutting in.

It was slow going, he had reinforced the hatches with titanium and thick steel frames. It would take some time. He also realized that the central hatch had a manual airlock that wasn't inflated. It looked like atmosphere was barely venting but that wouldn't last. He pushed off to the main cargo area floating through the ship. He found an environment suit and pushed back to the cockpit. He switched to the mag boots and put the full suit on. The gloves were a little thick but he already knew he could fire the gun if needed.

He checked fuel levels. His ship, The Essex, was fine. Plenty of extra fuel. He knew slowing would add months or even years to the trip, but maybe he could shake them off. He started flipping switches, all the while checking over his shoulder. Atmosphere was definitely venting now but before he could put the airlock in place he needed to shake off the leeches.

As soon as the reverse engines leveled up he flipped a switch turning them on. The cutting stopped. He heard two thumps before firing the thrusters up on the reverse engines. The ship immediately began to slow down. He looked into the main cargo bay, everything was properly locked down.

As the Essex slowed another ship moved into view through the small portal on the side of the ship. He watched a shuttle float inside the ship and the ship disappeared. Stunned, he sat staring a moment, realizing the likelihood that the ship had so called, 'impossible' faster than light travel. His brain drifted to various FTL theoretical concepts before quickly

remembering he was venting atmosphere.

He stuffed the gun into a pocket and pushed off to the beam above the central hatch. He climbed down the beam and engaged his mag boots. As he inflated the manual airlock he mused that by the time they reached Proxima Centauri Two he would have mastered weightlessness. Once the airlock was in place he went in to inspect the damage. It wasn't nearly as bad as expected. He could fuse the gashes left behind with simple chemical weld tape. True welding in an oxygen rich atmosphere was tricky and dangerous. Fortunately, they had only managed to cut through about eight centimeters.

He walked across the cargo bay to his makeshift workshop. He found the chemical tape and grabbed a few scraps of steel. He went back and forced the metal shards into the cut, before slapping on a piece of tape. He exposed the open side and took another piece from a separate roll. He pushed the second piece onto the first and waited. After a moment smoke rose and the tape shrank, sealing up the new vent so graciously made by his mystery guests.

He decided to leave the airlock in place, just in case, but once the atmosphere read normal he peeled off the suit, leaving the mag boots on. Now he had work to do. He released his boots and pushed off to the cockpit. Once locked in he fired up the comms station. He sent a short distress call, including the date and approximate coordinates. He chose not to send the automated signal designed to show intelligence, instead sending the message in plain English, hoping it would be ignored by anyone else. While he knew no one would be coming, perhaps another sleeper ship might find them, or, should the ship somehow fail, there may

be an answer as to why for some future generation.

He figured the would-be intruders were looking for an easy score and seeing someone awake inside scared them off. He decided he would stay awake for a week to make sure nothing else happened. He slowed the reverse engines until it was safe to fire up the forward engines again. Something told him to wait however, and as he sat, deciding if he would dig into rations or just scrape by on protein bars, his instincts paid off.

“Hello Earth ship Essex. This is the United Earth Federation ship Shepherd and we are coming to help. ETA, two hours.”

This was a simple recording, likely sent over a great distance. He decided to dig into rations, and his mind drifted back to FTL drives, since it seemed pretty likely Earth had also mastered the impossible. He found a meatloaf dinner and added water, letting it rehydrate. It was probably terrible but he now had no idea how long he'd be awake.

He put his feet up on a nearby shelf, and sat facing the small window. He put the meatloaf packet to his mouth and slurped in a chunk. It wasn't the worst thing he had ever eaten.

Captain Gardner was the first to board the Essex, Klein and Chen were right behind. After the standard greetings Gardner cut to the chase. “Captain Davis, did you see who tried to enter your ship?” Jonah smiled.

“Captain Davis? I guess so, but calling me a captain seems inaccurate. I'm a ship builder. And yes, I caught a short glimpse of the ship. Big, but it's hard to gauge how big. Wings and fuselage similar to a space shuttle.

Silver and blue I think. It's dark out here."

Chen smiled. "My great grandfather worked on the Chinese shuttle program."

Jonah looked up, "I wonder if I knew him?"

Gardner cut off the discussion. "Stay on point people. We can discuss history later." He turned to Jonah, "Captain, I would normally ask what you want to do, but given the circumstances I am going to strongly suggest we awaken your passengers and bring them to the Shepherd."

Jonah looked around the ship. "Nathan would be so proud to see how well she lasted" He looked at Gardner. "My son. He had just joined the Space Force when the war started. Do you know..." He paused unable to finish the question.

Gardner put a hand on his shoulder. "We can look once we get everyone safely on board. I would normally take a moment but we are dealing with a crisis and I really must insist we get going."

Jonah nodded and Chen pushed a button signaling her teams to begin the transfer. Jonah stood back and watched as the crews began to awaken passengers and dismantle the systems he had been responsible for over the last three decades. He was jolted out of his stupor by Gardner. "Captain, do you have a passenger manifest?" Jonah nodded and unlocked his mag boots, launching to the flight deck, retrieving a book, and launching back. He realized he would miss the weightlessness. He handed Gardner the book. Gardner began looking through it when Klein remembered something.

"Sir, we had a curious manifest from the last ship. Most of the names were crossed out." Gardner thought a moment, then continued reading. Not finding any

names he recognized he handed the book back to Jonah.

“Do you have family on the Essex?” Gardner asked. Davis shook his head no. Gardner turned to Chen, “Lieutenant, get these people to the Shepherd as quickly as possible. Personal items only, we can come back if needed. He turned to Jonah, “Come on Captain, let’s see if we can identify the ship you saw.” Gardner already knew from the description it was likely Sellane, and their civil war had impacted them already.

As Gardner led Jonah off the ship onto the Shepherd they were greeted by Bren. Jonah stopped in his tracks. Gardner assured him. “This is Commander Bren. He is the Ambassador for his people to Earth. He is also my friend and can be trusted.” Jonah relaxed as Gardner offered introductions. “Commander Bren, this is Captain Jonah Davis.” Bren reached out both hands and Davis followed suit.

“Just Jonah please. Now that I’m off the Essex I have no claim to the title of Captain.”

Gardner put a hand on his shoulder and led him toward the bridge. “The way I see it —” He emphasized the word, “-Captain- it’s not a situational title. Once you’ve earned it, you keep it.”

Jonah smiled as Bren led him onto the bridge. He began showing him ship designs, saving the Sellane fighter until he had seen a few others. Jonah stopped him on the Sellane ship. “That’s it. That’s the one.”

Although not surprised, Gardner was dismayed. “It seems we are being drawn into this war.”

Jonah looked concerned, “War?”

Gardner looked again at the ship designs. “Captain, I promise I will tell you everything, these are not military secrets. The Sellane are a species in this area

with a history of slave trade and we clashed with them briefly.” Gardner looked at Jonah, gauging his reaction. “Would you help acclimate your passengers for now, and I will tell Chen to give you all the information we have.”

Jonah recognized the crisis situation and nodded as an ensign stepped forward to lead him to the welcome area. “Of course Captain. At some point you’ll have to tell me about the design of this ship.” He looked around, running his hand along an edge, it seemed simple but he carefully measured the curves. “It feels very familiar to me.”

Gardner, Klein, Bren and Jeffries were on the bridge, gathering the information they had. Bren was giving a brief history of the Sellane slave trade. Klein interjected, “Eugenics?” Bren scanned his language model.

“Commander, what you refer to as Eugenics carries a negative connotation in your language. It does apply here, but you could use the same word to describe Klaan mating.” Klein looked at him suspiciously. Bren continued. “Sellane slaves have been bred for strength and stamina. The Kar’ddaeol meanwhile, bred their ruling class for intelligence and beauty.” Klein snorted.

“That was beauty?”

Bren continued, “To them, yes. But it also led to inbreeding. Klaan mating is designed to avoid inbreeding. We have an approved mating pool and have been careful to avoid those issues, as they did indeed cause problems two thousand years ago.”

Jeffries piped in curiously. “You have arranged marriages?”

Bren quickly shook his head. “No, we are free to choose our mates. However, if we want to reproduce we

must get approval after genetic testing. I believe that our partnerships are not the same as human marriages. We choose mates for compatibility, both genetic and interpersonally. But we also choose mates based on how well our careers will match, and based on whether we will reproduce.

Reproducing couples are afforded easier careers and lifestyles to make child rearing a priority. The first thirty years of a child's development are critical. It is an honor and a sacred duty to raise a child properly. You may have noted my scientific background despite being a diplomat. All Klaan learn extensive basics of scientific concepts, math, chemistry, physics, as well as artistic pursuits, language arts, and many other disciplines."

Gardner interjected, "I'm sure Mr. Klein meant no offense Commander. Our Eugenics bias is recent, and tied closely to a massive holocaust only a hundred and fifty years ago."

Bren smiled, "No offense was taken. I simply wanted to point out that your word Eugenics applies to multiple situations with very different goals and outcomes, although I can understand your trepidation. Your dark past is still very recent, ours is two or three thousand years old, and relegated to history studies."

Gardner got them back on track. "Mr. Bren, why did the Sellane continue slaving, knowing it could disrupt their admittance to the Collective?"

Bren thought a moment. "Most likely it was a few select Kar'ddaeol groups who took the slave system underground, so to speak. Free labor is difficult to replace. Technological advances slow when you have a large labor force that is free and continually replenished."

Bren thought a bit further. “It is also worth noting that Sel is not a fully unified world, and still operates on amassing wealth. In addition to Kar’ddaeol and slaves there are several social levels that keep everyone in a particular standing. Different classes, all reinforced by their use of selective breeding.”

Klein looked unhappy, and wasn’t hiding it. Bren looked at him curiously. Klein looked up. “I’m sorry Bren, I did not mean to disparage your mating practices. I have many family members who were directly effected by the holocaust the Captain spoke of. Grandparents and great grandparents who lived through those days.” He paused, “And many more who did not. It does cause me to overreact.”

Bren nodded, “Of course, James, I understand.”

After a moment, Gardner started back to the matter at hand. “OK, what do we do? We have to assume that the Sellane have our pods. Obviously we are not leaving without them. However, we are over-matched.” He looked at Bren with a question on his mind. Bren picked up on it.

“Captain, I am your friend, and I will help any way I can. However, The Klaan Collective ruling council has instructed me specifically to not engage in any hostile behavior except in direct self defense. My standing as an official Ambassador has changed the impact that would have, and for now, the Collective is not engaging with the Sellane.”

Gardner looked around. “OK people, I need options. Mr. Bren, is there any way to track the Sellane?” The pilot, Lieutenant Clarke, interrupted the Captain’s discussion.

“Sir, that won’t be necessary.” She put the front view on all screens, a Sellane heavy fighter was resting

in space right in front of them.

Sacrifice

The Sellane ship hung in space, a little above the Shepherd, ominous and powerful. Everyone on the bridge stared, unsure what to do. Klein spoke first. "Captain?" Gardner looked at him, gathering his thoughts before finally bursting into a string of commands.

"Bren, make sure we have language protocols in our translator. Jeffries, plot a course if we need to get away in a hurry. Mr. Klein, scan that ship and tell me everything, no matter how inconsequential." Everyone rushed to begin their assignments. Klein had the first response.

"Sir, it seems to be a fighter, several forward missile launchers on each wing. I believe they have some sort of energy shields."

Bren piped in, "Yes, Sellane ships have energy dispersion shields. I'm afraid your rail guns will be ineffective. Do you have missiles?" Gardner was reading details from Klein's scans.

"We do, but if the railguns won't do any damage I doubt these missiles will."

Bren looked concerned. "Do you have nuclear weapons?"

Gardner didn't look up. "No, we dismantled our nukes decades ago. When we decided to venture out we chose to focus on peace and exploration. It seemed wrong to restart any nuclear programs." Bren simply nodded his head and silently went back to his language model. "We never intended to fight. Even the weapons we do have are more practical, than offensive." Gardner continued reading. "Mr. Klein, any sign of the pods?" Klein started to shake his head when the Sellane ship hailed them. Klein looked at the Captain. Gardner stood up, squared off, and nodded to Klein.

Onscreen, the Kar'ddaeol examined Gardner and what parts of the bridge he could see carefully. Both men stared for a long moment before Gardner broke the silence. "Hello, I am Captain Alex Gardner of the Unit—"

He was cut off by the Kar'ddaeol. "Yes, I know who you are. Gardner, captain of the Shepherd. Gathering your strays. Captain, is that female pilot, Jeffries, there?" He spat the word female out like a piece of rancid meat.

Jeffries was about to stand when Gardner quickly answered. "No, she is on another assignment."

The Kar'ddaeol sneered. "Makes no difference. I will be taking you all in. It's bad enough that you have females on your crew, but you let them fly?" He made a strange sound, the translator sputtered then translated it to SNORK, pretty much just what he had expressed. "Captain, your people are... strange. You work with females and as I understand it, your term Strays is a reference to animals you keep as companions?" He made another sound but the translator didn't bother. "Filthy creatures you humans."

Gardner ignored the insults. He noted these Sellane looked different than the two he met on Gaia. These were more fierce looking. Almost demonic. "Captain, is there a reason you're here?"

"Colonel." The Sellane spoke, "My title is Colonel. Colonel Dak'keon, you will find I am different from the skon'han you met on that moon." Again the translator had nothing but it was obvious what he meant.

Gardner casually paced the bridge. "Well, Colonel, this is fascinating but we are busy, it seems someone took several hibernation pods from one of our sleeper ships and we're trying to find them."

Colonel Dak'keon gestured to a crewman, and the speakers throughout the Shepherd turned on. He spoke to the entire ship. "Gardner, you and the pilot, Jeffries, are criminals with warrants for interference in Sellane affairs. As such it is my right and responsibility to take you to Sel for trial. Your little show on that moon started quite the string of events and I'm afraid you'll have to answer for that. However, I am not an unreasonable man." Gardner looked at Klein who gestured the pods were there. The Colonel continued.

"I will take you and Jeffries back to Sel. But, instead of just destroying your ship, I will transport all of your crew and passengers to the moon you call Gaia." He smiled, if you could call it that. "Then I will destroy your ship."

Gardner walked back to the middle of the bridge and sat down. "Why should I go along with that?"

Dak'keon glared at him. "If you don't I'll just destroy you all." You have 124 humans on board. Certainly you have some responsibility to your Strays."

Gardner smiled. "Colonel, those are impressive threats, you're very intimidating. Is that what you were bred for?" Gardner intended it as an insult but it didn't appear to have that effect.

Dak'keon smiled. "I am of the warrior class. We are bred for strength, strategic intelligence, and brutality. We are very good at what we do." Dak'keon looked Gardner up and down. "It would seem you find our breeding methods distasteful. I suppose you breed with your domestic animals." Gardner thought briefly that perhaps the translator had cleaned up the obvious insult.

Gardner stood up. "How about this, you give us the sixty-three pods you took, and the people inside them.

And we will leave.” He smiled at the Colonel.

Dak’keon had had enough. “I tire of this game. You are an admirable leader, confident, and brave. But you are stupid. This is not a negotiation. You have four shuttles, begin transporting your people to our ship. I am sending coordinates. When you are on board I will take your crew to the moon, and take you and your ship back to Sel. You have twenty-four of your minutes to commence.”

The screen went black.

Gardner didn’t waste any time. “We have twenty-four minutes people. Ideas?”

Bren spoke up. “I have sent a message to Klaan, but I fear they will not respond in time, and may simply leave us to the Sellane.” Gardner looked around to see what else they had as Captain Davis stepped to the edge of the bridge.

“Permission to enter the bridge Captain?”

Gardner smiled, “Enter, no need to ask Captain.”

Davis walked in and got right to it. “Captain, we all heard that message. The passengers elected me their representative, so I speak for all of them. We are prepared to fight. They have humans on that ship?” Gardner nodded. “No one gets left behind sir.”

Gardner looked around the room. “What else? Jeffries, the shuttles were updated on Earth, anything useful?”

Jeffries shook her head, “No sir, mainly just software upgrades and emergency snap drives.”

Jonah looked curiously. “Emergency snap drives?”

Jeffries nodded, “Yes, single use, a range of about half a light year. Ten meter effective area.”

Klein looked at Bren. “Any idea of the crew compliment on that ship?”

Bren shrugged, "Probably about one hundred. All warrior class."

Gardner asked, "How many people can we get into each shuttle?"

Jeffries and Klein looked at each other, Jeffries guessed. "Maybe fifteen?"

Gardner stood up. "So we can take sixty people."

Klein raised an eyebrow, "Our crew compliment is only forty-eight. And we need someone to fly the ship."

Gardner turned to Jonah, "You said you have people ready to fight?" Jonah nodded. Gardner continued, "So we can find people. Sixty, that will be enough."

Klein looked at him curiously. "Enough for what? Do you have a plan?"

Gardner smiled. "We're going to commandeer that ship."

After everyone's shocked reaction the people assembled looked at Gardner for details. Gardner asked Bren, "Is there any vulnerability on that ship?"

Bren shook his head. "The only soft spot, so to speak, is the bottom level, but I believe that is where your people are being kept. The coordinates Colonel Dak'keon sent us appears to be a secondary shuttle bay. I'm guessing the pods are in an adjacent storage bay. The entire bottom level is expendable. They can lose it and continue to fly or fight. But if we attack there, we will certainly risk killing your people."

Gardner paced, "We'll do it in person then, we need a distraction, or a surprise."

Klein checked his pad. "Seventeen minutes."

Jonah spoke up. "Captain, I'm not completely familiar with your Snap drives. Can you briefly explain the technology?"

Gardner looked at him as if to say no, but could see gears turning. He spoke. "Essentially, a Snap drive excites the molecules in a static shell until they expand. The energy is fed into a continuous feedback loop until they're expanded to their limit. Then they affix to the furthest point and they reconnect in the new spot." Gardner looked at him, hoping that was enough. They didn't have time for physics lessons.

Jonah thought out loud. "So they don't act upon a particular object? These emergency drives just make a shell and snap?" Gardner nodded. Jonah continued. "They'll have to lower shields when the shuttles approach?" Bren nodded yes. It was clear Jonah was on to something. Everyone was looking at him. Jonah smiled. "So we launch those four snap drives onto that ship, and then snap away four ten meter chunks."

Gardner looked at Klein who immediately began calculations. Jeffries thought it through. "It should work, the emergency drives are crude. They are not designed to grab the shape of a shuttle. They're just big enough to quickly generate a shell and snap."

Gardner waited a moment, then began planning. "Klein, Jeffries, figure out a way to launch them. Go!" They jumped up and ran to the shuttle bay, brainstorming ideas from the first step. He turned to Bren. "If we were going to remove four chunks of that ship, what are the best bets, without blowing up the ship?"

Bren thought carefully. "Typically Sellane ships have a sensor bundle in the very front of the ship. Tactical, navigation, scanners, they all go through that nexus." Gardner looked at Clarke who signaled nine minutes. Bren continued. "There are missile launchers under each wing. That's three."

Gardner finished the plan, “And a fourth on the engines, then they’re stuck as we get away.”

Bren spoke quietly to the Captain. “Sir, taking out the bridge would likely vent the entire command crew into space.”

Gardner nodded. “I don’t need any more warrants. Let’s just disable them.” Bren nodded. Gardner called Klein. “Mr. Klein, any luck?”

Klein’s voice came back. “Yes sir, we have a plan. The shuttles will have to be close, but out of Snap range. We’re re-purposing the communications array, The dish is motorized—“

Gardner cut him off. “I don’t need the whole story, just get them ready.”

Klein spoke. “Yes sir, but it should be noted the shuttles won’t have communications.”

Gardner nodded. “Ok, get on with it.” He switched to another channel. “Security, I need you to put together four teams with every available crew member and report to the shuttle bay. You have seven minutes. Gather every weapon on the ship.”

He turned to Clarke. “Lieutenant, who is trained to fly the shuttles?”

Clarke turned around, “You, Klein, Jeffries, and me.”

Gardner grunted. “That’s it?” Clarke shrugged.

Jonah stepped up to the captain. “Sir, do you know the class of those shuttle designs?”

Gardner wasn’t in the mood for trivia. “Captain, now is not the time to—“

Jonah interrupted him. “Davis class? Gardner nodded. Jonah smiled again, “Named after their designer? Nathan Davis?”

Gardner was intrigued although he wasn’t sure where this was going. “Admiral Nate Davis, yes.” He

finally put two and two together.

Jonah smiled. "Admiral Davis, yes, has a nice ring. Captain, when Chen showed me the shuttles I recognized the design immediately. I helped him come up with that whole ship. He didn't realize it as a kid, but he remembered. Those shuttles are basically my design."

Gardner spoke, "That really is fascinating, but I'm not sure—"

Jonah cut him off again. "I can fly that shuttle, you even have one with manual controls for me."

Gardner looked at him suspiciously but nodded. "Captain Davis, go gather up about forty people ready to fight and meet me in the shuttle bay." Davis streaked off the bridge and Bren, Clarke, and Gardner were left alone. "Lieutenant Clarke, you will need to stay behind to fly the ship. If we fail, get out of here. Have a course plotted and ready." She nodded and began plotting. Gardner turned to Bren.

"Commander Bren, I know you can't go with us, but I have a far more important job for you." Bren smiled, waiting for his assignment. "Commander, the Shepherd is yours. Get the people on this ship to safety, whatever it takes." He looked at Clarke, to make sure she understood.

She replied. "Sir, Bren and I will not fail you."

Gardner headed for the shuttle bay. He stopped and turned back. "You will have a skeleton crew, no heroics, if we get stomped, run!"

When Gardner arrived the shuttle bay was controlled chaos. Jeffries was rigging the final communication array. Klein and Jonah were calculating time and distance for the Snap drives to be

launched. Security had already broken people into four groups, armed them, and lined them up behind each one of the shuttles. The security lead, a brawny man named Garland approached Gardner. "Sir, we're ready. Twenty-two Shepherd crew and security, thirty-eight civilians."

"Chief Garland," Gardner smiled and tilted his head, "Please try to not kill anyone. This is just a rescue, not an assault." Garland nodded and moved to his station. Clarke signaled Gardner on the communication station in the bay. Gardner flipped a switch. "Yes?"

Clarke responded. "The colonel just wanted to let you know you have three minutes."

Gardner responded. "Thanks lieutenant. Take care of my ship."

He went to Klein and Jonah. "Are we set?"

Klein nodded. "Sir, the communication dishes are motorized so we rigged them to overload and throw the snap drive at the Sellane fighter. They have a magnet that will latch to the ship, and trigger the jump."

Gardner smiled. "Good work." Jeffries hopped down from the last shuttle to be set up. Jonah handed each of them a display device. It had a timer set for four minutes.

Klein spoke. "We will each go to our target and be in place at the one minute mark. At zero, launch, and make sure you have enough distance. We will all approach from the same side, go under the ship, then look a little confused. Captain Gardner, you have the nose, Jeffries has the port launcher, I have starboard, Captain Davis, the engines."

Gardner picked it up, "Once they're disabled get into the shuttle bay, or really anywhere on the lower deck. There should be a few options. We will rendezvous at

the hibernation pods, which should be in the central storage bay, accessible from three shuttle bays. If we do this right we won't need the whole ship, just a couple big shuttles."

They stood up. Everyone took a moment and Gardner spoke.

"I'm not one for speeches. Let's go get our people."

Captain Davis was thrilled to be flying this shuttle, designed by his son. It felt comfortable, although a little heavy turning to port. He was thinking about why when they reached the Sellane ship. As they all squared off under the ship, each shuttle broke away to their target. At the one minute mark Jonah was 15 meters away. He waited. He could hear someone's ragged breath behind him, a Shepherd crewman who didn't look like a fighter.

Davis poised his hand over the lever that would release the Snap drive. Without looking he spoke to the young man. "It's not what I expected to be doing today either, son. But you know what?" He turned for a quick glance when the timer beeped and he released his drive. "We're about to do something amazing."

Someone else in the shuttle said "Yes we are," and a few people agreed and cheered. Several people inside tried to crouch and watch as the Snap drive attached to the engine section and then snapped away, leaving a ragged hole, which immediately began venting fuel. Jonah turned the ship around and made his way to the closest shuttle bay.

Colonel Dak'keon was incredulous. "What do you mean it's gone?"

His first officer restated. "Sir, it appears that our scanner nexus has been destroyed, our missile

launchers, and our engines. All offline.”

A young crewman burst onto the bridge. He punched a button on the nearest console and a video of the front of the ship appeared onscreen. The signal was unstable but it was clear to see that a large hole had been blown out on the front.

The colonel was in a rage, “How did they do this?” Another officer ran onto the bridge.

“Sir, We believe they have landed shuttles in the shuttle bays, but we can’t be sure.”

Dak’keon asked, his anger barely restrained, “And why is that?”

The officer shrank back. “Emergency protocols sir, several spots on the ship are venting atmosphere. The levels are all sealed, which means all of the lower level is sealed. It will take some time to override because we have no communication.”

Colonel Dak’keon sat back in his chair fuming. How did the humans beat a Sellane ship, superior in every way, twice now? He stared at the distorted image of the front of the ship with a hole punched into it.

As Gardner landed his ship his team immediately swung out and secured the area. It was no problem, the area was empty. On one side heavy blast doors had closed, the other two walls appeared to be normal doors, and there was some sort of energy field over the entrance to the bay. His chief reported to him. “This room is secure.”

Gardner nodded and pointed at the two side walls. “These appear to be large doors, see if you can find what’s on the other side.” Two men began investigating when one of the side doors opened. The security team crouched into a defensive position and were met with

another team doing the same.

Jeffries popped out from behind a beam. "Hi guys! Have you seen Captain Davis or Commander Klein?" As she said Klein, his shuttle appeared in the storage bay. There were now three of them in the bay.

Klein jumped out. "Jonah is with the pods. We found them."

Everyone re-entered their assigned shuttle and followed Klein to a third shuttle bay. This one appeared to be substantially larger and all four shuttles landed easily across the front. Klein jumped out and ran toward the back of the bay, there was a small door and he led Jeffries and Gardner through, into a storage bay. There sat 63 pods, and Jonah moving down each one, checking readouts. He reached the end. "They're all functioning!"

Gardner turned to the others. "Did anyone see a big shuttle?" They all shook their heads. Gardner sighed. "How do we get them back to the Shepherd?"

Jonah spoke up. "Cap, these are the same pods that were on the Essex. They will hold up in open space. We can tow them. They're already strapped together, it's probably how the Sellane got them onto this ship."

Gardner smiled at Jonah, "Mr. Davis, if you keep making good suggestions I may have to recruit you."

Davis grinned. "Just get me back to Earth to see my son." He thought a moment, "We're about the same age!" He started moving down the line and checking the straps holding them together.

Suddenly Garland entered the room. "Captain, someone is attempting to breach the door. It looks like it'll take some time but we should get going."

Gardner nodded enthusiastically. He turned to the other three pilots. "Get these pods hooked up and get

them to the Shepherd, as quick as you can. I'll take my team and prepare the bay for your arrival." He turned on his heel and walked out calmly.

As he walked across the launch bay to the shuttle he could hear metal banging on metal from the door in the back. It was designed to stop a catastrophic loss of atmosphere, it would take time. Gardner looked at his team and pointed to the shuttle. He turned to the other teams waiting for instructions.

Gardner took care of that. "Team two, go assist them in preparing the pods for departure. Team three watch this door. Team four, keep your eyes peeled for any other encroaching Sellane. They may have another way in." With that he entered his shuttle, checked with Garland for a headcount, and once confirmed, he sped off to return to the Shepherd.

As Davis and Klein prepared the pods to be towed, Jeffries maneuvered the shuttles into place from the hangar next door. It took them a few minutes to figure out how to open the door but once that was open, it was a simple matter of hooking up the straps to the shuttles. They hooked up the three rows of pods to the three shuttles. Once they were secure Klein called the security teams over to the shuttles. The Sellane were still working on the door. As the last man got on the last shuttle Klein got his head count and lifted the shuttle off, slowly pulling 22 pods behind him. Jeffries and Davis were already underway. Klein looked back. The four spots they had hit with Snap drives smoldered and vented atmosphere. The Sellane were dead in space.

Gardner and his team flew into the shuttle bay.

Gardner piloted the shuttle into the furthest corner and stopped. His team already had assignments handed out on the short trip to the Shepherd. As they peeled off to their assignments Gardner went to the comms station and called the bridge. "How we doing up there guys?"

Bren answered. "Very good Captain, we noted your return. What is the plan?"

Before Gardner could answer he heard Clarke exclaim: "Oh! They're coming, and – are they towing hibernation pods?"

Gardner smiled. They'd figured it out. "Yes Lieutenant. They're bringing them over. Be ready to jump. The moment we're all secure get us out of here!"

Jeffries was first, she pulled in as far as possible and the team waiting for them pulled in the pods, pushing them as far into the bay as they could. Davis was right behind and got his pods delivered. Klein was a moment behind.

Klein watched as the first two shuttles entered the bay. He was about one minute away when his shuttle was hit by something and suddenly lurched. The shuttle shook, and sped up. Klein turned on the reverse camera and saw a sight he didn't want to see. A Sellane fighter had arrived and it looks like they had fired on them, knocking the pods away from the shuttle. He flipped the ship around and assessed the situation.

The pods had been knocked loose, but were still tethered together. The Sellane ship turned for another pass, when they were intercepted by one of the Shepherd shuttles. The shuttle had gotten there without being noticed and rammed the Sellane ship. It showered the area with debris as the shuttle continued on, pursuing the Sellane ship on a direct trajectory.

Another shuttle slipped in next to Klein's, and he looked over to see Jeffries. She pointed at the pods, herself, and then pointed at Klein and the Shepherd. He got the message and headed back. As he approached the ship another shuttle zipped past him. He slid into the bay and secured his shuttle.

Gardner was waiting for Klein's shuttle to arrive when a communication came in from the bridge. "Sellane fighter approaching. They've fired on the shuttle. Sir, it looks like the pods were knocked loose." Gardner ran to his shuttle and began making his way to open space inside the now cramped bay. As soon as he had a path he flew out to make sure Klein could land.

Davis ran to Jeffries. "Are you familiar with the autopilot program?"

Jeffries shook her head. "I've never seen an autopilot except for maintaining a course."

Davis smiled. "I checked, it's a feature Nate and I came up with, it is indeed there, but he may not have told anyone, I had to search for it. Take your shuttle and try to gather those pods. Send Klein back. I'll set up a surprise for the Sellane ship."

Clarke fired railguns at the Sellane fighter but the slugs bounced harmlessly off the shields. Bren shook his head. "Lieutenant, you have control of weapons. Do what you must." At this point Gardner's shuttle rammed the Sellane ship. The fighter turned and sped away to regroup as Gardner pursued. Gardner's shuttle trailed the fighter, staying right below them, attempting the stay close enough to avoid fire.

Gardner watched through rear cameras and saw

another shuttle come to Klein's aid. Klein's shuttle was damaged but he managed to limp back to the Shepherd. The other shuttle snagged the pods in the front of the shuttle between the nose and the forward engine. A tricky bit of flying for most pilots. Jeffries began dragging them back to the ship. Just then he saw the fourth shuttle leave the ship, heading directly toward the Sellane fighter. As it approached he realized the back hatch was wide open. He decided not to wait and see what was about to happen and slipped in behind Jeffries' shuttle, making sure the pods were secure.

Davis rigged the autopilot like a heat seeking missile. He set the sub light engine to overload, hit the accelerator, and ran out the back hatch, hitting the floor of the bay just in time. He ran to the comms station. "Bridge! Bren, Clarke. Whoever is up there. I just launched a shuttle that's ready to overload. Hit it with a missile when it gets close to the fighter."

Bren responded. "Which shuttle?"

Davis laughed, "The one with the back door open."

Bren nodded to Clarke, "You heard the man." Clarke prepared a volley of four missiles, the most that could be fired quickly. She locked on to the shuttle and waited. The impact of the shuttle collision with the fighter had caused the ship to have trouble turning, they had slowed and were stuttering as they attempted to circle back. Gardner's shuttle zipped past and followed Jeffries into the shuttle bay. As the open shuttle approached the Sellane ship Clarke paused, trying to let it get as close as possible. The Sellane ship saw the incoming shuttle and began evasive maneuvers as Clarke fired two volleys of missiles.

* * *

The shuttle was just meters away from the Sellane fighter when the engine reached critical. Just as the shuttle began to shake the missiles plowed into it. The combination of the engine overload and the missiles caused a chain reaction which overloaded all of the safety systems. The shuttle exploded, its fuel load igniting, rather than venting as it was designed to do. The overloaded engine flew apart, another safety feature bypassed due to the missiles, sending a shower of titanium debris shooting in every direction.

The missiles alone didn't have enough force to penetrate the Sellane shields, but the flaming titanium debris and fuel coil explosion managed to penetrate a small section of the shield. Four more missiles pounded into the Sellane ship in the same spot, causing substantial damage. The Sellane began to back off when the Shepherd snapped away. A stretched out blur of colors and waves of energy and they were gone.

In the shuttle bay Gardner exited his shuttle, he immediately looked around and found Klein, Jeffries and Davis catching their breath. He breathed a sigh of relief as he approached them. "Who was flying that shuttle?"

Davis answered. "No one, you all didn't know about the autopilot feature."

Gardner looked at him curiously "We have a lot to learn from you Captain." Davis stood, favoring his ankle. "You ok? Get up to the med bay and have that looked at." Davis nodded and a civilian assisted him leaving. The various crew began returning to their posts as the civilians headed out.

At the same time, Chen and her rescue team entered the bay. She had a stack of papers and handed them to

the Captain. "Sir, this manifest appears to be inaccurate. Several names crossed out, a full second list with names but no pod assignments. It's confusing."

Gardner took the manifest and began scanning. At one particular row he stopped. The names he'd been looking for. Larry and Kit Jennings. His grandparents. But the names were crossed off. In the margin two names were squeezed into the edge. David and Michael Waller.

As he prepared to find the pods another rescue team member ran to Chen. "Chief, it looks like it's all children."

Chen looked at him curiously. "All of them?" He nodded.

Another crew member shouted from nearby. "I have an adult. Pod 22." Gardner looked at the manifest. One name was crossed out and another written in bold letters.

BRIAN ALLEN

The name didn't ring a bell but he joined Chen as she went to Mr. Allen's pod. He had just been eased out of the pod but wasn't fully together yet. As the man gained his wits other pods were opened. Gardner looked around and found Klein. "Commander, go to the bridge, get me a full report." Klein jogged out to the bridge, with Jeffries close behind.

The man took a sip of water and answered a few questions from Chen, who then nodded to the Captain. Gardner approached the man. "Brian Allen?" The man nodded. He took a breath to speak but Gardner stopped him. "Save your breath, I'm Captain Alex Gardner, you're on the Earth ship Shepherd."

The man looked at him curiously. "How long..." his breath gave out.

Gardner responded. "Looks like 29 years. Sir, can you tell me why these passengers are all children?"

Brian took a breath, seeming stronger already. He began nodding. "People were starting to bring their children to the launch sites, trying to get them on a ship. After a couple here gave up their spots so did another, and before long every adult had given up their space. I pointed out that at least one adult should go and the people voted for me to go." He paused, gathering his breath. "I had traveled with many of those people, usually turning down a spot for myself. They decided that was enough. They took my lists and sent me away."

Gardner exclaimed. "Brian Allen!" You made the list!

He looked at the Captain curiously. "The list?"

Gardner looked around the rescue team until he saw a computer pad. He gestured and the ensign handed it to him. As Gardner tapped into his communication center he spoke. "About a year and a half ago I met a young man named Jeremy. His mother had left him a list, compiled by her father. It was a list of people who had managed to get on a sleeper ship but hadn't been able to tell family. Jeremy was trying to find those families all by himself." Brian began to tear up. Gardner continued, "I am certain, Mr. Allen, that you would want to meet Jeremy." He showed Brian a photo of the list hanging on his wall. "This is you?"

Brian looked at the image of the tattered, yellowed list he had made thirty years ago, although for him, it was yesterday. "Captain, Jeremy's mother?"

Gardner pursed his lips. "Denise. She died of cancer a few years ago." Brian broke down in tears. Gardner looked at Chen, "Make sure to reach out to Jeremy. He

never knew what became of Mr. Allen, he will be shocked.” Gardner put a hand on his shoulder. “Mr. Allen, my grandparents were originally listed here, Larry and Kit Jennings. Do you know what happened to them?”

Brian thought a moment. “They were the first people to give up their spots. I’m sorry Captain, I don’t know what became of them, but,” He looked around as dozens of children moved carefully around the cargo area, “It was their quick sacrifice that led to all of these children surviving. They didn’t hesitate, and set the example.” Gardner smiled. Not quite the resolution he had hoped for, but he was surprised at the satisfaction he felt.

Bren found Jeffries in the dining hall. She waved him over. “Bren, what are your plans on Earth?”

Bren sat and smiled, I already have several days of meetings, and small conferences, but, I have a question for you.” Jeffries furrowed her brow and tilted her head. Bren smiled, “Admiral Price asked if there was a location on Earth I’d like to visit for the meetings.” He paused, unsure if his request would be too much to ask. “How do you think your mother would feel about hosting a diplomatic summit on the farm?”

Jeffries laughed. “Oh my god she would love it. I mean, she’d insist on feeding you, but she would love it.” Bren smiled wide and began tapping in a message on his pad.

Captain Gardner approached the two boys, Michael and David. They were in the passenger area, eating and flipping playing cards over. Gardner sat by them. “Hi boys, I’m Captain Gardner but you can call me Alex if

you'd like." Michael, the older boy, probably twelve, reached out a hand to shake. Gardner took it and continued, as his younger brother David just looked at him. "As I believe someone told you, we are looking for any family you have on Earth. I know it's confusing, but you have nothing to worry about."

The younger boy, David, jumped in. "We didn't have family. Our mama and dad died 'cause of a bomb. Our Nana was already gone."

Michael clarified. "Captain Alex, we're orphans, our neighbor brought us there, but she got on a ship and left us at the launch site. We were there for a month before the nice people gave up their spots."

Gardner choked up a moment, then continued. "Those nice people were my grandparents. The way I see it, when they sent you in their place, you became my family. I have a cousin in Minnesota. She has a son and daughter, Kirk is eleven and Daisy is nine. They also have a big yard, with a jungle gym, bikes, and three dogs. If you would like, they would love to have you stay with them. We can continue to look for your relatives, but you will always have a home with my family."

Michael nodded and gave Gardner a hug. David snuffled a little. "What kind of dogs?"

In the arrivals area there were people scattered here and there. Many folks had no one to come for them, or hadn't found them yet. Most had signs since no one quite knew what their maybe distant relative would look like. As reunions happened sporadically, there were also dozens of STRAYS program ambassadors, there to make sure everyone had a smooth path back into society. Near the edge, a small group stood with no

sign. They knew who was coming or at least, they knew the person bringing them. Although the young man had just met the family they seemed connected already. An Admiral stood next to them all.

Jonah ran to his son as soon as he spotted him. The Admiral was taken aback but as soon as Jonah stopped they embraced in a crushing bear hug. Captain Gardner and Brian Allen each held the hand of one of the boys as they approached their group. Gardner nudged Brian and he introduced himself to his Grandson Jeremy. They cried as they remembered Denise, and Jeremy was still surprised to see the man who wrote the list that had dominated his life the last several years.

Gardner turned to his cousin, Allison. "Allie, this is Michael and this is David. Larry and Kit gave up their spots for them and now they're a part of our family." Allie knelt down as Michael reached out a hand for a handshake. She put an arm around him and they both gave her a hug. Gardner turned to her husband, Bill. He smiled as they shook hands. "I'm sorry to surprise you like this."

Bill laughed. "Are you kidding? We get a piece of Allie's family tree to join ours." He turned to his own children. "Daisy, Kirk, Michael and David are going to stay with us." The four children examined each other as Allie stood and hugged Gardner.

She asked the obvious question. "No idea where they went?" Gardner shook his head no. Allie shrugged. "No matter, they did this and it sounds like a truly amazing deed." She looked at the four children as her kids showed the boys pictures of their dogs, yard, toys, bikes, and everything else. She looked back at Gardner. "Will you visit for a few days before you leave?"

Gardner nodded. "Yes, I want to make sure

everything goes smooth for these two. Our grandparents got them started on a new life, and now it's up to us to continue that." He put his arm around her. "They'll be Vikings fans, right?"

She smacked him. "They can like whoever they want, as long as it's the Pack."

Gardner shot back, "You do know you grew up in Minnesota, right?"

As the group moved along the walkway Jeremy and Brian were still in an embrace, and Jonah was telling his son about the pod rescue from the Sellane ship. Gardner stopped in just long enough to say goodbye and then they all moved out.

Lives interrupted, lives suspended, lives brand new. But at the end of it all -- lives.