



URNS OUT CRASHING WAS THE EASY PART

CITADEL

FIRST COLONY

BOOK ONE OF THREE

AUTHOR OF SAWYER JACKSON & THE LONG LAND
KEVIN TUMLINSON

First Colony
Book One of Citadel
By Kevin Tumlinson



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FIRST COLONY

BOOK ONE of Citadel

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*For Sammy “Granny” Mansel.
You believed, so I did too.*

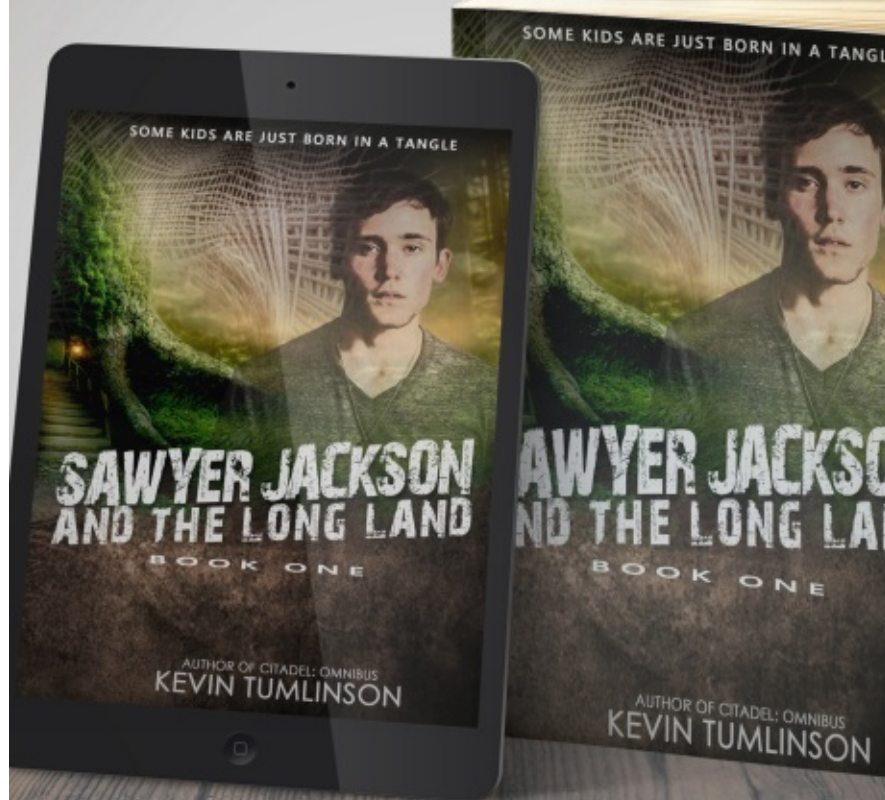
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One

Flash.

It was a pop of light, a burst of energy that left a little sizzle on the retinas. It was the return of light to eyes that had remained unfocused and non-functional for extreme weeks, months, even years at a time. Mitch Garrison had now experienced that flash enough times in his life that despite the fog of deep, vapor-induced sleep, his brain instantly put the pieces together. He was awake now. The long nap between shifts was over.

He tried to stretch but found himself confined. *Pod*, his gunk-filled brain reminded him. He blinked, which amounted to nothing but an instant of darkness punctuating the blurred light, and he managed to slide his hands up along the tight space to rub his underused eyes. Finally, slowly, things came into focus.

Something was wrong.

According to the readout just above his head, he'd only gone in a couple of months ago. He had another six months before his shift was to start.

The lid of the pod hissed, popped, and slid open. Mitch reached up and grabbed the lip of the opening, pulling himself up to a swooning but otherwise steady sitting position. The momentary grogginess of stasis was quickly replaced by sheer confusion as he looked around the Blue Collar pod bay.

Chaos was everywhere.

The rest of his shift was awake and scrambling. A few, like himself, were just sitting up from their own stasis pods, peering out at the madness surrounding them with expressions of confusion, concern, and occasionally outright fear. Mitch heard shouting and looked to see First Commander Marcos standing in the doorway to the pod bay, barking orders at the Blue Collar crew. Unsteadily, on limbs that weren't entirely ready to function, Mitch climbed out of the pod and stumbled to the pod bay floor.

"*Move! Move!*" Marcos was shouting. "We've got to get those White Collars awake and into the Citadel module, *now!*"

Citadel module. The landing module? Mitch glanced at the time display again. They couldn't be planet-side already. Could they?

He must have stood idle for too long. "Move it, Garrison, no time to screw around. We're hitting atmo in 25 minutes!"

Atmo ... atmosphere? Even with goo still dripping its way out of Mitch's gray matter, he knew for certain that the colony ship wasn't built to enter an atmosphere. So hitting atmo in 25 minutes meant only one thing.

They were about to crash.

Mitch shook his head, trying to jar his brain into gear, and grabbed his tool bag from the storage bin under the pod. He was thrown off balance. He had relied on these tools for most of his adult life, but they felt like dead weight as he slung the bag over his shoulder and took off at a run for the White Collar bay.

Captain Alonzo ran an orderly ship. He had to. Flight along the lightrail, at relativistic speeds, required mere mortals such as himself to sleep for long periods of time, along with a rotating chunk of the crew and every single non-essential passenger. If the order slipped, if chaos was allowed to take root, then the whole thing could spin out of control and everyone in his charge, including Alonzo himself, would be dead.

Chaos was currently everywhere.

Alonzo barked orders and directives as the Blue Collar crew—most of them still sluggish and groggy from the sudden release from stasis—began waking the White Collars and getting everyone into the Citadel landing module. The orbital platform crew was in another part of the ship. They'd have to remain in stasis for now—there had been an issue with the automated systems, and Alonzo couldn't spare anyone to go wake them up manually.

The protocol for a crash was to awaken ground crew and operations personnel. The colonists would be safer in sleep storage, where the padded and secured stasis pods would prevent injury from the jarring ride to come. If Alonzo could get the colony module clear of the rest of the ship, a pilot could guide her down by remote. Under normal circumstances, the colony module would be guided down from the bridge of the orbiting platform, while the Citadel module would have its own pilot at the helm. But normal circumstances had been abandoned when Alonzo found himself waking early to the jarring sound of warning claxons.

No time to dwell on it, he thought.

Landing the colony module safely was one challenge, but the continued survival of the colonists hinged on getting support personnel to the ground as quickly as possible. Alonzo had taken the extra precaution of ordering his bridge crew into the Citadel module. Every man and woman would count once they were planet-side. But it meant he would be short-handed until he could awaken the Beta crew. *Why didn't they awaken with the others?* he thought. He forced it out of his head, afraid that the answer would be less than helpful at best.

If the ship had been able to transition fully out of light speed, the computer systems, which became useless during faster-than-light travel, would have been functional, and the crew would have awoken automatically. That was the emergency protocol. However, the residual effect of the lightrail prevented the wireless and computer systems from functioning.

Protocol had screwed them.

How was he to know at the time? When the alarm sounded and he came out of cryo, all he knew for sure was that they were headed for the wrong planet. He did what any captain in the fleet would do. He tried to get them back on course—and protocol demanded that his first step was to maintain the connection to the lightrail, since losing it meant losing all of the lives on board to the vastness of space.

He had succeeded in keeping the lightrail going, but once that was done the ship's systems wouldn't let him alter course. Shifting the beam, even under the best of conditions, was both difficult and dangerous. This time, though, he'd found it was impossible. The computer systems were, of course, useless at light speed, but the mechanical systems should have worked with no trouble. Instead, no matter what he tried the beam pulled them along on the same course—toward the same planet. Only now, instead of gradually slowing from light speed, they were still heading for the planet at full tilt.

Once he had realized that their course couldn't be altered, Alonzo began shutting down the rail. It was too late. Physics still applied, even at light speed, and the ship couldn't finish decelerating before hitting the planet's atmosphere. There was nothing left to do but awaken the rest of the crew and prepare for ... well, at this point it was anyone's guess. There was one, slim chance for the colony, and that was an emergency atmospheric entry at sub-light speed.

Just because it had never been done before didn't mean they wouldn't survive, right?

The Captain had intended to brief Commander Marcos, his first officer. Alonzo planned to stay with the orbital platform, for good or ill, and that meant Marcos would be in command on the ground. But the planet was approaching fast, and there wasn't time to explain anything. Marcos would just have to piece it together on his own, if he survived entry into the atmosphere.

Despite the protocols established by the Earth Colony Fleet, Alonzo had his own set of priorities. It was imperative that his crew get the White Collars awake and to safety. Even more than the colonists themselves, this colony depended on these few over-educated, occasionally arrogant scientists, engineers, and administrators. If the Citadel module was the nerve center of the colony, then these men and women were the organs and arteries, the parts that made the

whole organism live. Funny how these intellectuals often toed the bitter line between the ship's Blue Collar operations crew and the mostly affluent colonists. The White Collars belonged to neither group, and the penalty for that was to be snubbed by both. But Alonzo saw the White Collars as being very much like himself—both part of and separate from the rest of the crew. He felt a bit of empathy for them, despite the fact that for years—first as a Blue Collar navigator and then as a commander—he'd felt mostly contempt for the seemingly soft, overly intellectual group. Since then, all contempt had been laid aside, especially at this moment when everything might depend on any one person aboard.

Alonzo left the chaos of the evacuation behind and made his way quickly to the operations control center on the bridge. He moved deliberately, but not slowly. He had a duty to show his crew that despite all of the panic, he was calm and in charge. Any sign of panic or worry might be enough to throw off the whole operation, and too much was riding on this. Thousands of people could die today if Alonzo allowed even a second's worry to cross his features.

He arrived on the bridge and pulled the hatch closed behind him. For the first time since the alarm had sounded, he allowed himself to relax a bit. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, ignoring the shaking stutter of his breath. He was alone here. The rest of the waking crew was bleeding out of the main body of the spacecraft, the segment that would for a time make up the orbital platform, and Alonzo would soon find himself the last waking soul aboard. Once the two extension modules were loosed and safely on their way, he could work on awakening Beta crew. He could organize them into repair teams and get the orbital platform back to full function, then deal with the problem of getting back to civilization.

He checked the monitors and took note when the crew was fully loaded into the Citadel landing module. The Colony module was firing up for entry, too.

"Captain," First Commander Marcos called over the wired video intercom. "We're loaded here. What's the status of the Colony module?"

Alonzo checked a status screen and frowned. "Still locked, First Commander," he said. "It looks like you're going to have to do a simultaneous landing."

"*Simul ...* are you saying the Colony module is going down *with us*?"

"Affirmative, First Commander. No way around it. We're too close to the atmosphere, and if I don't get both of you off of my belly, the whole ship's going in. I'm disengaging all docking clamps now. The orbital platform should settle in to geosync once I rebound off of the two landing modules."

Despite the confidence in his voice, Captain Alonzo had no idea if this plan was going to work. He was relying on a pretty rudimentary understanding of

physics—equal and opposite reactions—to justify what he was about to do. In theory, the orbital platform would be pushed out towards open space, and he could maneuver it into geosynchronous orbit using thrusters. In reality, if it didn't work ... well ...

“Get an engineer to the module junction to start the manual release. We're still feeling the effects of the lightrail. No radio or wireless yet, so once the physical links are broken, we'll be out of contact. By the time you get to ground and get the wireless set up, we should be in orbit and back online. Report in as soon as you can.”

Marcos nodded, “Aye, sir.” He paused, then said, “Captain, just in case this goes bad ... I want you to know it was an honor serving with you.” He snapped a salute.

Captain Alonzo smiled. Marcos, his First Commander, was a good man, and they had served together for a very long time. He was honor-bound and duty-driven. When he offered an honorable salute of any kind, he meant it. It was one of the reasons Alonzo had chosen him as his second-in-command, even though there were higher ranked crewmembers on board at the time. Good men, as the *cliché* goes, are hard to find. Alonzo returned the salute with just as much respect. “Get those people on the ground, Commander. That's an order.”

The crew was boarded and in the process of strapping in. Marcos was gripping the sides of the console before him, staring at the smiling, slightly haunted image of Captain Alonzo on screen as he let his salute fall. “Get those people on the ground, Commander,” the Captain said. “That's an order.”

“Aye, Captain,” Marcos said. The image blinked off, and the screen went dark. Marcos turned to face the crew, most of whom were still struggling to lock themselves into place. There were more people than chairs, unfortunately, and many were forced to snap into the emergency straps lining the module walls. Marcos shook his head. Some of them were going to have a rough time going down.

He spotted one of the White Collar medical personnel. “Doctor,” he said, “when we're down, there are going to be a lot of injuries ... ”

“Got it,” the doctor interrupted. “You concentrate on getting us to the surface in one piece. I'll worry about patching up the wounded.”

Despite himself, Marcos smiled. He was a fan of no-nonsense. He nodded and turned back to once again survey the crowd.

One man immediately stood out—his skin naturally hued a light and organic green. “Captain Somar?” the First Commander asked, pushing through the settling crewmembers to stand before the alien. “I figured you'd still be in stasis.”

The alien captain was an experiment of sorts. He was one of the first participants in a crew exchange between Earth Colony Fleet and their former enemies, the Esool. Until recently—within the past few years actually—humanity had been engaged in a bitter territorial war with the Esool. The fight had been long and scarring, and humanity in general was having trouble letting it go. But the leaders of the Earth Colonies—a relatively new, poorly organized, and only occasionally unified government of humanity—felt it was time to put differences aside and share the gaping expanse of space with the only other sentient species they had ever encountered.

The decimation of a rare and invaluable planet, one that could have supported human life, had certainly played a role in the movement toward peace.

Somar looked up from helping one of the female White Collar engineers into a seat harness. “First Commander Marcos,” he said, nodding briefly. “I was in stasis in the White Collar pod bay. I was awakened with the others.”

Marcos nodded. “I’m sorry about that. Captain Alonzo felt it was important to get all of the support crew into the Citadel module. It has the best chance of making it to the surface intact.”

“What about the colonists?” Somar asked. “Are they in danger?”

“All of us are in danger,” Marcos admitted. “But the Colony module has a reinforced hull and atmospheric thrusters. Not to mention computer guidance systems that should kick in once the light-speed effect wears off. We’re hoping that’s enough.”

“I believe the guidance systems depend upon Citadel being planet-side to guide the module to a safe landing, do they not?”

Marcos let the question hang, and after only a brief pause, Captain Somar nodded, catching on that things could go from bad to worse.

Marcos looked around and spotted one of the White Collar engineers, a man named Thomas. “You,” he said, “I need you to get to the module junction and activate the manual release.”

Thomas hesitated.

“Go!” Marcos shouted, annoyed. *White Collars*, he thought. *Always balking ... always bucking authority*. This was far from a military operation, but the chain of command had to be maintained. If it were up to Marcos, he’d have left all of the W.C.’s in stasis. But the captain’s command was clear, and orders were orders. Marcos was willing to admit that their survival might depend on one of these pampered types. Regardless of his opinions, they might need every soul they could get.

Snapped out of any reluctance, Thomas ran out into the corridor and towards the junction room.

Somar spoke up, “Our first priority must be the colonists.”

Marcos turned back to the Esool Captain and paused. He had almost forgotten the alien was there. “I’m sure Captain Alonzo thinks so too. But we can’t help them if we’re scattered all over the landscape.”

Somar reflected on this then nodded, turned away, and continued to help the White Collars into their harnesses.

Marcos turned to the module pilot, the young woman named Reilly. She was methodically working the preflight checklist and preparing for an emergency atmospheric entry. Marcos knew Reilly well and admired her a great deal. If anyone could handle a forced landing under these chaotic conditions, it was her.

They might just pull through this.

Or it might all be for nothing, he thought. *Even if we survive*. The prospect of having to scrape by on a colony world with no way off had crept into his mind, but he shoved it back and focused on the business of saving their collective asses.

Now this, Thomas thought, is just about typical.

He wasn’t generally a fatalist, or even overly pessimistic. He was simply a keen observer of a life spent rebounding from one crash after another. True, this one would be a little more literal than most, but ironically appropriate considering how he’d found himself here in the first place.

Thomas shook his head as he ran. He didn’t believe in poetic injustice. The universe had a sadistic sense of humor, but it wasn’t that cruel.

He hoped.

Right now, he was focused on finding the manual release. In the weeks after waking up to his new life, Thomas had spent most of his time memorizing the mechanics and layout of this ship. He needed a “conversational” knowledge of how things worked here if he intended to pass for an engineer. His own specialty gave him the foundations he needed to catch up, but his knowledge of the ship’s sub-light engines and computer systems would do him little good when it came to the intricate mesh of cogs, wires, and pumps. Apparently, one of the major side effects of travel on the lightrail was that digital technology was rendered useless for the duration.

He knew how that felt.

But he’d always had a head for diagrams, blueprints, and spec sheets. And in the end, that’s what it took to come up to speed on “modern” engineering—a mish-mash of mechanics that seemed like a cross between the Victorian era and rivets-and-steel science fiction. Now, though, he had to quickly apply what was in his head to what was spanning out before him. Was this the right corridor? And what, exactly, would the manual release look like?

He wondered briefly how First Commander Marcos would react if he knew that this particular “White Collar” had never been on a modern space craft before.

The corridor opened up into a large room with walls made of overlapping bands of metal. From small portholes, Thomas was able to peek out at the blackness of space. They were still riding the lightrail, a beam of near-solid energy that stretched to infinity, as far as Thomas could tell. Streaks of light, distant stars seen from a sliding vantage point, were starting to shrink toward points. The ship was slowing down.

Thomas could see the landing module to the left and the orbiting platform to the right. The only thing holding both together was the docking tube in which he now stood. Far away, attached to another part of the ship, was the colony module. The design hadn’t changed much since the first vessel, appropriately named “First Colony” more than 150 years earlier.

Thomas shuddered at a not-distant-enough memory and turned back to face the contents of the junction room.

Along one wall was a series of cabinets and lockers. A communications panel was wedged in among these. And there, in a large gap made between two banks of lockers, was a metal wheel and a sign reading “Manual Release” in large, red, and (to Thomas, at least) beautiful letters.

He ran to it, placed both hands on the wheel, and gave it a tug. Nothing.

He rolled through the details of the release in his head. There was nothing that should prevent this wheel from turning ... except ...

He ran his hands along the base of the wheel, which was hidden from view. There it was—the cotter pin. It was attached by a small chain to the wall behind the wheel. Thomas grabbed the chain and tugged. It was in there tight, but it did move slightly. He pulled harder. The chain felt as if it were cutting into his hand, and in seconds, it pulled free and clinked against the wall.

He shook his hand briefly, then firmly gripped the wheel again. After two deep breaths, he gave it a turn, putting all of his weight into it.

The manual release clicked and clacked as he turned the wheel. Finally, after what felt like an alarmingly long time, it gave one final click and stopped turning. A buzzer sounded from somewhere behind him, and when he’d turned back from glancing around for it, Thomas put his shoulder to the wheel for one last go. He pushed hard, put all of his weight into it, but the wheel would budge no further. Satisfied, he picked up the cotter pin and pushed it into the hole at the base of the wheel. Now that it was in the open position, the holes in the shaft lined up again and the pin slid in much easier than it had come out.

Thomas quickly made his way through hatch of the junction room, closing the large, heavy door behind him, and into the corridor connecting the junction bay to the landing control module. First Commander Marcos was barking orders at the Blue Collar crew, each busy with last-second preparations for the launch. The Commander turned to Thomas. “The green light just came on. Good work,” he said.

Thomas nodded and made his way to one of the handrail-studded walls at the back of the module’s crew bay. The alien captain ... Somar ... was busy working straps and hooks, fastening people to the handrails. Many of the White Collars still seemed dazed and confused by the events they’d awoken to, and they offered little in the way of help. Thomas stepped in beside Somar and began helping the alien to strap people in.

“Thank you,” Somar said, nodding to him slightly.

Thomas nodded in return and clipped the remainder of the White Collar and Blue Collar crewmembers to the walls. He and Somar then secured themselves and prepared for what promised to be a very bumpy landing.

Marcos flipped open the control panel’s switch-guard. One at a time, he flipped the switches that activated the explosive bolts and thrusters. One by one, each bolt exploded, and each thruster fired. Soon they would pull free of the orbital platform and hit atmo ... probably way too fast. But they had a chance, and Marcos was going to follow orders and get these people to the ground. Safely if it was possible.

The landing module jarred heavily, throwing Marcos to the floor.

“What ... ?”

Another wrenching quake, and the screeching sound of metal on metal resonated through the hollows of the module.

“Commander!” Reilly, the pilot, shouted over the din. “The release clamps are still engaged!”

Damn it! The White Collar—Thomas. He must have screwed up. Marcos stumbled to the man, who was being buffeted between crew members on one of the handhold walls. He grabbed Thomas by the collar. “The release is still closed!” he shouted.

The man’s face went pale. “I ... I turned the release until it locked in place. The cotter pin ... ”

“You screwed up!” Marcos shouted.

Thomas started fumbling with the release on his safety straps. "I'll take care of it," he said.

"No," Marcos said, pushing him back hard against the wall. "I'll take care of it." He stumbled away, opened the hatch to the corridor, and closed it behind him. As he made his way down the corridor to the junction room, he was buffeted from side to side. He occasionally lost his footing and had to catch himself on the handrails.

It was taking too long! By the time he got to the controls, it might be too late.

The ship held together, though, as Marcos opened the hatch to the junction room and stumbled to the release wheel.

It wouldn't budge.

He gave it another good tug, then remembered something Thomas had said. *The cotter pin?* He looked, and sure enough, the pin was in place. The threads of the wheel were exposed, too. It would have been impossible to replace the cotter pin if the release hadn't been either wide open or completely closed.

It also occurred to him that there had been a green light on the panel on the control deck. A green light meant that the clamps were disengaged and the bolts were ready to blow. The bolts had gone, sure enough, and the module should have been propelled outward by the thrusters. Instead, here they were being buffeted and shaken.

Quickly Marcos studied the onscreen schematic. He switched to exterior cameras and turned a knob, slowly. The image zoomed in on the manual release clamps. All of the explosive bolts had fired and the thrusters were active, but the release itself, the physical linkage between the landing module and the orbital platform, was still in place.

The White Collar had been telling the truth. He had done his job. Something else was preventing the release from working.

Marcos zoomed in further, focusing on the line between the control wheel and the clamps, the physical linkage that would open the clamps as the wheel turned. He saw that there was a break in the line.

No ... not a break. It was too smooth—too uniform.

It was cut.

He yanked the communicator from the wall and called up to the main bridge.

Captain Alonzo's voice, strained and tense, came back. "Marcos, what the hell are you still doing here? You're shaking the hell out of me! Get that module off my belly!"

"Captain, we've got a problem. The release has been sabotaged."

There was a brief pause on the other end, and Marcos was afraid the connection had been lost. The jarring and wrenching became more frenetic

outside. Bad things were about to happen.

“Sabotaged,” Captain Alonzo repeated. “First Commander,” the Captain’s voice came through calm and collected. “You know what needs to be done.”

Marcos felt his stomach tighten. “Yes sir,” he said.

“You have your orders,” the Captain said.

Marcos nodded, took a deep breath, and said, “It was an honor to serve with you, Captain.”

“Likewise, Commander. You will be remembered. And honored.”

Without further pause, Marcos dropped the communicator, letting it dangle by its cord, and ran to the wall of storage bins on the other side of the bay. There was no time left to pull on an EVA suit. By the time he had it pressurized, the whole ship would have torn itself apart. Marcos took a deep breath as he placed his palm on an identity scanner and opened one of the secure bins. He grabbed a molecular disc gun from the locker and checked its charge and load. Full charge. Marcos took a deep breath, turned, and walked into the corridor that connected the junction bay to the landing module.

The linkage ran parallel to the corridor, and a pattern of bolts showed where the line would be. Marcos positioned himself in front of the release valve, the one that would normally have freed the module from the main body of the starship, and took aim. He knew there was no time to waste, but still he hesitated.

He had meant what he’d said. It truly had been an honor to serve with Captain Alonzo. It had been an honor to be a part of the Earth Colony Fleet. He had known that this sort of end had always been a possibility, and he had accepted it, with no regrets. He would do his duty, and he prayed that the colony would survive.

Without another second’s hesitation, he raised the disc gun and began firing in short, punctuated bursts. Metal sizzled in a way that was wholly unnatural as the molecular disruption fields emitted by each disc made quick work of the housing of the tunnel, as well as the linkage of the clamp on the other side. As the molecules of the metal split and fell away like so much dust blown from a piece of furniture, the sudden rush of atmosphere exiting the tunnel forced the emergency doors closed and pulled Marcos outward, hurling him into space.

In moments he would explode from the outward press of his own blood pressure.

For the first few seconds, Marcos felt nothing but a sense of sudden, complete silence. Never before had he been in a world so totally devoid of sound. The silence was so deep, and so wonderful, that he hardly noticed the pressure build. Then, as air and blood and bile were forced out of him, he felt the

pain of his limbs swelling and his eyes bulging, and still the silence brought a kind of peace. He was dying, but it was a death on his own terms. And that made it bearable.

He closed his eyes and waited for the inevitable, and as the pressure became too much for his skin and muscle tissue to contain, one last nuisance of a thought flitted through Marcos's mind.

The Captain had not been surprised about the sabotage.

Inside the landing module the crew was shaken and tossed all over the place. Even with the restraints holding her in her seat, Reilly felt like she was about to fly out into the open crew chamber any second. She struggled to hold herself steady as she began working the controls that would get them safely to the ground.

The crew module was actually a shuttlecraft mounted atop the Citadel module—the tower of sophisticated technology that was the brain and central nervous system for the future colony. While attached, the shuttle had a direct mechanical and electrical link to Citadel's thrusters and propulsion systems. Everything was designed to work in tandem until the Citadel module landed safely on the planet's surface. The shuttle could then detach and resume normal flying, acting as a ferry between the planet's surface and the orbital platform. It would be one of three shuttles on the planet's surface, with the remaining two coming down from the landing platform. But until then, it was the acting control deck for the entire Citadel module.

A module that was about as maneuverable as a brick.

Reilly was now forced to guide that brick to the ground using what amounted to a stiff breeze blowing against a hurricane gale. This was far from a "textbook atmospheric entry." The lightrail was fading, so they had exited at relativistic speeds. But as normal physics kicked in once again, the entire ship was becoming inertia's bitch. The fact that they were still attached to the larger mass of the entire vessel meant that when the release finally opened, she'd be dealing with much more inertia and momentum than the module deserved.

It was a struggle just to plot the right trajectory and prevent them from bouncing off of the atmosphere and back into space. The work was taking a lot of Reilly's concentration, and it would be nice if someone were there to give her some direction. First Commander Marcos hadn't come back.

Which could only mean he was dead.

The violent jarring before, that must have been an explosive decompression. Marcos would have been caught in that, hurled out into space as the landing module tore free and careened wildly away from the main body of the starship. Reilly had used everything she had to right them and control the ship's attitude,

and now that she'd finally leveled off, she wondered if it had been worth the effort. There was a better-than-likely chance that they would now slam into the atmosphere at just the right angle to shatter the hull and spew everyone into space.

Maybe she would bump into Marcos out there.

Reilly shivered, focused on the mechanical web of controls before her, and put everything she had into adjusting the ship's trajectory.

She checked the screens for a visual on the colony module. It seemed to have released without the problems or drama of the Citadel module, and it was being bounced around like a tennis ball at the moment. *Thank God for gravity fiber*, Reilly thought. It was the only thing keeping the sleeping colonists from being slammed all over the inside of their stasis pods and coming out like scrambled eggs.

Too bad they didn't line the module seats with the stuff.

She was just about to flip the view back to the atmo side of the module and watch for problems on entry when she noticed the tiny white dot.

She rolled the dial to zoom in. There was too much light coming from the backwash of the orbital platform—no way to know for sure what it was. But it was definitely humanoid. She could make out arms and legs flailing, as if the figure were trying to find purchase in the black of space, to swim.

It had to be Marcos.

Reilly blinked, and hot tears streaked her face. She shook her head, letting the tears fly, and then creased her brow as she leaned into the controls. There was no time to think about it. She would grieve later.

She had a brick to fly and, hopefully, land.

They didn't have the luxury of the usual soft descent. This was going to be a hard landing, and she would need to focus everything she had on keeping them on course. Without the aid of the computers and without time to do the math, she had to rely on instinct to find the right entry window. She had made hundreds of orbital landings, and more than a few of them had had their issues. None, however, were quite as problematic as this one. It would take a miracle of intuition and ballsy luck.

Not only was she going to have to land the crew module, she was going to have to figure out a way to get the colony module down safely at the same time. It was one of the pilot's duties during a colony landing. Of course, the pilot was normally either on the ground or in the orbital platform when the colony module landed. Today she would have to fly two modules down at once, and it was a bit like spontaneously learning to write with both hands while riding a unicycle.

If they could reach the ground before the colony, then there was a chance they could still guide it down as usual, but with both modules entering atmo at the same time, the only chance of reaching the ground first was to push forward using thrusters. That meant building up even greater momentum—not such a desirable situation when your destination is the ground.

Reilly gripped the controls—one for each hand. She tapped the dual foot pedals—one for forward thrusters, one for breaking thrusters. Just like driving a car. Only a car didn't have a few thousand tons of momentum behind it and come bearing the heat of atmospheric entry.

Reilly shouted to the crew and passengers, “Lock your belts, we're going in extremely hot!”

“You're hitting thrusters!” one alarmed crewman shouted.

“Ya think?” she whispered and jammed the forward thruster pedal to the floor.

Now that they'd broken the upper atmosphere, real gravity was kicking in and with it came real inertia. Everyone was thrown back by the sudden g-forces, and Reilly had to struggle to keep the module on the right trajectory. She worked the two attitude controls feverishly, compensating for the buffeting and redirection coming from the chaotic entry.

It looked for a moment like they were going to make it.

But the ground was coming up too fast, and they had too much momentum behind them. There hadn't been enough time in orbit to find the right entry vector, so she'd had to guess. Now they were paying for it. They would make it down, but it wasn't going to be a controlled landing. It was going to be a crash.

At least we'll beat the colony ship down, she thought.

As if on cue, there was a massive, jarring impact. The landing module lurched to the side, and Reilly struggled to hold it steady. She checked the monitors and saw that the colony module had careened into them, pulled into the crew module's draft as it moved through the atmosphere. Reilly cursed. Pushing with the thrusters had worked a little too well, putting them directly in the path of the slower-moving colony module. Now it was almost in free-fall, its thrusters useless as the automated systems struggled to right the craft. It was bouncing off of the crew module, threatening to destroy them both.

“Reilly!” one of the crew shouted.

“I'm on it!” she yelled back, then gunned the breaking thrusters while throwing both attitude controls into opposite positions. The crew module went into a sickening spin, end over end, throwing the crew module out and away from the colony.

And now we crash, Reilly thought as both modules spun wildly toward the surface. With one last effort, she pushed the controls forward with all of the force she could muster and slammed the thruster pedal to the floor. She turned on all of the attitude thrusters at once and jammed them downward. They'd still crash, but maybe she could soften the impact. She poured everything the module had, including the shuttle's own attitude thrusters, into pushing downward against the pull of gravity.

Her last conscious memory was of seeing the colony module as it spun toward the surface, a gaping hole ripped in its side. *God help them*, she thought. *They're on their own.*

Two

Smoke.

Smoke was everywhere, and Mitch coughed outrageously as he struggled to get his bearings, blinking and wiping away tears from his stinging eyes. He was strapped to his chair but dangling against the belts, which cut painfully into his chest and ribs.

He was hanging above the open crew cabin. His chair had spun away from the controls that had been before him—a safety protocol meant to protect the crew during an impact—and now apparently he was facing the new “down.”

Shock had dulled him a bit, and he was struggling to understand everything he was seeing and hearing. A screech of noise ripped through his ears and into his brain, and in some part of his mind, he knew what it meant. Fire alarms were blaring. The module was on fire.

He coughed and sputtered. His side hurt, bruised by the impact with a chair arm and a safety harness. He winced as he fumbled with the harness release, but thankfully stopped himself before unlatching it. *Get your brain in gear, moron*, he thought. If he released the restraints he would fall into the open cabin, possibly hurting himself and some of the other crewmembers in the process.

He struggled now to get a grip on the arm of the seat. He flicked the release on the harness and felt himself drop momentarily, catching himself on the seat arm and dangling high above the crew cabin.

The smoke was getting thicker, gathering at the top of the chamber. Which was, incidentally, where he now found himself. He had to get down somehow or he'd suffocate here.

Working his way around he managed to grab hold of one of the support legs for the console above him. His hand gripped the support just below the brass plate engraved with the words “Taggart Industries,” the company that built most of the equipment that Mitch relied on from day to day. Now he was relying on it to hold his weight and keep him from plummeting to, at best, a debilitating injury or, at worst, a painful, impaled death.

Dangling from the leg of the console, he managed to move hand-over-hand from one leg to another—rather like climbing on a jungle gym. He'd never had the chance to do that when he was a kid, but he'd seen vids. Who knew he'd be

using it as a survival skill someday? He was making slow progress, one leg at a time, and finally found himself dangling above the pilot's station.

This station was surrounded by a guardrail, and Mitch lowered himself to stand on it while he checked on Reilly. She was unconscious, hanging limp from her harness. There was a nasty looking cut on her forehead, where she had apparently met her console at high speed before the safety mechanism had kicked in and rotated her seat. Mitch unhooked the harness and gently lowered her to rest on the guardrail.

"Hey," he said, gently slapping her cheek. "Hey." He wasn't sure what else he should do. He was certain he'd need her help, but he wasn't sure of the best way to wake someone who was unconscious. "Hey, Reilly," another gentle slap.

"Wha ... " she mumbled. She made a squinting, annoyed expression and turned her face from him slightly. "Stop slappin' me," she said, her voice weak. Her eyes fluttered as she opened them and looked up at him.

"We're down," he said. "In more ways than one."

"Alive?" she asked.

"I'm going with that, yes," he said. He glanced around the crew cabin. Smoke was everywhere, and there were people moving about, unhooking themselves from harnesses, struggling to lower themselves safely. There was coughing and moaning all about. "It looks like the module's landing system kicked in. She's upright. But the shuttle is still attached to the Citadel module. It didn't release, so we're sticking straight up. And there's a fire somewhere. All I can see is smoke."

Reilly sat up, with Mitch's help, and immediately burst into a coughing fit.

"Commander Marcos ... " she sputtered.

Mitch looked around. He was nowhere to be found.

"He must have fallen," Mitch said, glancing below them.

She shook her head, managing to tamp down the coughing. "Dead," she said. She blinked a few times, tears in her eyes, and reached up to her forehead. She winced and took her fingers away quickly, looking at the bright red blood on her fingertips. "He's dead," she said again. "I saw him. He was blown outside during decompression."

Mitch took this in. "He had to release the clamps manually?"

"Something happened to the release, I think," she said.

Mitch nodded. Later, they could grieve for Marcos and anyone else who didn't survive the crash. For now, if the rest of them were to get out alive, it was vital to start moving. "Let's concentrate on getting everyone out of here, ok?"

She nodded in return and struggled to her feet.

There was moaning everywhere, and the sound of electricity arcing in places. From deep within the smoke Mitch could hear a firm voice giving orders, telling people to remain calm, and organizing them to gather the wounded and find a way out of the module.

It was Captain Somar.

“Captain!” Mitch cried out, using the title, even though the alien was not part of the Earth Colony Fleet. “There’s an escape hatch in the aft section, starboard.”

There was a pause. “I am sorry, crewman, I do not know these terms.”

Mitch blinked and couldn’t help smiling a little. These were ancient Earth nautical terms. The alien Captain would have no frame of reference. “Rear of the module on the right side if you’re facing the front of the shuttle.”

“Thank you,” the Captain called back and began directing the crew toward the hatch. There was a clank and a sudden WHOOSH as the hatch opened and the pressurized air of the crew chamber gushed outward into the planet’s atmosphere. The smoke was carried with it, and the room cleared enough, momentarily, for Mitch to see where the fire was.

Flames danced insanely around the oxygen scrubbers, directly below him.

“Out!” Mitch cried. “Everyone out now! The O2 tanks are going to go!”

The orderly evacuation being organized by the alien Captain now became frenzied and chaotic as everyone struggled to exit the crew chamber.

Somar picked up immediately, “Grab anyone who is injured. I need two people on the door assisting people who exit. You! And you!”

Mitch was impressed by the alien’s capacity to lead, even in this chaotic situation. He remained calm but driven.

In the meantime, Mitch found that he and Reilly were in a bad situation. They were resting on the guardrail several feet above the oxygen scrubbers, which meant that if the scrubbers went, he and Reilly would be the very first casualties. It also meant there was no fast way down. Even if they risked it and dropped, they’d land in the flames and be seriously injured, if not killed.

Mitch twisted and turned, desperate to see a way down. They were on the port side, across the chamber from the exit. There was another hatch on this side, but it was currently surrounded by flames and arcing electricity.

“Up,” Reilly said, coughing. “We have to go up.”

“I just came from there,” Mitch protested, half joking.

“The forward emergency hatch,” she said. “It’s in the floor, just above us.”

Mitch looked up. True enough, the pull ring for the hatch was in plain sight, only a few feet above the pilot’s station. He helped Reilly to her feet, and the two of them clamored up, scaling the station supports. It was grueling, and the bruising in his side felt like he’d taken a missile hit to the ribs. He pushed

through the pain, hoisted Reilly up to one of the cross beams for the guardrail, and then pulled himself after. When they were close enough to the hatch, Reilly reached up, twisted the release, and let the panel fall open. Before she could grab it, the hatch pulled free and fell past them.

“Look out below!” she cried. The panel clanged and rang against the guardrail and was deflected outward, landing just short of the O₂ tanks. Mitch let out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. “Freak out later,” Reilly said. “Exit now.”

He could hardly argue with that kind of logic. He helped Reilly up and through the hatch before struggling through it himself.

Coughing, eyes stinging, Thomas helped the alien guide people out of the aft hatch. His arm hurt. It didn’t seem to be broken, but it might be a sprain. Otherwise he felt like he was in decent enough shape for just having crashed on an alien planet.

The stinging in his eyes became too much and he paused to wipe them with the sleeve of his jumpsuit. The chaos around him, the coughing and groaning and sounds of fire and electricity, gave him an unwelcome sense of *déjà vu*. Of course, he knew he’d never been here or even in this situation before. But he’d seen a similar scene in his mind so many times that this one felt utterly familiar. It was a sound—a sound that could only be imagined but nevertheless haunted him—that rang most clearly in his ears.

The sound of two-hundred-thousand souls crying out as they were consumed by flame.

“Crewman,” the alien said, “I need you.”

Thomas snapped out of the trance, shook himself, and moved to the alien’s side, helping one of the injured Blue Collars through the hatch. Most of the crew was now making its way through the emergency exit, and it wouldn’t be long before they were all safely on the ground. They were going to make it.

This was his fault for playing the part of a modern engineer. What had he been thinking? He was completely out of his element here. His expertise was in systems that were antiques here. Ironic, considering that antiquated-looking mechanical systems, like something out of a Jules Verne story, had experienced a rebirth side-by-side with advanced technology. He had thought that, with his background, he could easily catch up. He had thought that he could wing it. He had been wrong.

His ineptitude had caused the chaos around him. The lives lost here would be on his head. He was proving to be every bit the villain he was accused of being.

Some new start.

“Help,” came a weak voice from above.

Thomas peered up through the thickening smoke and saw a young woman, still strapped in her seat. Blood covered her face, and she seemed unable to make her hands work properly. *Concussion*, Thomas thought.

“Help,” she said again in a voice that was now barely audible.

Thomas leapt upward and snagged one of the seat backs. It reclined, causing him to nearly lose his grip, but he held on and pulled himself up with a huge effort. His arm screamed at him. A bolt of pain, like molten lava, ran from his shoulder up into his neck and then back down to the tips of his fingers. He clinched his jaw and pulled.

“Crewman!” the alien shouted.

“There’s someone up here!” he called back.

“The last of the crew is out, I will assist you.”

“No!” Thomas called. “Get outside and get the others to safety. They need you,” he said.

The alien looked at him briefly, then nodded. “Blessings,” he said, then exited the craft.

“Look out below!” came a cry from far above. Thomas watched as a floor panel clanged and rebounded from the guardrails, barely missing the scrubber tanks. *That was a close one*, he thought. He continued to haul himself upward until he was eye-level with the injured woman.

“I’ll get you out of here, ok?”

She nodded weakly and struggled with her harness. Thomas reached over her and pulled the release. He then pulled her free of her seat, bracing himself while keeping her close to him. He gasped from the pain in his arm, had a fleeting mental image of shredded muscle and cartilage, and pushed through to hold on to both the girl and the seat. He began the climb down with her clinging to his aching shoulders.

There was a pop and hiss, followed almost instantly by a sudden explosion.

One of the smaller tanks near the fire had finally had enough, and the explosion sent shards of hot metal sailing across the room. Whatever had been in the tank was liquid and extremely flammable. It spread like napalm and covered the surface directly below him.

“Damn,” Thomas said, surprisingly calm.

They would have to scale their way over to the exit and drop down directly in front of it. This was going to be tough, since there were no seats in that area and the drop from one of the guardrails cleared a good fifteen feet at that point.

Thomas held the woman tight as he climbed across seats. Again, one of the seatbacks reclined suddenly, throwing the two of them downward at an alarming rate. The girl screamed as he caught both of them by grasping an armrest. His

shoulder bellowed its protest, and his left arm, which felt sprained before, now felt like it was ready to snap.

There was nothing for it now. It wasn't possible for him to climb back up with the weight of both of them on an already-injured arm and shoulder. That left only one choice—drop into the flames below.

He took a couple of deep breaths, grasped the injured woman tightly, and let go of the armrest.

They hit with a thud, but he managed to keep his feet under him. Flames leapt onto the legs of his jumpsuit and caught the material almost instantly.

Actually, Thomas realized after a few seconds, the material was fine. It was resisting the fire, but it was covered in the burning liquid.

A sound was coming from behind him, like a metal balloon stretching to its limits. There was a pop and a whine as one of the seals on the oxygen tanks burst. There was no time left!

Thomas clutched the woman to him and ran full on towards the hatch. He leapt, diving for the opening with no idea what would be on the other side.

It has to be safer than here.

The tanks blew at that moment, and the concussive force funneled out of the exit behind them, propelling them both outward into open air.

The module had landed nose up with the hatch several hundred feet off the ground. The outward thrust of the explosion launched Thomas and the woman into the treetops, and the two crashed their way through a lattice of small limbs into the brush below.

Somar was scrambling down the side of the module when the explosion rocked the craft, nearly shaking him loose and hurtling him to the ground. He saw two figures flung from the ship, vanishing into the treetops—the crewman and the woman he had bravely stayed behind to save. Somar prayed that they lived through the impact in the forest.

As he reached the bottom rung and finally stepped down onto the alien soil, he looked around at the surrounding chaos. Many of the humans were injured and lying on the hard-packed ground among splintered trees and upturned brush. The sounds of moaning and anguished cries filled the air around him.

The explosion of the oxygen tanks had been completely contained within the crew chamber of the shuttle, high atop the Citadel module. The module itself had managed to right itself for landing, settling into the towering position that would have been its default in a normal landing. Considering the half-crash/half-landing, the module was in relatively good shape. Spires of gleaming metal, a communications array, jutted upward into the sky in a way that Somar thought was almost majestic. Like the points of a crown.

The crewmembers were organizing and tending to the injured, getting people to safety and dressing wounds with the few med kits that had been hastily retrieved from the module before the mass exodus of the crew. Somar spotted three Blue Collars who had helped one of their crewmates into the shade of the trees.

“Crewmen,” he said, gesturing for them. “We need to form a rescue party. Two of the crew were thrown clear by the explosion. I believe they landed in that ...”

“We’re not taking orders from *you*, scrub,” one of the males said belligerently.

Somar blinked. He had heard the term “scrub” before. It was a derogatory term, short for “scrub brush.” It was a slang term that referenced the plant-based nature of Somar’s people. “Forgive me, but we must ...”

“You heard me. We don’t take orders from a walking salad. So why don’t you just go take root somewhere nice and let the real humans do their work, ok?”

Somar was unsure how to proceed. It was essential to act quickly. The crewmembers were likely injured and could die if not found soon. But he was unaccustomed to his orders being ignored and wasn’t sure where this sudden hostility was coming from.

“I am a Captain of the Esool Fleet and an acting Captain for the Earth Colony Fleet. I am the only ranking officer present. Please assist me in finding these injured crewmen.”

“I said we’re not taking orders from you!” The crewman stepped forward menacingly, squaring off with Somar. His body language was practically screaming hostility. “Our commander is First Commander Marcos, and we’ll only take orders from him.”

Somar was unsure how to proceed. If he engaged this crewman in hand-to-hand combat, he would surely prevail, but it would waste precious time and conceivably damage his position with the crew. Luckily, he was spared from the decision by a male voice from behind.

“Marcos is dead.”

Everyone turned to look at the newcomer. Somar recognized him as Mitch Garrison, one of the Chief Engineers. He was helping the female pilot, Reilly, to hobble toward the group.

“Like hell,” one of the Blue Collars said.

“It’s true,” Reilly reported. She wiped at her eyes with the sleeve of her uniform, smearing dirt across her tear-moist cheek in the process. “He had to hit the release clamps manually. He was blown out during decompression.”

There was a moment of silence as the group absorbed this information. “So ... who’s in charge?”

Mitch nodded towards Somar. “Like the man said, he’s the ranking officer. And you, gentlemen, will follow the chain of command. Is that going to be a problem, Jack?” he said, turning to address the belligerent crewman.

The other crewmen looked at each other, plainly irritated by this turn of events. Jack openly stared at Mitch, then looked to his friends and nodded. When they turned back to Somar, they saluted, although a bit resentfully. “Your orders ... *Captain*,” Jack, practically spat.

Somar simply repeated, “We need to form a search party. I want three people to scout that brush. There are at least two crewmembers in there, possibly injured. Bring them back to this area.”

The crew nodded and three men, including Jack, left to enter the brush. A moment later, another Blue Collar crewmember hurried after them, a young human that Somar had not seen before.

Somar looked around and indicated several more members of the crew, most of which had gathered at the first sign of a conflict. “We must establish a camp. You,” he indicated several men and women. “See to food and shelter. The rest of you will tend the wounded. Bring them all to this location and make sure they are shaded and provided with water and treatment.”

The crew now split up into their various duties.

Somar turned to Mitch and Reilly. “Thank you for diffusing the situation,” he said.

Mitch nodded. “You’re welcome. I saw how you got everyone out of that chamber. You may have saved most of their lives, even if they don’t want to admit it. You deserve respect,” he said.

Somar nodded perfunctorily. He then helped Mitch to lower the injured Reilly into a shaded spot. He spared a glance at the Citadel module, standing high and gleaming under an alien sun. The shuttle, their only means of transport out of the atmosphere, was smoldering at the top of the tower. It might or might not be able to function again. But since they had no way, at present, to know if the orbital module had managed to survive, it could be a moot point anyway. Space might just be permanently out of reach.

Somar turned back to the injured and dazed crew. Space, at this point, was the least of their worries.

Jack and the others stomped off into the woods. The scrub had given them an order, and the Chief had backed it. Mitch Garrison was a good guy, and Jack would follow his lead. If he said do what the sprout ordered, then that was what Jack would do. For now.

He and two of his crew had just entered the brush when Alan Angelou raced up to join them without a word. *More the better*, Jack thought.

Alan was an odd kind of guy—Jack wasn't too sure how he felt about him. He was a good worker and was always on time. When he had first joined Captain Alonzo's crew, he was as green as Esool blood, but he was smart, and he worked hard to get up to speed. In fact, he seemed to know more than he let on. He picked up everything so fast that Jack was sure he had at least some kind of background in it.

It was funny because even though Alan was a Blue Collar, he sometimes acted like a White. He read things. Whenever he wasn't on duty, you could almost always find him in the galley or in his bunk, reading something from a handheld. When they were at faster-than-light, he would read from one of the old paper books, the rare ones that they came across sometimes during trades. Jack had seen the boy trade a perfectly good wrench for a stack of worthless, rotting books once. He had torn into him for that one, but later Alan showed him his collection of tools, all good quality and all cared for regularly. The boy could spare one wrench, which had suddenly not looked up to snuff in the comparison.

Jack didn't trust Alan entirely, but that was true for most people. Trust had to be earned, Jack felt. But the kid did his work and kept his mouth shut—and that *wasn't* true for most people. The books were a big waste of time, Jack could have told him, but he couldn't see much harm in them. If the boy started to get too big for his britches, thinking he was a White Collar, Jack and his crew could always teach him a lesson. A bunk raid in the middle of the night was usually enough to make most guys give up on trying to be above everyone else.

They had been in the brush for a while now, plowing through as branches and brambles snagged on their clothes and tripped them up. Jack was starting to feel that every step, every slap of a branch, every time his clothes snagged, was a slap in the face from the alien scrub.

Damn the scrub! Why wasn't he the one sweating and dragging through this stuff? Jack cursed as more branches slashed at him and more brambles grabbed him.

They were going blind, using only the general direction the alien had pointed in as their guide. Probably a big mistake. What would the scrub care if four real men died out here in the brush? He was *in charge*. As long as he had a few pet humans to boss around, why should he care if he lost a handful?

As they moved, they suddenly heard someone calling from within the brush. It was faint, muffled by the growth of the forest. “Hey! Hey, we’re here! Over here!”

“You hear that?” one of the guys asked.

“That way,” Jack nodded, honing in on the voice. Alan stepped in beside him as they moved further in. The kid was breaking through the bramble and limbs through sheer will.

“Here!” they heard the male voice call again, closer. “Here in the brush!” They finally broke through to a small clearing where a White Collar was tending to an injured woman on the ground. Jack looked closer and saw that it was Lissa Martin. She was a Blue Collar who worked in ship’s services, mostly running errands between modules, checking gauges, that sort of thing. She and Jack had given it a go a few times, taking advantage of long shifts by keeping each other “company.”

She looked to be in bad shape. They’d have to get her back to the landing module quickly.

There was movement to his side. Jack glanced over to see Alan. He seemed to be looking at the White Collar. No, not just looking—*staring*. It seemed to Jack that Alan recognized the man, but he couldn’t be sure. Alan glanced quickly at Jack and then his expression changed. He was, once again, the same old stoic Alan, and before Jack could ask him anything, the young man pushed into the clearing, moving to help the injured pair.

Three

When Thomas opened his eyes, the first official act of his brain was noticing the pain. A lot of it, in fact. His shoulder ached to the point where he wondered if maybe his arm had been ripped from the socket. A cautious but quick check, lifting his hands painfully into the air, showed him that everything was still attached and working. It hurt like hell, but it didn't seem to be dislocated. Just wrenched.

It was the burns that hurt the worst.

The jumpsuit had protected him from the flames for the most part, but the burning liquid had clung to his clothing and had burned his arms and hands in places. He wasn't sure, but it was likely these were second- and third-degree burns. Pretty dangerous injuries to have at any time—but especially while stranded on an alien planet with God knows what kinds of bacteria and infections floating about. Plus they hurt. A lot.

He resolved not to worry about infections. Supposedly, the *Uninoc*, “universal inoculation,” that he'd been given prior to the trip had some sort of adaptive antibody that could fight off any infection. He might still get sick, but his recovery would be faster, and there was “less chance of death.” Comforting. But at least he could put that worry out of his mind and concentrate on more important things.

The woman he'd rescued seemed to be burn-free, but she was obviously injured in other ways. She groaned as he gingerly turned her over. He winced at the pain it caused his own hands. His fingers seemed to be mostly free of burns, so he tried to limit any contact to these.

She was still breathing, which was a relief. But he was concerned about the blood caked on the side of her face and gathered in the corners of her mouth. “Hey,” he said, though his voice sounded hoarse and his throat hurt. Smoke inhalation. He was in bad shape, too.

The woman coughed and winced. “Hurts,” she said, indicating her ribs.

Thomas felt relieved to hear her speak. He had half-worried she wouldn't regain consciousness. He reached out with burning and aching hands and gently pressed her side. She nearly screamed from the pain.

Her ribs were broken.

“Listen, I’m going to open your jumpsuit and take a look at your side, ok? Hope you’re not modest.” He tried to smile.

She simply nodded, her eyes squeezed shut, tears streaming from the corners, and her face contorted with pain. Thomas, using the tips of his unburned fingers, gently unzipped the jumpsuit, pushed it open and lifted her T-shirt. Her entire right side was one big bruise.

He closed up her suit and helped her to be comfortable. What was he going to do? He had no formal medical training, and most of what he knew came from movies and television. He had taken a safety course once, years ago, but he was sure that CPR would do more harm than good at this point. It was the only part he could remember.

Even if he had been a trained physician, his burned hands made him effectively useless. In fact, it occurred to him that he was in as much danger as she was. They both needed serious medical attention, and that meant getting back to wherever the module had crashed. Someone among the survivors would have medical training. It was the girl’s only hope.

He couldn’t do this alone. “Just rest. I’m going to see if I can find anyone to help.”

She gripped his arm. “No, please,” she said, barely whispering. “Please don’t leave me.” She sobbed and winced from the pain in her side. She suddenly coughed, and a light spray of blood splattered forth.

This was bad.

It seemed likely she had a punctured lung, and Thomas wasn’t sure what the hell to do about it. Should he move her? Or should he leave her and try to find help? Neither seemed like a great idea. It might be better to stay close, tend to her, and hope that someone came to rescue them soon.

He couldn’t see out of the undergrowth, which was thick around them. He had no idea in which direction they’d been thrown after the blast. The module could be anywhere, and if he moved out in search of it, he might become lost and entangled in this alien brush. No good for either of them.

Still, how could he sit here and do nothing? He stood and listened, hoping to hear sounds from the crash site. Either the brush and forest were too thick, insulating him from sound, or they’d been thrown further than he’d thought. Maybe both.

“Hey,” he said to the girl, kneeling beside her once more, “what’s your name?” He instinctively felt he should keep her awake and alert. Or was that just for head injuries? He cursed himself for having no medical knowledge whatsoever.

She coughed a bit. “Melissa. Melissa Martin. Lissa for short.” She actually managed a smile.

“Lissa,” he smiled back. “I had a cousin named Melissa, back on earth. Mean cook,” he said.

Lissa coughed and winced. “I ... can’t cook,” she said, and Thomas thought she smiled again. She was tough. Scared, but tough.

“Lissa, I’m going to step away. Just for a second,” he added when she seemed ready to protest. “I’m just going to scout around for a few feet, see if I can find any sign of the landing module or the crew. They can’t be far. We were thrown out by the blast, but we have to be close. I’ll be in ear shot the whole time, ok?”

She nodded and lowered her head to the ground.

Gingerly, trying not to use his burned hands, he rose to his feet and began walking a perimeter. He picked a distinctive-looking tree as a landmark and kept it always on his left as he made an ever-expanding circle. True to his promise, he stayed close enough to hear Lissa cough and groan as he pushed through the heavy brush. Every few moments he would stop, remaining still while he listened for signs of the crew.

This was taking too long. Lissa was in bad shape, and if she didn’t get medical attention soon, she’d die. Thomas felt responsible. It was he, after all, who had screwed up with the manual release for the module. This crash, Lissa’s injuries, the injuries and deaths of the rest of the crew—it was all on him.

Again.

He shook his head, fighting back the self-pity and loathing. This wasn’t the time for it. The weight of responsibility for all of this made it even more crucial that he save Lissa. He pressed on in the staggered walk-pause-listen-walk pattern.

Finally he heard something that sounded very much like talking. It was faint and distant, somewhere in the thick brush, but it was nearly unmistakable. It sounded like a group of men some ways off.

“Hey!” he called out. “Hey, we’re here! Over here!”

He quickly made his way back to Lissa’s side. “Here! Here in the brush!”

It took several minutes, but soon he could hear shouting and the sounds of people pushing through the undergrowth. In moments, four Blue Collars broke through to the clearing where Thomas and Lissa had landed.

The four men paused at the edge of the clearing, taking in the scene. One of the younger seemed, for a moment, to be staring strangely at Thomas, but then all four men pushed ahead and hurried toward them.

“Lissa,” one Blue Collar said, kneeling beside her.

Lissa coughed again, and blood spattered the corners of her mouth.

“It’s ok,” the young man said with a strong, reassuring tone. “We’ll get you out of here. You’re going to be fine.”

The four men began tearing the sleeves from their jump suits and breaking limbs from the trees, fashioning a makeshift stretcher for the injured woman. Thomas felt completely useless as he sat with burned hands, forced to watch them.

One of the men bent to take a look at Thomas and his burns. “These are bad,” he said. “You hurt anywhere else?”

“Shoulder,” Thomas said. “I don’t think it’s dislocated, but I wrenched it pretty good.” Briefly, Thomas thought about the pain he’d felt in his arm earlier, but if it was sprained, the pain was being masked by his other injuries. He wondered if it was a good or bad thing for one potential injury to be forgotten in light of several others. *Wonder what else I’ve banged up*, he joked with himself. Internal gallows humor.

The man nodded. “Can you walk?”

“Yeah, I’m good.” He nodded towards Lissa, “I think she may have a punctured lung, though. Pretty bad. Is there a medic back at the crash site?”

The man shrugged. “Maybe. There’s a field medic in the BC crew, and the White Collars are supposed to have at least one doctor. Whether they survived or not ...”

Thomas didn’t need him to finish.

“They were setting up a camp when we left. The scrub ... that Somar guy ... he was in charge,” the man practically spat. “The camp isn’t far. But you two were thrown pretty deep into the brush.”

Thomas wasn’t sure if he’d heard the man right. *Scrub?* He hadn’t heard it much, but he was pretty sure that was slang used to describe the Esool. Somar—the Esool Captain who had helped everyone get strapped in and prepared for the crash. The man who had helped save humans when he could have thought only of himself.

How could anyone still be a bigot in this day and age? Shouldn’t that world have died off long ago? Some things, Thomas supposed, just stayed the same as long as humans were at the heart of the equation.

Thomas decided that this wasn’t a good time to point out the foibles of racism and struggled to stand again. The man helped him, carefully taking hold of his elbows and lifting Thomas to his feet. Thomas glanced up through the trees. “We must have been launched out of the door pretty fast to be thrown so far. The brush may have been the only thing that kept us from going splat.”

The young man, Alan, stepped up to them. The other two were gently putting Lissa on the stretcher. “You saved Lissa,” he said stoically. “If not for you, she would have died in that explosion.”

Thomas studied him for a moment. It was as if there was something unspoken there, some hint of a conversation unsaid. “Seemed like the thing to do,” Thomas said finally.

Alan nodded and returned to help the others in getting Lissa on the makeshift stretcher.

“Don’t mind him,” the man beside him said. “He’s always been a little weird. He reads too much.”

Thomas almost laughed. “I didn't think anyone read anymore.”

The man laughed and helped the others to lift the stretcher and carry Lissa toward the edge of the clearing.

Thomas looked around and, despite himself, had to smile. They had just crashed on an alien world—a world where he was prepared to spend the rest of his life. A world that represented a fresh start. “Welcome home,” he said quietly, as the group began the hard trek back to camp.

“There are supplies and tools inside the module,” Mitch reported to Captain Somar. “It’s likely they’re still in good shape. Most of that stuff was sealed in individual fireproof containers.”

Somar nodded, glancing up at the gleaming tower that loomed above them. It seemed to Somar to be a majestic thing, every bit as regal as its name implied. “The Citadel module almost made its landing, it seems.”

Mitch glanced up as well, squinting in the bright light that reflected from Citadel's solar coating. “The safety system kicked in and righted it. Plus, Reilly dumped everything the module had into pushing back against gravity. It slowed us enough to make a semi-decent landing. But the crew chamber is part of the shuttle. It was supposed to release from the module before it landed. That’s our link back to the orbital platform, if it survived.”

“Why didn’t the shuttle release?” Somar asked. “It seems unlikely that its systems would fail at the same time as these other mechanical failures.”

Mitch looked around to make sure no one was paying close attention. “You’re right,” he said to Somar, lowering his voice. “It’s too much of a coincidence. The whole colony ship comes off of the lightrail too close to a planet’s surface, the release clamps fail, and the shuttle doesn’t detach? That’s a pretty long string of failures.”

Somar looked again at the Citadel module. The shuttle that formed the top portion was pointing prominently toward the sky, as if yearning to launch. “Once we have a base camp established and the wounded are tended to, I’d like you to examine the shuttle. We need to know if there has been sabotage.”

“It’s almost a sure thing,” Mitch said intently.

Somar sniffed and shook his head. “May the Creator help us if we have a saboteur among us. Worse still to have one who is at peace with dying himself.”

Mitch nodded. “Well, I’ll figure out what the story is with the shuttle, but at least Citadel seems to be intact. More or less.”

The module did seem to be in decent shape, as Somar allowed his gaze to move from the shuttle to the base of the structure. “Take someone with you, and retrieve the supplies and tools.”

The engineer nodded and was turning to leave when Somar added, “And Mr. Garrison?” Mitch turned. “If there are weapons on board please secure them.”

Mitch paused briefly, then nodded again and was gone.

Somar looked around at the crew of humans he was now commanding. This was by no means going to be easy. Many of them were injured beyond the abilities of the Blue Collar field medic, some of the White Collar physicians were among the injured and dead, and there was apparently an enemy in their midst. Add to that the open bigotry that many of the humans felt toward him, and Somar’s isolation was nearly complete.

There was something else, as well. It had nagged at him for a while before he’d finally begun to put the pieces together. The Blue Collar crew was tending to its own, as was the White Collar crew. There was a definite division in the group—to the point that Somar could see a physical line of demarcation as the groups of blue-clad crewmembers lay apart from the more casually dressed White Collars.

There was a growing division in the ranks.

In this situation, on an alien world, with so many injured and the odds stacked so high against them, division was one thing that could not be tolerated. They would all have to work together for their common good. The question was, how could an outsider such as himself ever hope to lead a group that was divided even amongst their own?

“Captain?” a woman’s voice said from behind.

Reilly, the ship’s pilot, was holding her side as she stepped up to him. “One of the White Collar doctors has a broken arm, but he’s asking to be allowed to help.”

“Of course,” Somar said, nodding slightly. “We can use all of the help we can get.”

Reilly nodded. "Thought so," she said.

She didn't move, and Somar had discovered during his time among the humans that this meant they had more to say but were unsure how to proceed. "You wish to say something else?" Somar asked.

Reilly blinked, then smiled slightly. "It's just, some of the crew are ... suspicious of you."

Somar was not surprised by the news. "Oh?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. There have been comments. Some of them think it's a little much that an Esool was onboard when all of these things went wrong. Some of them are even wondering why you were out of stasis."

Somar reflected on this for a moment. "Are you one of them?" he asked.

She shook her head fervently. "No. When Captain Alonzo ordered us to wake everyone in the WC stasis bay, I was the one who woke you," she said.

Somar blinked and smiled. "Oh? Why was that?"

She shrugged. "It was chaotic. I'm not an engineer, I'm a pilot. I just started hitting buttons. You were in one of the pods that was activated."

Somar laughed. "So, I am here by accident?"

Reilly smiled. "Yes, sir, I suppose you are. So I'm pretty sure you weren't running around sabotaging the ship."

"No, I wasn't," he said. "But the two of us are apparently in the minority. It seems the rest of the crew is determined to make me the villain."

"Mitch isn't," she said. "You can trust him. And there are a few others. We don't all hate the Esool, you know. Most of the fighting was over when we were very young. A lot of us saw this exchange program as being a pretty good thing for humans and the Esool."

Somar nodded. "I appreciate your support, Pilot." He bowed slightly in the tradition of honor that his people used, "I thank you."

Reilly smiled and attempted a slight bow, unaware of the traditional response. Somar took no offense.

It was getting dark when the rescue team breached the underbrush and burst into the open area formed by Citadel's crash. The men holding the makeshift stretcher took their first rest since finding Thomas and Lissa, and Thomas joined them happily.

He felt hot and feverish. That was a very bad sign. He may not have much medical knowledge, but he knew enough to recognize signs of infection. His hands, now wrapped in the torn sleeves of his jump suit, throbbed and ached furiously. And the fever was taking a toll on his strength, causing him to feel weak and very thirsty.

Alan had noticed early on that Thomas was having trouble and had stepped in to support him on occasion, without a word. Thomas was grateful not to talk, actually. At this point, all he wanted was to collapse, preferably into an icy stream somewhere.

Citadel rose high above the surrounding forest, and for the very first time, Thomas got to see it in all of its glory. Even now, wrecked and damaged as it was, it was awe-inspiring. All those years ago, he'd dreamt of being exactly where he was right now. Sure, he'd envisioned things going a little more smoothly. But in general terms, it was exactly as he'd dreamt it. Standing on an alien world, breathing an alien atmosphere. And it was made all the sweeter by the fact that the ship that had brought him here was based partially on his own work and designs.

It had all worked.

"Doctor!" Alan suddenly called. "We need a doctor! We have injured here!"

The camp had taken shape amongst the trees with the looming structure of the Citadel module standing guard, just as its namesake might have millennia ago. A man with his arm in a sling came forward with one of the Blue Collars in tow. The Blue Collar was carrying what seemed to be a med kit, and he rushed to Lissa's side.

"It's going to be ok, Lissa," the Blue Collar man said, as he had them put the stretcher down and he opened the med kit beside her. "Doc?"

The other man, casually dressed, knelt down beside them. He reached out and gingerly touched Lissa's side with his good hand. She winced and cried out, coughing slightly. "Punctured lung," the doctor said. He turned to the Blue Collar, "I don't suppose you've had any experience in an operating room?"

The Blue Collar shook his head. "No," he said. "But now's as good a time as any to pick up a new skill."

The doctor gave a sharp, almost derisive laugh, then nodded and directed the men to carry Lissa to a makeshift triage. He then turned his attention briefly to Thomas. Unwinding the bandages was a little more painful than Thomas would have hoped. "Bad," the doctor said. "It looks like infection is setting in. We have antibiotics, but someone will need to dress these."

"I'll do it," Alan said, stepping forward immediately.

The doctor looked him over and nodded. "ok. I have to assist with the surgery of the young woman. You take care of this man," he said.

Alan gently took Thomas by the arm and led him toward Citadel.

After both bandages had been completely removed, Thomas downed a couple of antibiotics, some painkillers, and what had to be gallons of water. It

wasn't cold, but it tasted like heaven to him. He felt as if he hadn't had anything to drink in months.

Alan had a kit with fresh bandages, swabs, and ointments. "This will hurt," he said frankly.

And it did.

Thomas gritted his teeth as the young man meticulously swabbed and daubed at his hands with cotton, gauze, and alcohol. Once the burns were clean to his satisfaction, Alan slathered balm on them and wrapped them in fresh, clean bandages.

The damage hadn't been quite as bad as Thomas had feared. His fingers were mostly fine, singed here and there. His palms and the backs of his hands were blistered and burned pretty bad, though. The balm felt cool and comforting, but it still hurt like hell.

"Thanks," he said.

Alan looked up at him and nodded. "You're welcome."

Thomas nodded to his hands, "You've done this sort of thing before."

Alan shrugged. "My parents died when I was very young, and I had to learn how to take care of myself. And occasionally other people."

Thomas noted Alan's distant, subtle but sad tone. "How did they die?"

Alan stopped and looked to the side. His breath quickened, then he seemed to calm himself. "They died in a colony ship accident," he said simply, without seeming emotional.

For the first time, it occurred to Thomas how tenderly and thoroughly the young man had dealt with his burns. He knew how to treat them without being told. He was an expert at it, in fact. This was more than just the standard set of survival skills learned by an abandoned youth, it was art. It was a skill learned with motivation, even if the purpose was long gone. "They were burned to death," Thomas said quietly, feeling a pinch of turmoil at one of his own distant memories.

Alan looked at him, his gaze steady but sad.

"I know something about that," Thomas said. "I ... let's just say I have dreams about people dying like that. Fire. Explosions."

Alan was silent, studying Thomas' face. He nodded, rising to his feet. He helped Thomas stand, and the two of them quietly made their way out into the current of the new community that had been born, if somewhat painfully, in Citadel's shadow.

Gravity was something different. After years of working in space, even hanging from rigging high up in cavern-like chambers, Mitch had never felt the full tug of real gravity. At least, not while he was dangling from a questionable support ring with a bed of metal and jagged, splintered trees below. He opted to concentrate on the work at hand. And the work at hand was confirming something that Mitch had hoped would turn out to be his imagination.

This was definitely sabotage.

Mitch had inspected all of the release clamps for the shuttle and found the same weld on each of them. They were fused as if they were one piece of metal, and that meant someone had used an MD welding rig. MD—molecular disruption—could break things apart at a subatomic level, unstitching the target molecule by molecule. It also came in handy for joining things together in one piece.

“Mitch,” said Billy Sans, one of his Blue Collar crewmates. He was assisting Mitch, hanging from the side of the Citadel module. His hand-wound flashlight was playing light over another set of bolts. “Someone did this. This wasn’t an accident.”

“Yeah,” Mitch agreed. “They were pretty determined to keep us from launching the shuttle.”

“This doesn’t make sense,” Billy said. He had let go of the magnetic handgrips all together and was hanging entirely by the safety strap clamped to a ring in Citadel’s hull, bracing himself with his feet. It made Mitch nervous to see it, but the young man had been doing things like this his whole life. He felt perfectly safe.

Mitch wished he could say the same. He felt anything but safe at this point.

“Someone didn’t want this colony to survive,” Mitch said. “Makes sense to me.”

“But why weld the shuttle in place? I mean, the clamps on the modules ... I can see that. Heck, whatever they did threw us out of light speed too close to the planet, so you’d figure that would be enough to take us out.”

“But it wasn’t,” Mitch said. “Maybe they knew we might survive that and thought this might be a good way to finish us off.”

Billy chewed on his lip and allowed himself to swing gently back and forth on his safety strap, forcing Mitch to look up at the increasingly dark sky above. “Hey, Mitch, you don’t think it was the scrub, do you?”

Mitch’s temper went white hot, but he kept it in check. “No, Billy. *Captain Somar* didn’t do this. Why would he?”

“The Esool are the enemy, right? Maybe this is their way of starting the war again.”

“*Were* the enemy,” Mitch said. “And they were never suicidal, were they? Captain Somar was on board during the whole thing. There was a good chance he would have died with us. Does that make sense to you?”

Billy shrugged, “Who knows how a scrub thinks?”

Mitch couldn’t listen to this any longer. He released the magnetic fields on his grips, attached them to the harness, and hit the cable release on the safety strap. With the buzzing sound of the line playing through metal clamps and pulleys, Mitch lowered himself quickly to the ground, slowing his descent just before contact. Billy came buzzing down after.

Once they were back at camp, Mitch told Billy to go find some chow and set off himself to locate the Captain. He found Somar sitting at one of the folding tables that had been brought out of the equipment bay. Spread out on the table was a survey map, printed from the colony archive. A hand-wound brass lantern was lighting the surface of the table as Somar puzzled over the image, making various marks.

“Captain,” Mitch said as he approached.

Somar looked up. “Mr. Garrison,” he said.

“Looks like we were right. Someone put an MD weld on all of the release clamps. Whoever sabotaged the modules did the same thing to the shuttle.”

Somar nodded. “I was sure that would be the case. And it’s actually a relief.”

Mitch was surprised. “Why?”

“The module releases could be reached from within the colony ship, but the clamps on the shuttle would have to be welded from outside.”

Mitch thought about this. “Someone would have noticed an EVA. So this was probably done before we left the Hub.”

“That is what I believe. And that means there is a very good chance the saboteur is not among us.”

“Good news for once,” Mitch said. “So what are you doing now?”

“Looking at the survey maps. And what I have seen does not make me happy.”

Mitch looked at the maps with the various marks of certain locations. “What is it?” he asked.

“I cannot find us on this map.”

Mitch blinked. “What do you mean?”

“The batteries on the navigational computer you brought me are not fully charged, but I used the hand-cranked generator to power the computer long enough to give me a general location. The orbital platform seems to have survived and is functioning in orbit. However, the satellite data I have retrieved does not match any of these survey maps.”

“Maybe some are missing?” Mitch asked.

“Perhaps. But that still leaves us with only a brief glimpse at the landscape. I shall be forced to wait for the computer’s batteries to fully charge.”

“I can turn the crank for a while. It shouldn’t take more than thirty minutes to get a decent charge. Tomorrow the solar panels should do the rest.”

Somar bowed slightly. “Thank you, Mr. Garrison. That will free me to deal with another matter.”

“What’s that?” Mitch asked.

“One of the White Collar crew members was badly burned while rescuing a woman in the crew chamber. I will tend his wounds.”

“Can’t the medic or the doctor take care of it?” Mitch asked, confused.

Somar didn’t answer immediately. He seemed to be considering. “My people have ... special techniques.”

Mitch nodded and took up position by the computer system, taking the hand crank and turning it to charge the system’s batteries. “I’ll be here, then,” he said. Captain Somar nodded and left what had become the command center of the camp.

Thomas wished he had an actual book to read. He knew that would be a strange idea to the others, who seemed to be content with the flat, metallic rectangles that were now used for reading and watching video. The technology was pretty impressive, he had to admit—a display that only used power when the image changed, allowing it to go months between charges. Remarkable. And necessary in an environment, such as a space-faring vessel, where power consumption had to be closely regulated and the span between lightrail hubs could be several months, possibly years. But as remarkable as it was, it somehow lacked the charm and kinesthetic comfort that a book could provide. It also lacked a smell—that strangely vital component of books that Thomas hadn’t even realized he’d missed until it was gone. Technology had finally won out over real books, even if everything else seemed to be a throwback to brass and bolts.

That was something else Thomas hadn’t expected. In his early research, it had become evident that digital technology would have problems operating under the conditions needed for faster-than-light travel. He had always assumed someone would invent an alternative. And, it seemed, someone had, only a few hundred years earlier—in the form of brass fixtures and pneumatics and cables. It was quite brilliant, actually. Where bits and bytes failed, good, old-fashioned

bolts and gears performed miracles. It was a different world than the one he'd left, for certain. "Times have changed," he said quietly.

"Indeed," came a voice from above him.

Thomas looked up to see the alien captain. Somar. The green-tinged man was smiling down at him, barely visible in the darkness of the night-shrouded forest. "Captain Somar," Thomas said, returning the smile. "What brings you to this neck of the woods?"

The captain blinked.

"It's an Earth saying. Ironic, in this case."

"Ah," Somar said. He knelt down beside Thomas. "I heard about your burns."

Thomas held up his bandaged hands. "Not the most convenient thing that could have happened. Makes me a little useless at the moment."

"You have already served your people well," Somar said with quiet authority.

If only, Thomas thought. "What can I do for you, Captain?"

Somar shook his head. "You can do nothing for me, Thomas. But I wish to do something for you."

"You have a book?"

"A book?"

"Nothing. You were saying?"

Somar looked around, and once he seemed satisfied that no one was paying attention, he reached into the interior of his jumpsuit and pulled out a very sharp, very wicked-looking knife.

"Um," Thomas said.

"Do not be afraid, Thomas. This is not meant for you." With that, he reached out and carefully cut the bandages away from Thomas' hands. When the bare, burned flesh was exposed, Somar once again looked around, and then locked his gaze on Thomas' eyes. "What I do now is considered a sacred act among my people, and you must promise not to reveal it to the others."

Thomas, confused but intrigued, nodded. "I promise."

Somar bowed his head slightly in acceptance and then quickly sliced the palm of his hand with the knife. As green-tinted blood oozed out, he cupped his other hand, catching it in a pool. He then cupped Thomas's burned hands in his own, covering them liberally with his own blood.

Thomas felt it immediately. A cool sensation, tingling its way up his arms to the elbow. His hands felt as if they were covered in something mentholated. In moments, the burns stopped hurting all together, and soon after, the tingling and coolness subsided.

Thomas raised his hands, Somar's blood making them slick and slightly green in the faint light from the camp. Somar reached out and wiped them clean with a cloth he produced from his pocket.

The burns were completely healed.

"What ... "

Somar held up his own hand. The cut, which had bled freely only seconds before, was completely gone. Healed over. "As I have said, this is a sacred act among my people. Our blood is mingled. We are as brothers."

"Blood brothers," Thomas said quietly.

Somar's eyes widened slightly. "Indeed. You have this custom on Earth?"

"Not exactly," he replied, marveling at the smooth and blister-free flesh. "Can ... can you heal any injury this way?"

Somar shook his head. "No. Burns. Slight wounds. In the case of severe wounds, I can help in the healing process, but it is usually not significant enough to make much difference. Among the Esool, many of us would gather to share our blood and heal one severely injured brother."

"So ... it's cumulative?"

"As you say."

"So the more of your blood you use, the more you can heal someone?"

"Yes, in a sense. Which is also why it is so vital to keep this a secret."

"I can see that. If people here found out you could heal them with your blood, I don't think you'd last very long. There are a lot of injured humans here."

"Indeed, and only one Esool."

Thomas saw it immediately. If the others found out about this, Somar would be torn to shreds in the name of healing the others. And all in vain, since there would not be enough of his blood to do much good.

But something wasn't quite right about this. "Why me?" Thomas asked suddenly. "Why heal me like this? There are people worse off than me. Lissa ... Won't this just raise questions in the camp?"

Somar shook his head. "If you agree to my plan, you will not be here to raise any suspicions."

Thomas blinked. "What do you mean?"

Somar rose to his feet. "I have a mission for you, Thomas. One for which you will need your hands whole. And one that could mean the survival of this colony."

Four

The night had been a long one, and no one had really slept much. Things had gone so terribly wrong. Being on this world had been expected. Being here without the power and security that Citadel was meant to provide was just disturbing. When dawn finally came, the camp of humans rose wearily, stumbling and coughing and shuffling to the large, open area where they were being directed.

Mitch and Reilly sat in the front row of the impromptu meeting. Somar was standing next to the White Collar engineer who had rescued Lissa during the crash. The man's hands were wrapped in bandages, but he didn't seem to be in much pain. Mitch looked from him to the alien captain numerous times, trying to figure out what Somar had in mind. And why he and Reilly had been asked to sit in a prominent position.

"I would first like to thank all of you for working so diligently to build shelters and care for the wounded. Their lives continue because of your strength and courage," Somar said. He bowed slightly. The crowd was mostly respectful, though there were a few titters from some of the Blue Collars in the back. Mostly guys like Jack and his crew—the type of people who took pleasure in seeing someone suffer. Mitch had been around guys like that for most of his career and tolerated them only because they were often good at their jobs. *What would happen, he wondered, without their jobs to occupy them?*

"We have survived a great tragedy and ordeal. But our trial is not yet complete. Though we are safe here in the shadow of the Citadel module, there are many hundreds of colonists in stasis somewhere on this world. During our entry into the atmosphere the colony module was badly damaged and was sent careening towards the planet's surface. There is a very good chance that many of the colonists perished in the crash."

There was a murmur in the crowd as this information took hold. Some were mournful at the thought that so many had died. Others seemed to have a "better them than us" attitude. Mitch couldn't say he blamed them, exactly. Relations between colonists and Blue Collars were always strained. There was a definite class distinction as the Earth-born moved out into the galaxy, usually holding the

Blue Collar workers in disdain even as it was their sweat, blood, and hard work that made the entire trip possible.

Still, the colonists were human beings. Every life was valued the same in Mitch's eyes.

"Despite this," Somar continued, "there is equally the chance that many of the colonists survived. The stasis pods are built to withstand a great deal of damage and keep the occupants safe. They are environmentally self-sufficient. It's possible that many of the colonists can be recovered.

"That must become our top priority. Now that we have tended to our own survival, we must send out a rescue party to retrieve and return the colonists to our camp."

There was a general rumbling as many agreed, but some opposed this course of action. "We only have limited resources," one of the Blue Collars complained loudly, and several of his compatriots agreed.

"Yes," Somar replied, picking up that argument. "Which is the second reason that a rescue attempt is absolutely essential to our survival."

The crowd quieted, curious as to how the captain would connect the rescue of the colonists to the survival of the crew. "The Citadel module was meant to be supplemented by the colony module. Upon landing, the engineering crew was to cannibalize the colony module and the stasis pods for materials to build the colony. This is especially vital now. Many of Citadel's systems have been damaged beyond repair. These systems are key to our survival, as well as communication with the Earth colonies. Even the atmospheric shuttle, our only link to the orbital platform, is severely damaged. If we hope to survive or escape this world, we must make repairs. And that means retrieving the colonists."

"Parts," Mitch said suddenly. He turned in his seat and faced the rest of the crowd. "Every colony pod we retrieve means parts to fix vital systems."

"Indeed," Somar continued. "There are also reserves of emergency rations, water, and medical supplies. These are all things we need, and that is why I am commissioning a rescue team to find the Colony Module and to bring the pods back."

Someone in the crowd laughed. Mitch looked back and realized, without much surprise, that it was Jack. "That's ridiculous. What do you expect us to do? Carry the pods here one at a time on our backs?"

Somar held up his hands as the crowd threatened to get rowdy. "What I propose," he said, "is that we focus our first efforts on repairing the atmospheric shuttle. With that done, a team of four crewmembers can go forth and retrieve several pods at once. It will take some time, but the colonists can be rescued."

“But you said we’d need parts from the colony module to repair the shuttle!” a female White Collar crewmember exclaimed. She sounded stressed to Mitch, near panic. He glanced around and saw her expression mirrored on the faces of almost every White Collar in the crowd.

“Indeed,” Somar said. “But Mr. Garrison has assured me that he can repair the shuttle enough to make short jumps. For the time being, this should be sufficient for the rescue effort.”

Mitch sat back and looked at Reilly who had a curious expression on her face. He had told Somar that he *thought* he could partially repair the shuttle. It would be enough to make a few hops, but they would have to land often in order for the engines to cool. The coolant system—crucial for inner-atmosphere flight—was completely gone, and if the engine overheated, they’d lose it all together.

This was a risky move.

But Mitch saw that it was the only shot they had. The shuttle wouldn’t be able to make it out of the atmosphere right now, but with parts from the colony module and the stasis pods, they would be able to put it back in full working condition. If there was going to be any chance for the crew to return to the orbital platform and get back on the lightrail, back to the human colonies, this was it.

“I have selected three people to go on this mission. Mr. Garrison, as an engineer, will be there to keep the shuttle working. Ms. Reilly will pilot the craft. And I would like Mr. Thomas to lead the expedition.”

Everyone turned his or her attention to the White Collar engineer who stood beside the captain. There were mixed reactions from the audience. Thomas was an unknown to nearly everyone. Since Jack and his team had pulled Thomas and Lissa out of the woods, the enigmatic White Collar had stayed to himself. He had gained some respect from the Blue Collars because he had risked his life to save one of their own, but in the end, he was still a White Collar, and to many Blues that meant he couldn’t be trusted. And why should two Blue Collars need a White to baby-sit them on this mission?

Mitch wasn’t sure what Somar had in mind, but if the captain trusted this guy, that was enough for him. His only concern was that Thomas had been injured in the crash—his hands were still heavily bandaged. Though it didn’t seem to bother Thomas much.

Amidst the grumbling of complaints, Somar once again held up his hands. “I am seeking a volunteer to go with them. This will not be an easy mission. There are many risks, and I cannot guarantee your safety. Any volunteer will be honored for his dedication. Who would care to go with them?”

There were smirks and laughter from the crowd. Many of the BCs were making jokes about whether or not a White Collar would deign to get his or her hands dirty with real, physical labor. Others were joking that nothing about this had been “easy” so far, so why should this mission be any different?

Before anyone else could answer, Alan Angelou stepped forward. “I’m going,” he announced.

It wasn’t so much “volunteering” as it was a statement of fact. Mitch didn’t know Alan all that well, but it had always been obvious that he was determined. Once he made a decision, he was committed, whether anyone agreed or not. It had gotten him into trouble here and there, but it otherwise made Alan one of the few crewmen that Mitch thought of as truly dedicated.

Somar looked at the young man and nodded. “Very well. These four. Now by nightfall, I would like to see the repairs to the shuttle underway.”

With that, the crowd was dismissed. Mitch, Reilly, Alan, and the White Collar—Thomas—remained to discuss with Somar the next steps. Mitch had every confidence in the Captain’s choices and was prepared to deal with whatever challenges arose, but based on some of the looks a few Blue Collars gave the alien as they left, he knew that Somar would have his own challenges to face.

He hoped Somar knew what he was getting into.

The work and labor had begun that afternoon, before night had set on their second day on the planet. By noon on their fourth day, the shuttle came to rest, finally, on the alien soil, and it was nearly ready to take a few staggering hops over the planet’s surface.

It hadn’t been easy. The first challenge had been to cut through the MD welds that held the shuttle in place. Next came the challenge of simply lowering the shuttle safely to the ground. Mitch had devised a plan to use a series of pulleys and the surrounding trees to gently lower it down. Once they had it settled, Thomas worked tirelessly with the internal systems, struggling to repair the shuttle’s computer. By his side, constantly, was Alan Angelou. Since pulling Thomas and Lissa out of the woods, the boy had stuck to the White Collar like glue. Mitch had no idea why, but seeing Alan’s connection to Thomas made sense somehow. *No wonder he volunteered for this mission,* Mitch thought.

Actually, having the young Blue Collar on board suited Mitch just fine. Alan might be a little ... reserved? Quiet, certainly. But he was a good worker. He followed orders, and he thought on his feet. And he wasn’t given to goofing off

like most of the other young BC's. He'd be a great asset on this mission. He was also likeable, which was a big plus.

They had pulled all of the fire-damaged seats and equipment from the crew chamber, leaving a large, open space that would be used for cargo, supplementing the existing cargo bay at the back of the shuttle. She might not be pretty or comfortable, but she would have plenty of cargo space.

Working with Reilly, Mitch managed to repair the web of flight controls. It had taken most of a morning to untangle the lines of pneumatics and wires, patch broken and crimped cables, and get the brass and wood fixtures, the handholds and pedals, back into shape. Reilly smiled appreciatively when she took the controls. "If anything, they feel better than they did originally."

"They've needed an overhaul for a long time," Mitch said. "I just never got around to it. Too many things to fix on the main ship."

Reilly nodded, her smile suddenly taking on a slight edge of strain, and Mitch immediately regretted mentioning the ship. Reilly, more than just about anyone, was anxious to get back into space. She was a pilot. She didn't care much for being on the ground.

Mitch felt he should say something comforting but couldn't think of anything appropriate. The situation was what it was, and now wasn't the time to get stressed about it. He nodded to her, she gave a wan smile, and he walked out of the back cargo bay door, feeling just a bit helpless himself.

Half an hour later, he was inspecting some of the exterior repair work with the help of Thomas and, of course, Alan. "Here's where the limitations of faster-than-light travel pay off," Mitch said, smiling.

"How's so?" Thomas asked.

"It's all mechanical. Wireless and computer systems tend to have problems at light speeds, so most of our control systems have to be mechanical."

Thomas laughed.

"What's up?" Mitch asked, smiling.

"Nothing, really. It's just ... well, it wasn't that long ago that the 'pay off' for faster-than-light travel was much more ... grand."

Mitch laughed, too. "Maybe I'm jaded. Most of us have lived in space our whole lives, so it's easy to forget that some people have always been planet-side. Maybe we've lost some of that 'sense of wonder' that the first engineers felt."

Thomas had a strange smile on his face when he said, "I can see that. I bet those early engineers were probably more concerned with keeping the thing from blowing up than they were about whether they could use a computer to control it."

“Hey, they weren’t all John Thomas Paris, you know. Not everyone was a psychotic murderer with an engineering degree.”

For an instant, the smile faded from Thomas’s face, replaced by a strange look Mitch didn’t quite recognize. It was just a flit of expression, only there for that instant, and soon enough the smile returned and Thomas changed the subject. “So how much longer until she’s sky-worthy?” he asked, placing one of his bandaged hands on the lip of an access panel and leaning in to look at the inner mechanics of the shuttle.

“Tomorrow,” Mitch said. “There wasn’t that much damage, actually. She won’t go out of the atmosphere like this, but she’ll fly. The biggest problem is going to be overheating. We’ll have to land pretty often.”

“What happens if she overheats?”

Mitch blinked. It was a strange question from an engineer. “Engine blows,” he shrugged. “If we’re in the air when it happens, then we say hello to the ground pretty fast.”

Thomas grinned, “Been there, done that.”

“Sorry?”

He shook his head. “It’s an old saying. Guess it’s not in use much anymore.”

“‘Been there, done that,’” Mitch repeated, grinning. “I’ll remember that. By the way, how are your hands? They don’t seem to be slowing you down much.”

Thomas paused. “They’re ... fine,” he said, holding them out for inspection. The bandages were dirty and hanging loose in places. “Not as bad as we first thought, I guess. I should probably just shed the bandages at some point.”

“Well, don’t rush it,” Mitch said. “Last thing you want is an infection right now.”

Thomas nodded again.

“Sir,” Alan said. He had pulled himself out of the flight control housing and stepped off of the crate he was using as a stepladder. “The coupling is secure. I also tightened some of the support cables. I didn’t see any evidence of anyone screwing around with them, but you might want to double-check me.”

“Thanks, Alan, but I trust you,” Mitch smiled.

“ok,” Thomas said, standing back to look at the shuttle.

Mitch joined him, appreciating the craftsmanship and lines of the shuttle. She gleamed in the sun, and even the few blemishes that marred her hull only added to her beauty.

“It looks like we leave tomorrow,” Thomas said. “Better make sure your bags are packed.”

“I don’t have any bags,” Alan said.

“It’s ... well, it’s kind of a joke. Sort of.”

“Oh,” Alan said. “Sorry.”

Mitch smiled. These two were quite a pair. Alan—stoic and introverted. Thomas—constantly making jokes and odd references. It was like one of those “buddy comedy” vids. It would be interesting to see what happened with these two out in the wilds of this planet.

Mitch reached up and closed the housing of the maintenance port, snapping it shut and locking the bolts in place. Whatever they came across out there, it couldn’t be any worse than what they’d already faced. *After all, any colony ship crash you can walk away from ...*

Inside the shuttle, with most of the systems on idle, it was getting a little on the warm side. Or maybe it was just tension that made the sweat bead in his armpits as Thomas locked the seat straps into place. It had taken a few days of hard work, but they were finally ready for takeoff.

“Good luck, Shuttle,” came Somar’s voice over the wireless. It was one of the few technologies that worked without the need for repair. It didn’t have the range of the satellite communication network, but the SCN wasn’t online just yet. Which meant there had been no contact with Captain Alonzo and the orbital platform. It also meant they would have no means of communicating with the base once the shuttle was out of radio range of Citadel.

“Thank you, Captain,” Thomas said. He was manning the navigation system. This had been the station that FC Marcos had manned just before his death. It seemed fitting, somehow, that Thomas should take up Marcos’s post. Hopefully the fact that the last occupant of this seat had died wasn’t some sort of an omen.

In front of Thomas was the pilot’s station, where Reilly had the controls in hand. Alan and Mitch were strapped into seats before two non-functional consoles. Everyone was a little tense—painfully aware that the last time they were in this shuttle, they were nearly killed.

“You are cleared for launch, Shuttle,” came the voice of one of the Blue Collars, Billy Sans, from the makeshift control room.

“Roger that,” Reilly said, as she lightly revved the thrusters at her feet. She directed the force downward using the hand controls and pushed slightly up and forward to indicate their desired trajectory.

Thomas was completely fascinated.

This was so different than anything he had seen before. The manual controls weren’t completely unexpected, of course. But they were so much more ... primitive-seeming ... than he had expected. Intuitive, surely, and sleek. Elegant, even. But so far from the touch screens and voice control he had imagined, it was like comparing two different species of animal. These controls had a nostalgic, bygone-era feel. Brass rings and fixtures, leather straps, polished

wooden handles, piping and cabling and bellows—it looked almost like something from an earlier age, as if Jules Verne had consulted on the design.

It was a little like watching a marionette play, only in reverse. Like watching the puppet manipulate the master by its own strings. Minute finger movements and gestures determined what the larger body of the shuttle would do, and the smooth and fluid motions resembled nothing so much as a dance or mime of some kind.

Poetry. Flying one of these machines was less mechanical and more organic than anything he'd ever imagined possible. He looked with profound new respect at Reilly as he grasped how much skill and finesse simply flying this craft entailed.

Once they were in the air, the thrusters didn't have to work quite as hard, and the noise level dropped off dramatically. The repulsion system took over for keeping them aloft and vertical, and the thrusters only kicked in when they needed a change in elevation or direction or required an additional burst of speed. As it was now, they might have been floating serenely on a pond or maybe in space.

Very different than home, Thomas thought, then shook the memory away. Home was an unreachable place, so far away as to not even exist anymore. Best if he stopped thinking in terms of the past and started concentrating on this “new beginning” he'd gambled everything on.

“Ok, we're up,” Reilly said. “Now what?”

“The computer isn't showing any hits on pod transponders yet,” Thomas said. “Can you make a few slow circles? Start moving out in an expanding pattern?”

“Aye, Sir,” Reilly said, and Thomas felt the shuttle vibrate slightly as the atmospheric thrusters kicked in to move them about. He was watching intently for any sign of a signal, but nothing was popping up.

Now that they were in the air, Mitch and Alan had removed their restraints and were gathering around him and the console. “Nothing?” Mitch asked.

Thomas shook his head. “I had expected an immediate hit, actually. I mean, we collided as we came into the atmosphere. I was hoping that meant we were on a similar trajectory.”

Mitch leaned in and pointed to one corner of the screen. “What's that?” he asked.

“This image is taken from the data we collected just before the crash. It's not live. That may be some debris.”

Mitch paused, thinking. “So there might be an image of the colony module on this thing?”

Thomas blinked. “Yeah ... and if we have a shot of it ... ”

“We might be able to figure its trajectory,” Mitch smiled.

Thomas grinned as he started moving through the map images. “Wish I’d thought of that,” he said. “We could have plotted a course before going up.”

“Maybe,” Mitch said. “As it is, we’re going to have to land soon to keep from overheating.”

“You’re kidding!” Reilly shouted from in front of them. “We just got up here!”

“Yeah, we did,” Mitch said. “And if we don’t want to have a little *déjà vu* crash for old time’s sake, we’ll have to put down pretty often and let the engines cool.”

Alan spoke up, “The heat-sink coils we rigged will keep the engines cool enough to run for ten minutes at a time.”

“There you have it,” Mitch said. “Ten minutes, Reilly.”

Reilly grumbled a little but kept the shuttle moving in its slow, coiled pattern. “Ten minutes,” she repeated.

“Let’s make the best of them,” Thomas said, pointing at a dark, cylindrical object taking up a small portion of the screen. “There’s the colony module. We can get coordinates from that.”

Mitch looked closer. “What the hell is that?” he asked, pointing at several specks that dotted the screen.

Thomas peered closer at what he had assumed was debris or even dust on the lens. He felt his stomach clench. “Pods,” he said quietly. “This shot must have been after the collision. The module breached.” He looked up at Mitch, who looked as sick as Thomas felt. “Those are stasis pods falling to the ground.”

Five

Somar couldn't afford to keep to himself. This presented him with a great deal of discomfort, but it was unavoidable. His species was naturally solitary most of the time. Large social engagements were rare, and they were certainly less flamboyant and chaotic than what he'd seen of human gatherings. Officers among his people were even more reclusive, keeping social interaction down when among one's subordinates. It was a means of maintaining propriety and preserving authority.

But above all, Somar himself was a solitary person. Even among his own people, he preferred to remain by himself. He had excellent relationships with his immediate subordinates and his superiors, but he rarely attended celebrations or parties, and even state functions were something he would avoid if he could.

It had been a point of contention with some of his superiors. Norchek, the admiral who had promoted Somar to the rank of Captain, had been particularly concerned about the man's apparent introversion. In fact, it was the reason he had ordered Somar to take part in the Human-Esool Exchange Program.

"It will be good for you to be among the humans," Norchek said. "The ability to interact with others is what gives an officer strong leadership skills. You are a good leader, Somar. But you could be a great one."

"I understand," Somar said. Though in fact, he didn't understand at all. He had led men for some time now—many decades in fact. In the conflict with the humans, he had led troops of men in battle. He had led a crew of men into intricate combat in space. He had led men since he was just a cadet. How would living among the humans make him a better leader than he already was?

But it was not his place to question the orders or wisdom of his superiors. Norchek had proven himself to be a brilliant leader and a true friend. Whatever reasons he might have for wanting Somar to be involved in this experiment, they would be good ones. For both Somar and the Esool.

At present, however, it wasn't his own people that concerned him. It was the humans. For the first time since that conversation with Norchek, back on the Esool home world, Somar saw that he would have to form relationships, not to be a better leader but to simply survive and to keep these people alive as well.

It was proving very difficult.

“Why should we listen to the scrub?” he heard one of the Blue Collars say. It wasn’t meant for his ears, of course. Or maybe it was. After all, there were few places that could be considered private, here in the shadow of Citadel. And the man had spoken quite loudly. “He’s not an official officer of the Earth Colony Fleet. He’s not even human!”

“He has an honorary rank,” one of the Blue Collars said in Somar’s defense.

“Honorary! I’m an honorary member of Commander Carrot’s Cartoon Cavalry, but does that make me an animated vegetable?”

Several crewmembers laughed. “Tell ‘em, Jack! Maybe the scrub knows Commander Carrot personally!”

“Come on, this is insane,” a woman said. From Somar’s vantage point, it looked like one of the White Collar crew. One of the veterinarians, he thought.

“What do you care, he’s not a puppy,” spat another White Collar worker. “He’s an alien. And I can’t help but notice that we crashed and nearly died on an alien world. Didn’t the Esool want this one for themselves?”

“They want all of them!” someone shouted.

“They agreed to let Earth put a colony here. It was part of the treaty.”

“Some treaty,” the first Blue Collar, Jack, said derisively. “They convince us to split up the good worlds, and then they send one of their agents to sabotage us.”

“We don’t know that,” the woman said sternly.

“I know what I know. I know that I’m stuck here, planet-side, instead of back on my ship heading for my next assignment. I know that after the hundreds of lightrail drops I’ve been on, this is the first one that’s ever gone wrong. I know that I nearly died. And I know that one of those green-blooded bastards was right there when it all went bad!”

There were plenty of grumbles of agreement in the crowd.

This was not a good situation. The humans were afraid and looking for someone to blame. They were looking for an enemy at a time when they should concentrate on bonding and working together. Somar knew that the situation was becoming more and more volatile and would require some sort of action to head off disaster. He would have to decide what to do, and quickly.

Whether they realized it or not, these people needed a leader, and he was best qualified for that position. Unlike the humans present, he had actual command experience. And he was obviously far less volatile. Several times since the crash, he had been forced to intervene and bring peace between the Blue Collar and the White Collar crews. It seemed to be a constant battle. They just could not understand that they were all in this together, a group of humans in a bad

situation on an alien world. They were determined, it seemed, to stick to their prejudices and class distinctions.

These people needed a cool head in charge. They needed Somar, whether they realized it or not. It was time to take action.

Somar stepped out from where he'd been seated. The reaction was immediate as many of the humans realized for the first time that he'd heard everything. Those who assumed he had been listening from the start were suppressing grins or open expressions of hostility. They were daring him to attack them. They were daring him to defend himself.

Somar moved deeper into the crowd, past Jack and his gathering group of malcontents. To the humans, he must have appeared to be oblivious to them. He continued to step ahead as if no one were before him. And if anyone refused to move from his way, he would step around them and then immediately step back to his path. His steps were deliberate, focused, and intent. Many of the humans watching seemed enthralled by what they surely assumed was some sort of strange, but purposeful, alien behavior.

Somar, however, was making this up as he went along. The only thing he knew for sure was his destination, and that he wanted all eyes to follow him.

Now he arrived at the base of the module, which rose above him and broke through the tree line into the blue sky. The sun had moved past the mid-day point and was now glinting from some of the more polished surfaces of the module. As the humans looked his way, Somar made sure that he was square in the midst of the near-blinding reflections. He stepped up onto one of the equipment crates that had been brought out from the cargo bay, and as all eyes locked on him, some shaded by palms or caps, others narrowed in squints, he spoke.

"This is Citadel." His voice was strong but quiet. He had not shouted, as many had expected him to do. He had not used a tone of arrogance or authority. He had simply made a statement of fact.

The response of the humans was silence. Mostly. There were some titters from further in the crowd. From his vantage point, he could see clearly the faces of everyone present. There were some who were scraped and bruised. All were dirty. Many were belligerent.

After a pause he said again, louder, "This ... is Citadel!"

He raised his arms and turned towards the gleaming tower. Moments before it had merely been wreckage, a standing symbol of chaos, a routine landing gone horribly wrong on a planet impossibly far from home. Somar, though, was turning it into a symbol for something else.

He turned back to the crowd. "We stand now in the reflection of light. And in this light, we are all the same. White Collars, Blue Collars ... *scrubs*."

He paused to allow them to laugh if they felt like it. Few did.

“This is Citadel,” he said again, looking deeper into the faces of the humans. “And just like its namesake, it is a fortress, a stronghold. It is hope.”

The crowd had become completely silent now.

“When we crashed on this world, we were individuals, each with our own lives and agendas. Each with our own loves and our own prejudices.” He moved his gaze over the crowd as he spoke, pausing slightly at intervals, giving the illusion that he was talking directly to each person. “Now we are much more,” he said.

“We are not a crew. We are not an army. We are not a town or a colony or a civilization.” He paused for a long moment, and just as the humans were becoming uncomfortable with the silence and the unspoken, inevitable question of who—if none of these things—they now were, Somar filled in the answer. “We are family. And a family divided is one that will fall.”

He looked around at the faces of the humans as they covered their eyes, straining to see him amidst the reflected glare. “If we do not band together now, if we do not bond now, we will die. We will be as a tree whose roots are too far from the water it needs to survive. We will become dry and brittle, and we will break. We cannot afford to stand alone. We cannot afford to look away or look inward. We cannot even afford to look to small clusters of friends. Isolation here, now, means death to all of us. We stand now, not in the shadows of isolation, but in the light of strength, of community ... of family. This,” he said indicating the wrecked vessel behind him, “is not Citadel.” He turned back to the crowd and held his arms out wide, including everyone present in the virtual embrace. “This is Citadel. This. Is. Citadel.”

Suddenly someone in the crowd shouted and clapped. Then others joined. It was small, but it was there.

“This is Citadel!” he shouted.

More shouts, more applause.

“Citadel!” someone shouted from within the crowd.

“Citadel! Citadel!” someone began chanting.

“Citadel!” others joined in. And soon the chant took hold, rolling like a wave over the crowd, and Somar raised his voice to join it. And as he stepped down from the crate and into the crowd, he saw even those who had been belligerent and angry were suddenly galvanized, chanting and cheering and striking the air with their fists.

As Somar moved through the crowd and back toward the command center they had established, he felt that maybe, just maybe, he had accomplished

something here. For the first time, he felt less like an outsider, the “alien captain,” and more like a member of this community—of this family.

As he passed Jack, his detractor, the man met his eyes with an angry stare. He said nothing, but continued to watch Somar even after he’d passed.

No family, Somar thought, is perfect.

The shuttle settled to the ground in a clearing about three miles east of where the first pod had crash-landed. The temporary heat sink that Mitch and Alan had rigged had done a good job in keeping the engine’s core temperature down for a time, but they were at the very limits now. It would be some time before the engines cooled enough to allow them to lift off again.

The terrain in this region was rocky and uneven, and looked to be worse to the west. It wasn’t going to be easy to retrieve the pod.

Mitch, Alan, and Thomas had pulled on packs with food, water, and climbing gear. “Ever do any rock climbing?” Thomas asked.

“Not really,” Mitch said. “Hard?”

Thomas shrugged. “Never tried it. I was a lab rat.”

“Gear head, here,” Mitch grinned.

“It’s not easy,” Alan said. Mitch and Thomas looked at him as if they’d just remembered he was there, which was pretty close to the truth. “Especially if you’re used to artificial gravity.”

“Great,” Mitch said. “I can hardly wait to discover the joys of the real thing.”

Reilly leaned in from the doorway leading back to the crew chamber. “You sure I shouldn’t be going with you? Wouldn’t it be easier if four people carried this thing?”

“Sure,” Thomas said. “But in case something goes wrong, you’ll have to fly the shuttle back to Citadel.”

“Besides,” Mitch said, “once the shuttle cools down, you might be able to fly in and help us get the pod out.”

“Why not just wait until the engines cool, and we can fly there? Why go for a hike when you don’t have to?” Reilly asked.

“The shuttle won’t be cool enough to launch for hours,” Thomas said. “In that time, we might be able get to the pod and maybe even be back here. If the images from our entry are any indication, there are a lot of these things scattered all over. Some of them may be damaged. Time could be running short for some of these people.”

Reilly nodded, obviously not thrilled about being left behind.

Mitch, seeing the faintly frightened expression on Reilly’s face, pulled her aside. “Hey, we’ll back as soon as possible. Just track us on the nav computer. We all have beacons. You’ll have to be our eyes and ears as we get closer.”

“I know. I can handle it. I just ... well, I’m not really used to being alone.”

Mitch laughed. “What, you miss me already?”

She smiled and punched his shoulder, hard. “Just don’t get yourself killed, Mitch. And take care of Alan.”

“What about Thomas?”

She looked at the White Collar engineer, “Something tells me he can take care of himself. But yeah, look out for him, too.” She paused then, looking at him, as if considering something. Then rushed forward and hugged him tightly. Before Mitch could say anything, she turned and hurried back to the pilot controls.

“Well,” Thomas said from behind him, “we’d better get going.”

Mitch turned, his eyes wide with surprise. He blinked, nodded, and hit the release for the cargo hatch.

Since the shuttle wasn’t pressurized, there was barely a noise as the large cargo door settled down to the ground—just the sound of the hydraulics and the low hum of the motor, followed by the crunching of gravel as the door settled in. The three men stepped down the ramp and were making their way over the rocky terrain in no time.

Mitch reflected on the spontaneous hug and took a quick glance back at the shuttle. He grabbed the wireless from the shoulder strap on his pack. “Shuttle this is Search Team,” he said.

“Go ahead Search.”

“Just ... checking the comms,” Mitch said.

“Everything’s clear. Don’t forget to wind them.”

“Roger, out.”

He looked at the other two men who were obviously suppressing smirks. “I had to test the comms,” he said.

“Of course,” Thomas said.

“Charge your batteries,” Mitch grumbled, and unfolded the hand crank from the back of the wireless, turning it as they walked. When the charge meter hit green, he folded the handle back into the radio and clipped it back to his pack strap. The others did the same, grinning the whole time.

The day was a little warm, and after walking for half an hour, they stopped and opened their jumpsuits, letting the top portion fold down and hang around their waists. Mitch took a sip of water from his canteen. “This may take longer than we expected,” he said.

Thomas was studying a photo print of the map they'd used to get here. "The terrain's pretty rough. It's going to slow us down quite a bit. But I don't think it will be much longer. I figure we're about halfway there."

Mitch nodded. They moved on, trudging through snagging brush and rocky terrain.

"This reminds me of when I used to go camping with my grandfather," Thomas huffed as they made their way through thick brambles and rock-strewn patches.

"Yeah? What planet did you grow up on?"

Thomas seemed to hesitate. "I was Earth-born."

"Earth?" Mitch said. "I didn't think there were many unoccupied areas left on Earth."

Again Thomas hesitated, as if composing an answer. Mitch took note of the brief hesitation, wondering what it might mean. "There are a few patches here and there, I guess," Thomas said. He obviously wanted to let the subject drop. Mitch wondered what he was hiding, but decided not to pry. For now.

"Your hands seem to be ok," he said, changing the subject.

Again there was hesitation.

"Yeah, well, they're not hurting anymore. I think they weren't as bad off as everyone thought." As if to demonstrate, Thomas held up his hands and slowly flexed them.

Mitch nodded, then turned his attention back to the rough terrain. If Thomas had secrets he felt the need to keep, then that was his business, wasn't it? Mitch personally had no real secrets. Nothing anyone would be interested in learning, anyway. Growing up starships, where privacy was limited, secrets that stayed kept were rare. Still, Mitch understood that there might be some bits of a man's past that he would want to keep quiet. So be it.

Alan had moved a bit ahead and suddenly stopped. "Wreckage," he called back to them. They hurried forward to the slight rise where he stood in order to get a better look.

Sure enough there were bits of wreckage spread out on the landscape in front of them. Large sections of the colony module lay strewn in a great swath of destruction. The distance was deceptive, as they looked as if they were close by. In reality the huge chunks of metal were miles away.

The three men were silent for a time. Finally, after looking at the horizon of twisted metal for a few minutes, Thomas asked, "Can any of that be salvaged? Used to repair Citadel?"

"Maybe," Mitch said. "But it's going to take a larger expedition than what we're on at the moment. I'd say we'd need to bring a large crew back here. And

we'll need the shuttle to be in better working condition.”

“So we need parts to fix the shuttle, so we can go get the parts we need to fix the shuttle,” Thomas smiled.

“Irony sucks,” Mitch nodded.

It was Alan who came up with a plan. “Once we have a few of the pods rescued, we could land the shuttle near where the control deck crashed,” he pointed to one of the nodules of the craft that jutted out over the terrain ahead. “That will have the majority of what we'll need to get the communications system up and running again.”

Again Mitch nodded. “And if we can spare it, we should try to make an attempt to salvage a couple of the propulsion and coolant systems from the atmospheric engines.”

“Those are pretty far apart,” Thomas said. “It might add a couple of days to our trip. We'll be outside of our window.”

“What if we went for the engine parts first?” Alan asked.

The other two exchanged glances. “You mean, before we rescue the pods?” Thomas asked.

“If we have fully functional engines, we can make better time on getting the pods.”

“Damn,” Thomas said. “Why didn't we think of that?”

Mitch was shaking his head. “That's not the mission. Captain Somar ordered us to make the pods a priority.”

“He's right,” Thomas said. “And those people may be dying as we speak, if the pods were damaged. Time is a factor here.”

“The pods would still be the priority,” Alan said. “With working engines, we can get to more pods in a shorter time. It might make a difference in how many we can save.” He was intense but not insistent. It actually surprised Mitch that the young man was so mature. He believed that his plan was the right way to go, but he wasn't insisting that his idea be followed. He was willing to give his opinion and then let the people in charge make their decisions.

Mitch looked at Thomas, who was clearly trying to determine the best course of action. “You're leading this mission,” Mitch said. “It's your decision.”

“What do you think, Mitch? What's your take?”

Mitch shrugged. “He has a point. If we got the engines back online and working properly, we could get to more pods in less time. It's a gamble, though. Even if we find the parts in decent condition, it will take some time to rebuild the engines.”

“How much time?”

“Maybe a day,” Mitch answered.

Thomas thought for a moment. “If we are able to make better time to the other pods, though, that day won’t cost us much. We’ll actually be able to come back ahead of schedule and go out for the next run.”

“That seems to be it,” Mitch said.

Thomas immediately came to a conclusion. “ok. We know there’s at least one pod between us and the wreckage. We’ll continue on and make the first recovery. We’ll also pick out and clear a landing zone for Reilly, and when she’s ready she can make a hop close by so we can load up and head for the wreckage.”

That was as good a plan as any. Alan seemed to nod his approval as well. Mitch found himself feeling a deep respect for both men. Alan was proving to be resourceful and intelligent, and Thomas, secrets or no, had a good head for this kind of thing.

He pulled his radio and called to Reilly to let her know about the new plan.

Somar was perplexed by what he was seeing. After studying the survey maps and the satellite images for the past couple of days, he could come to only one conclusion.

They were not where they were supposed to be.

At first, he had accepted Mitch Garrison’s suggestion that some of the survey maps might be missing. But after carefully searching through every map he’d found, he was satisfied that the entirety of the planet was laid out before him. Now that the computers were powered up and working, he confirmed that there was no data loss, and the digital maps matched the paper prints precisely. The satellite telemetry, which was spotty but functional, provided him with a landscape that diverged wildly from the survey maps.

These surveys had been made by satellites that had been thrust into orbit by an open lightrail beam only a year earlier. As the network of lightrail hubs expanded further into the galaxy, the number of newly discovered planets increased exponentially. Satellites were sent to potential colony worlds with precision and a great deal of planning, and only to the worlds that hit specific markers for supporting life.

The satellites were, in effect, small lightrail hubs. Digital technology could not function at light speed, and no known signal could traverse the wide expanse of space fast enough to be useful to anyone receiving it. So once an exploratory satellite was within orbit it could use the lightrail to fire memory modules back to a distant hub. There the data would be inspected and scrutinized by engineers and scientists. It was a complex but precise process, all in the name of finding new worlds to colonize. And it worked extremely well.

Somar often marveled at the ingenuity of humans. His people had a system of exploring the stars that was very similar but incurred a greater cost. They would load their starships with what they needed, say goodbye to their loved ones, and accelerate to light speed using their own version of the lightrail—a near-solid beam of light that propelled their vessel to faster-than-light speeds. However, unlike the lightrail system developed by the humans, with its variable beam strength, the Esool beams remained at constant power levels. An Esool vessel would be propelled onward until the beam weakened, and they would emerge ... somewhere.

The Esool had long ago managed to calculate the odds of a planet being able to support life, based on its placement in the solar system, the “wobble” of its orbit, and thousands of other tiny, minute metrics. It was a complex process that was not without its failures, but it had led to the colonization of many worlds. And with their own network of “hubs”—in their case not space stations but relays that held precise positions in space to form a web of lightrails—the Esool had managed to mirror the human’s development and expansion in their own corner of the galaxy. The only advantage the Esool system had was the greater range of their lightrail beams. They could explore further, if not faster.

Plus, the longevity of the Esool, with lifespans spanning centuries, made it less risky for them to spread out and explore. And they did so, in great swathes, settling roots into the soil of any rare, habitable world they could find, exploring the universe, seeing all of its wonders open before them as buds of leaves open to the light of the sun.

It was inevitable that the Esool and the humans would one day collide in a dispute over a world. Habitable worlds were, after all, quite difficult to find, and even more difficult to reach. Suddenly discovering another race of beings out there, in competition for a world you had sacrificed so much to find, coupled with barriers to communication and cultural misunderstandings—war was inevitable.

And it was a bloody, brutal war. The humans were passionate and easy to rise to the call of hatred and violence. The Esool, on the other hand, met human fire with an icy efficiency. Each was particularly skilled at killing the other, and both were determined that they would dominate. The fighting raged for decades.

All wars, however, must come to an end. The brutal battles between human and Esool were taking their toll on both sides. Colony worlds were decimated, made uninhabitable. Vast, fragile threads of the lightrail web were torn and shredded. The humans had the advantage of flexibility in combat, but the Esool outmatched them in patience and long-tail planning. Gradually it became evident that if the war continued, both sides would lose. Treaties were drafted. Plans to

share resources were made. And the first tentative steps toward peace and cooperation were taken.

The war was now over. Humanity and the Esool had become ... not friends. Allies? Partners? Somar thought of them as fellow explorers on a trek among the stars, who finally, after years of fighting and dying, had agreed to disagree, and to move on in tandem with each other. Now, when one of the human satellites found a world worth visiting, they shared that knowledge with the Esool. And both races worked together to improve the range and stability of the lightrail, combining the Human's variable-strength technology with the Esool's power distribution systems, and refining the ability to identify habitable worlds with complex metrics and ingenious systems.

Together the two races were refining and perfecting star travel and using it to find more habitable worlds. Then both races would decide, together, who should dig their roots into newly discovered soil.

With the Human-Esool Exchange Program, though, for the first time Esool and Humans had decided that they might be able to share one of these worlds—or at the very least share the exploration of it. *We'll work up to cohabitating later*, they felt. *One day, we'll both set foot on a world and call it home*. But this was a good start. The satellites went forth to find new worlds, and together the humans and the Esool would expand outward into the Universe.

It was a good system, and it was proven. It *worked*. Hundreds of planets were discovered by these satellites, and the data was always reliable. So why, now, did Somar have before him two very different maps? Why did he now have a screen filled with contradictions?

How had they landed on the wrong world?

It seemed impossible. The odds of a miscalculation by the computers, both Esool and Human, were astronomical by themselves, but what of the odds that this miscalculation might inadvertently lead them to a different *habitable* world? Was it possible that this planet and their target were, perhaps, in the same solar system? That was almost as unlikely as finding a habitable planet at random.

The simplest explanation—the “Occam's Razor” as the humans called it—must be that someone planned Citadel's route to this world. Was it part of the sabotage?

This seemed unlikely as well. Why would a saboteur plot a course for a world where the crew might survive?

If they were lost, they could still conceivably reconnect to the lightrail network. The strength of the beams weakened with distance, but any connection was enough to get the ship moving. Citadel was equipped with three lightrail relays, intended for dropping along particularly lengthy routes. These would be

enough to strengthen and maintain the lightrail beam and get the vessel back to civilization.

Had the saboteur made a mistake? Surely he hadn't intended for Citadel to reach this world safely. Were they meant to crash into it?

Again, the odds were impossibly high against it. First, it would mean that the saboteur knew of the world's existence. Second, with all of the uninhabitable, inhospitable worlds in the galaxy, why would he choose one where potential survivors could live? For that matter, why not choose to deposit the ship into a star? Somar thought this would have been a much more likely plan, if the goal was to destroy the colony.

There were many questions, and Somar did not believe he had enough information to form any answers. The only things he knew for sure were that someone had intentionally sabotaged Citadel and that this, the world they now stood upon, was not the planet that had been their original destination.

So the real question was, where were they?

"Captain Somar?" a voice came from behind.

Somar turned to see crewman William Sans. "Billy," as his crewmates called him. "Yes, Mr. Sans?"

"The satellite link is working ... sort of."

"Explain, Mr. Sans."

Billy looked uncomfortable, or maybe he was annoyed. Somar wasn't yet able to read the emotions of humans very well. They wore every emotion, all at once, on their face and skin. It was like being deluged with information all the time. But clearly the crewman was struggling with something.

"The satellite link works, but we're not getting any two-way comms from the orbital platform. And the orbital satellite ... the original scout probe ... it seems to be malfunctioning. It's like it isn't there."

Somar nodded. He knew that the probe satellite was actually not there, because they were on the wrong world. But he felt it best to keep that knowledge to himself for now.

"Maybe it was damaged when we entered atmo," Billy said. He seemed to be uncomfortable with Somar's silence, and was filling it with any idea that popped into his head.

Somar had seen this before. His own people spoke only when there was need, but the Humans seemed to feel compelled to fill every silence with words. To put the young human at ease, Somar said, "You have done well, Mr. Sans. Has there been any sign of communication from the orbital platform?"

Billy relaxed slightly and nodded. "We're getting a feed from the orbital platform but no response to our transmissions. I've checked the transmitter, and

it's working. The platform's communication array may have been damaged. But so far, there hasn't been any word from Captain Alonzo or anyone else on the platform."

Somar gave a brief nod, "At least, we are assured the platform is there. That means there is a good chance they all survived and are simply dealing with their own difficulties at the moment. Very well, Mr. Sans. I expect you'll continue to monitor the satellite communications?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. And what about contact with the recovery team? Now that satellite comms are working, have we attempted to reach them?"

Billy hesitated. "Well ... no. I ... I didn't think to. I was trying to reach Captain Alonzo."

"Do you not agree that making contact with the rescue team might be a priority, Mr. Sans?"

Billy's face went through a series of minute, tiny contortions. Somar might not be able to read the expressions of the humans with any certainty, but he was sure that this young man was angry. When he spoke, his voice was tight. "Yes, sir. I believe that is a priority, sir."

Somar paused for a moment. The young man was angry, no doubt, but he seemed willing to adhere even more closely to formal protocols of address than usual. He was respectful. Still, it seemed as if he were using that formality as a form of attack. Somar fought the urge to sigh. He would never understand humans. "Very well, Mr. Sans. I trust you'll make contact."

The young man only nodded and turned to leave without a word.

Somar reflected on the conversation. He was unsure what he might have said or done that had offended the young man. Perhaps Sans, like many of the others, simply resented having an alien in charge. Or perhaps he resented being on this world in the first place. Billy Sans was a Blue Collar, one of the crew that stayed perpetually in space. The idea of being rooted on a planet might be causing a great deal of frustration and distress among the Blue Collar crew. Somar felt he should address this, but for the life of him he had no idea what he should say or do. His own people yearned for the soil beneath their feet, for the moisture in the air, for the sun on their skin. Being on a planet's surface was always preferable to being in space. But he understood that to some of the humans, it was the *change* that they resented. Humans were addicted to a familiar routine, it seemed. They craved it, longed for it. When it was gone, in whatever form it had taken—space flight, a colony, a house, family and friends—it was taken almost as an act of war. The reaction was similar, anyway.

“If I cannot have what makes me whole, then I will destroy what makes me weak,” Somar said to himself. It was a quote from the *Book of Nolad*, the great Esool philosopher. It was a warning to the reader that living beings—Esool, human, or other—will seek strength and power as a means of survival. To the humans, Somar knew, strength and power could be as simple as “familiarity” and “stability.” Having a home they recognized and felt comfortable and safe in gave them the power they needed to survive. Take that away, and they would resort to the only means left to them—war.

War requires an enemy. The greatest danger here, on this unknown alien world among the crashed ruins of the colony ship, was that the only enemies present were the humans themselves. And, oh yes, the strange, alien Captain that many already resented because he was somehow put in charge of their fates. He was hardly anything to them, however, if they decided to strike. He was one man, and he would fall easily enough. It was the division in the crews that would supply the real war. It was Blue Collar against White Collar in the minds of many of the survivors.

So what could be done about it? How could this war be averted? Somar knew of only two possibilities.

One was for Captain Alonzo to contact them, instruct them, and eventually rescue them. He could take the Blue Collar workers back to their place of comfort and power, the ship whose thin walls were the only protection against a death by decompression in space.

The second way, however, was much more under Captain Somar’s control—the rescue of the sleeping colonists.

If the colonists were returned safely, their sympathies would be much more in line with the White Collar crew. This would mean a sudden shift in the balance, with one side taking dominance. It was a sad truth, but Somar knew all too well that peace was often a function of domination by one side. At present, the number of White Collars and Blue Collars was fairly equal, and tensions, resentments, and outrages were already rising.

It was a like a fire. The flames could start small, but they would no doubt rage, soon enough. Just as one would control a large fire by using several “break fires,” Somar could keep this fire in check if he could bring those colonists home.

At least, that was what he was counting on.

If only he could contact Captain Alonzo. The Blue Collars trusted him, and the White Collars respected him. All of the humans would see him and the orbital platform as a symbol of authority and hope. They would feel that rescue was imminent.

But what if it wasn't? What if they were truly stranded here on this world? They had one working shuttlecraft, which at present could not even make it out of the atmosphere much less initiate a lightrail beam. If, by some chance, the orbital platform was damaged beyond repair, along with the starship module that Captain Alonzo commanded, then Somar and the humans would find themselves in what would surely be an untenable situation. And such feelings of weakness and helplessness were exactly what the great philosopher Nolad had warned against.

Somar felt the need to stand in the sun and stare into the sky. It was an old tradition of his people, whenever they sought comfort and spiritual guidance. If ever these were needed, it was now.

There was a crackle from the comms. "Shuttle, this is base camp."

Reilly had been going over the launch checklist, and she fumbled with the transmitter controls.

"Base camp, this is Shuttle! I read you. Is that you, Billy?"

"Yeah, Reilly. I'm glad we could reach you! The alien asked me to contact you guys."

The alien? "Can I talk with *Captain Somar*," Reilly said, placing a bit of emphasis on the Captain's name. She couldn't understand why there was so much hatred towards him. The war was over, wasn't it? This idea that he might have had something to do with the crash was stupid. It was pure racism, and she wasn't going to be a part of it.

"I'll get him."

The comms went silent, and Reilly found herself regretting the lost connection. She hadn't realized it before, but being alone in the shuttle while the others were out hunting for the colonists was starting to get to her. She had never really been alone for so long in her life, and it was starting to wig her out a little.

"Shuttle, this is Captain Somar. I am pleased that we could make contact."

The Captain was so formal it made Reilly smile. She liked him. He was a true leader, she felt. Maybe a bit starched, but he seemed friendly enough. "Captain, it's good to hear your voice. Have you heard from Captain Alonzo?"

"No, I'm afraid not. How is your mission proceeding?"

"Slowly. I've been idle for hours, Sir. The boys all took off to get to one of the pods, and I've been waiting for the engines to cool. But it looks like there might be a slight change in plans."

She explained to Somar about the crash site, as well as the plan to repair the shuttle and, hopefully, to be able to get to the colonist stasis pods more quickly.

"It is a good plan, but not without risks," Somar said when she had finished. "If they are unable to repair the shuttle then the whole endeavor will cost us

time.”

“Yes, sir,” Reilly said. “But if they can get her fixed then we’ll more than make up for it. That might make it worth the gamble.”

There was silence on the other end, and Reilly was afraid for a moment that the connection might have been lost. “Very well,” came Somar’s reply, finally. “Tell them they have my full approval. They are retrieving one of the pods first?”

“Yes, sir. It’s between us and the wreckage. And for all we know, there may be a lot of pods near the crash site, too.”

“Agreed. Then I will leave you to your work. Please give Mistery Thomas, Garrison, and Angelou my compliments.”

And the connection ended.

Reilly felt as if she’d suddenly gone deaf and was reeling from the loss. She hadn’t realized how much she missed the constant communication she’d had onboard Captain Alonzo’s starship. Nearly her entire life she had been a Blue Collar, living primarily in space and only setting foot on ground when she piloted passengers and cargo to and from an orbital platform. This little stint after the crash represented the longest in-atmosphere experience she’d ever had, and she was pretty sure she hated it.

As soon as they could repair the shuttle and get these colonists back to Citadel, she was more than ready to get back into space. Captain Alonzo would have her and the other Blue Collars back to something resembling normal in no time.

She hoped.

Six

Thomas huffed as they crowned yet another ridge. The terrain here was rocky and difficult, and the heat from the sun was making him feel dehydrated and exhausted. He took a sip from his canteen and looked over the landscape before them with a wary and weary expression.

If the pod was here, it was hidden damn well.

“It should be close,” Mitch said, dropping to one knee and opening up his own canteen. “I’m tempted to pour this over me instead of drinking it.”

“Don’t,” Alan said from beside them. He, too, was sweating and slightly out of breath, but it didn’t seem to impact him nearly as much. Thomas envied him. “You need to drink a lot of water, or you’ll become dehydrated.”

Mitch smiled at him. “Thanks,” he said.

“I think he was kidding,” Thomas told the boy.

Alan only nodded and stepped ahead by a few paces.

Thomas couldn’t help but laugh lightly to himself. Alan was something of a mystery. Everywhere Thomas went Alan seemed to be on his heels. But he didn’t mind. He liked the boy. Well, hardly a boy. A young man, though that term made Thomas feel every bit as old as his birth date would have implied. At any rate, Alan reminded Thomas of people he’d known long ago—scientists who had senses of humor, but hadn’t quite figured out when or where to use them. Maybe that’s why he felt so familiar.

“He respects you,” Mitch said, catching Thomas in a moment of reflection.

“No accounting for taste,” Thomas smiled.

“I don’t know about that. I’ve heard about what you did. You risked your life to go back for Lissa. That was brave.”

Thomas shrugged. “The least I could do after ... ” he stopped himself.

Mitch looked at him curiously, took a swig from his canteen, and asked, “After what?”

What could he say? After my crimes? After everything that happened in my name? “After nothing,” he said with a shrug. “I think I have a bit of survivor’s guilt.”

“Survivor’s guilt? Over what? Most of the crew survived the crash. You can’t blame yourself for the ones who died. It’s not like you were the one who

sabotaged the ship. Wait ... you're *not* the one, right?" Mitch teased.

Thomas smiled lightly, "No, I'm not the saboteur. But when we were hitting the atmosphere, I was the one Marcos ordered to release the clamps so Citadel could fall free from the orbital platform. I know that they wouldn't have worked anyway, that someone had welded them together. But still ... Marcos sacrificed his life to cut those lines. I think part of me still thinks it might have been my fault."

Mitch paused, nodded in contemplation, and then said, "That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard."

There was silence for a moment, and then the two men burst out laughing.

Mitch stood and clapped Thomas on the shoulder. "You had nothing to do with any of this. You're a victim, just like the rest of us. And Alan respects you because you risked your life to save one our own. Hell, Captain Somar must respect you, too. He put you in charge of this mission, didn't he?"

"This despite me being about as useful as a penguin in the desert."

Mitch laughed. "Hey, if nothing else you can always eat the penguin."

"Too true," Thomas said. "So if we run out of food, you have my permission to eat me."

"Noted," Mitch said, smiling.

Both men joined Alan where he was surveying the area before them. They were prepared to carry on to the pod when the radio crackled. "Rescue this is Shuttle. I've just had a conversation with Captain Somar. Things are looking up."

The first pod lay at the bottom of a ravine. Thomas looked down the vertiginous slope and backed away slowly. He planted his eyes on the ground at his feet and took a few deep breaths.

"Scared of heights?" Mitch asked.

"Not exactly. Scared of falls."

Mitch grinned. "The falls aren't so bad. It's the sudden stops."

"Very funny," Thomas said.

Alan stepped forward and inspected the ridgeline. "There are some trees just north of here that seem to be growing up from the bottom of the ravine," he pointed. "We could use those to go down."

"But we have ropes," Thomas said.

"We're going to need the ropes to get the pod back up," Mitch responded. "We passed through a clearing a short ways back that will do for a hover pick-up."

"Hover?"

“Reilly can’t land here, not easily. But she can bring the shuttle in close and lower the cargo door. We can load the pod and be on our way to the crash site.”

Thomas considered this. “Good plan,” he said. “And all it takes is for us to climb down into a steep ravine on a tree and then haul a very heavy stasis pod up using ropes. All without dying.”

“Simple as they get,” Mitch nodded, smiling.

In moments, Mitch and Alan had rigged a pulley and carry system with the ropes, anchoring it to some of the larger boulders present and lowering it into the ravine. It would be enough to hold the weight of the pod, hopefully. Thomas wasn’t at all sure about this sort of thing, but he trusted the expertise of the two men. Not for the first time, he felt completely useless in this. What was a computer engineer doing out here, where physical strength and stamina could mean the difference between survival and death? Of course, Thomas was no slouch, physically. He kept in shape. He had always worked out, even before being sent to ...

He stopped. Best not to think about that. It was a time long passed, and remembering it now had no real purpose. There was a task to complete, and he focused on that instead.

Once the carry system was down, it was time to make their descent. The trees to the North did indeed reach the bottom of the ravine, and they looked stout enough to support their weight. Thomas had never been much of a climber himself. He hadn’t really spent much time in trees, even as a child. But it couldn’t be that hard, could it?

Mitch stepped out and put a foot on one of the branches experimentally. It seemed to bear his weight. He held onto another branch and put his full weight on the one at his feet.

With a sudden crack, the branch snapped, and Thomas cried out as Mitch was forced to hold tight to the one above him. He dangled perilously, his feet kicking wildly to reach the broken stump of the branch he had just been standing on.

“Keep close to the trunk,” Alan said. For the first time, Thomas noticed a bit of emotion in the boy’s voice, in this case alarm at the near disaster. There was hope for him yet.

“Good tip,” Mitch said, huffing. “Could have used it a few minutes ago.”

“Sorry,” Alan said, returning to near impassionate mode.

“ok, is this going to be a good idea or a bad idea?” Thomas asked. “Should we be looking for another way down?”

“This is as good as any,” Mitch said. “The base of this branch seems pretty stable. If we keep close, it should be ok. Like going down a ladder.” To prove his

point, he bounced a few times on the branch, testing it.

Thomas wanted to yell at him to stop but chose instead to get this mission going. The quicker this was done the better. “Let’s get going then,” he said.

Mitch made his way slowly down the tree, followed by Alan. Mitch had nearly made it to the ground when Thomas took a deep breath and slowly reached out to grasp the first limb. He placed a foot on the base of the broken branch and soon was scaling down slowly, keeping his body close to the tree’s trunk.

It was not easy. And it certainly was not like climbing a ladder. For one thing, at this level the tree swayed in a way that made Thomas very edgy. Visions of the top half snapping off and hurling him down to the rocky bottom of the ravine were making this one of the scariest things he’d ever done. In addition, though there were branches at fairly even intervals there were still gaps where getting down took a leap of faith—literally. Thomas reached one such gap and found that he was dangling by his arms and trusting that he could keep himself stable after dropping a few inches to the limb below.

To add to the difficulty, there were thousands of tiny branches that tended to catch and tangle in his gear. At one point he lowered himself to a branch only to discover he could go no further because there were a few limbs caught in the straps of his pack, holding him up.

“Stuck,” he said, huffing.

“Try to pull yourself up a little,” Alan said. “If you twist to your right a little, those branches should let go.”

He pulled up slightly and felt some of the branches whip and smack his neck. Then, with a slight twist, he felt the rest fling free. Once again he lowered himself and found his footing.

The only real blessing was that as they descended the branches became thicker and sturdier. It was no longer necessary to hug so close to the trunk, though Thomas still tended to stay in close proximity to it. Below him, he heard Mitch call out, “Made it! It’s not so bad. There’s a long drop to the ground, though. And it slopes. We’ll have to figure out a way to get back into the tree to get back up.”

“Good to know,” Thomas called back. He was not at all thrilled about the idea of climbing back up. Getting down had been hard enough. Maybe they could find another way out once they’d recovered the pod. It was a slim hope, but he held on to it.

He had taken a brief rest and caught his breath, now it was time to get back to the climb. He put a foot on the branch below him, and just as his weight settled in, it snapped, falling away quickly.

Thomas cried out as his full weight yanked him suddenly downward, causing him to lose his grip on the branch he'd been holding. He suddenly found himself plunging through the branches, taking a brutal beating as he moved towards the ground with alarming speed.

Before he could slam into the rocky terrain below, he was brought to a sudden stop. The network of branches had caught and grabbed him, and were, for the moment, holding him aloft. He scarcely breathed, as he realized that all that stood between him and hitting the ground were a few green branches. He held very still, trying to figure out what his next move should be.

"Don't move!" called Alan, now above him. He was hurriedly making his way down the few feet to where Thomas was being held aloft.

"Don't worry," Thomas said tightly.

"Can you get to him?" Mitch called from below.

"Yes, maybe," Alan said. He was close now. Standing on the branches just above where Thomas was caught. He crawled outward on of the larger branches and reached a hand downward. "Slow," Alan said.

Thomas slowly raised one of his arms. The motion was enough to cause some of the branches to work free, and he dropped a bit. Instantly he stopped moving.

"I think this is bad," Thomas said slowly.

"Just wait there, don't move," Alan said.

"I'm coming up!" Mitch called.

"No!" Alan cried. "Stay where you are! You might shake him loose."

"This is bad," Thomas said again. He couldn't feel the network of branches beneath him, but he was relatively certain they couldn't be much. His weight was currently distributed among many, but the balance was delicate. Any tiny shift in his body weight, or even a stiff breeze jostling the tree slightly, could be enough to send him to a hard landing below. At this point, he must have been twenty feet or so from the base. But the ground sloped away at a steep angle, and it was covered in jagged, very solid rocks. He might survive the fall, but he would almost surely be injured.

Alan was slowly and carefully adjusting his position on the branch above. He sat up and began removing his pack. He then leaned forward again and lowered the pack by one of the shoulder straps, allowing the other strap to dangle close to Thomas's hand.

"Take the strap," he said.

Thomas risked moving enough to grasp the shoulder strap.

"ok, I'm going to brace myself on the limb. When I say go, you need to hold tight to the strap and try to reach upward. There's a limb below you, slightly to

your left, that should be able to hold your weight. Get your feet to that, ok?”

Thomas nodded.

“ok,” Alan said, “Go!”

Thomas gripped the shoulder strap hard and moved his upper body as if he were trying to sit up. The limbs below him immediately gave way, and his lower body fell downward. He managed to snag his left foot on the branch Alan had described and to reach his free hand up to the base of the limb where Alan was straddled. The young man’s face was contorted with the strain of holding Thomas up.

Thomas struggled to get his weight onto the lower limb, and finally after a few random kicks, managed to make solid contact. He placed both feet on the limb and was now leaning with one hand on the limb above. Slowly and cautiously, he let go of the pack strap and put both hands on the limb Alan was on. The young man scrambled back now and got into a position near the trunk of the tree, reaching down to help Thomas right himself and move in closer.

In moments, the two of them were safe, huffing from the exertion and clinging to the tree like infants to a mother.

“You ok?” Mitch called from the ground.

“Scratched but functional,” Thomas said.

“Me, too,” Alan said, breathing heavily.

“Good. Now stop slacking off and get down here so we can get back to work.” He was smiling, but Thomas could see that he had been genuinely worried.

“Aye, sir,” Alan said.

Thomas looked up at him, and for the first time he could recall, the young man was actually smiling.

“Oh, now you develop a sense of humor,” Thomas said, punching him lightly in the leg.

The pod was damaged. Bad. Mitch looked it over before letting the others come closer. If there had been a leak in the stasis system, it would have put them down, unconscious or worse. Uncontrolled stasis was very dangerous.

But most of the safety systems seemed to be in place. The problem was that the pod’s life support had taken a hit. Whoever was in there had very little time left.

The others approached. “We’re going to have to open it,” Mitch said when Thomas and Alan were near.

Thomas paused. “They’re in danger?”

“Yes,” Mitch said. “Life support was blown to hell in the crash. The casing protected most of the other systems, though. This puncture,” he pointed to a

jagged hole in the pod's housing, "it nicked the control system for the life support. The redundant systems kicked in, but they're limited. They kept her alive this long, but there's no way of knowing how much time she has left."

"ok," Thomas said. "Let's get her out of there."

Mitch nodded and tried the control pad. No good. There must have been more damage than he'd thought. "Alan, get on the other side, we'll have to work the manual release."

Alan moved to the opposite side, and the two of them turned the levers that would manually open the pod. A hiss came from within as the inner atmosphere was expelled. They lifted the lid and folded it back, looking into the pod to see the young woman inside.

She was pretty and obviously wealthy, judging by her clothes. Mitch had seen thousands of girls like her in his years ferrying colonists from one world to another. Most of the colony worlds were established by the very rich, along with their paid help. It had become a status symbol of sorts for the elite rich to own property on an alien world, returning to the homes and shops and crowds of Earth by lightrail whenever the allure of "roughing it" in the colonies had worn off.

Mitch had always felt a kind of contempt for these people, but at the moment, he would have to fight past it. This girl, rich or not, was in danger. He'd help her. And when everything returned to normal, she'd probably sue him and everyone else present because that's just what spoiled, rich girls do when they're inconvenienced.

The girl's eyes blinked open. She looked up into their faces and suddenly her expression became haughty, perturbed.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

Thomas smiled and held out a hand, "Let me help you up. My name is Thomas. This is Mitch Garrison and Alan Angelou. Careful," he said as she struggled to sit up, still a bit weak and woozy from stasis.

"Where am I?" She looked around at the ravine. Mitch noted for the first time that the rocky, steep walls of the place might give the impression of complete isolation.

"There was a problem with the landing," Thomas said, still smiling.

Mitch knew from the look on her face that this girl was about to become trouble.

"Miss," Mitch said, "you're alright. We had to bring you out of stasis because your pod was damaged."

She was looking around wildly. "Daddy!" she called. "Mother!"

"We haven't found them yet," Thomas offered.

“Stay away from me!” she screamed. “Daddy! Oliver!”

Thomas looked at Mitch, “Who’s Oliver?”

“Probably a butler,” Mitch said.

“Who are you people!” the girl shouted.

“I told you, my name is Thomas ... ”

“I don’t care about your stupid name! I demand you tell me why you have kidnapped me!”

The three men looked at each other, a bit confused by this turn of events.

“Oh,” the girl said quietly. She pushed against the pod and managed to crawl out onto the ground. A bit unsteady, she stood and crossed her arms over her chest, moving slowly away from the three of them. “I see,” she said. “You want ... you’re ... I know what you want.” She backed herself up until she hit the wall of the ravine and could go no further. She looked truly frightened, and Mitch wasn’t sure why.

“She thinks we’re trying to rape her,” Alan said bluntly.

Thomas nearly choked, sputtering.

“Ma’am,” Mitch said to the girl, “we’re here to rescue you, not rape you.”

The girl was still pressing against the rocks. She turned and looked down the length of the ravine. “Help!” she cried. “Someone, please help!”

“What do we do?” Mitch asked.

Thomas shrugged. “This is my first rescue.”

“Please,” Mitch said to the girl, “Miss, we’re telling you the truth. We’re here to help. We’re not going to hurt you.”

She looked at them with panic in her eyes, still struggling as if she could somehow push through the stone of the wall.

It was Alan who finally got through to her. “We’re going to take you to your parents,” he said quietly.

She stopped. “Daddy and Mother?” she asked.

“Yes. As soon as we can find them, we’ll take you there.”

She visibly relaxed. “Good. And Oliver?”

“Him, too,” Alan offered.

She nodded slightly, then her eyes rolled back into her head, and she fainted to the ground.

The three men rushed forward to help her. “Is she ok?” Thomas asked.

“Sleep sickness,” Alan said.

Mitch cursed himself for a fool. “It’s not common, but since her pod was damaged, she’s experiencing something a little like altitude sickness,” he explained. “She’ll be fine. But this explains why she was so irrational.”

“Maybe,” Thomas said. “I think some of that may just be personality.”

“Maybe,” Mitch smiled.

They helped her up into a sitting position, moving her to a small boulder where she could sit off of the ground. Mitch gave her some water. After a while, she began to come around.

“You’re ok,” Mitch said. “A little sleep sickness. You’re going to be fine.”

“Oliver?” she said weakly. “Are Mummy and Daddy awake yet?”

Mitch looked at Thomas, who shrugged. Alan knelt beside the girl, and in a gesture that surprised Mitch, the young man smoothed her slightly sweat-matted hair out of her face. “They’re still asleep, but we’ll wake them soon. Just rest,” he said.

Mitch and Thomas exchanged glances again. It seemed their young friend had a bit of a crush.

“Are you out of your mind?” the girl shouted. “I’m not climbing that!”

Her name, she had informed them, was Penny. Short for Penelope Daunder, daughter of Elizabeth and Miguel Daunder and heir to the Daunder fortune. That last part Thomas had simply assumed, but he was certain it was on the mark.

Penny was currently lording it over poor Alan, who quietly took her abuse as she explained to him that he was, in fact, a brainless cretin who should somehow perform the miracle of magically transporting her back to Earth with the wave of his hand. To be fair, she’d said no such thing, but to Thomas her demands were just as lofty and unreasonable.

“What do you think? Should we knock her out and put her back in stasis?” he said to Mitch, only half joking.

“It would certainly make things quieter.”

Just then the radio came on. “Search, this is Shuttle.”

“Go ahead, Shuttle,” Thomas said over the transmitter.

“The engines have been cool for a couple of hours now. Are you guys ok? I figured you would have called in for pick-up by now.”

“We’ve found the first pod, but we had to wake up its occupant.”

“Good,” Reilly said. “You can probably use all the help you can get to bring that pod out of the ravine.”

Thomas looked at Mitch, who was busy hiding his grin and shaking his head.

“Yeah, I don’t think she’s up to that kind of help.”

“Well, when do you want me to rendezvous?” Reilly asked.

“We’ll call you when we get top-side,” Thomas said.

Mitch pulled the communicator from his shoulder strap. “Reilly, you getting impatient up there?” He meant it as a joke, some friendly banter, but he wasn’t expecting her response.

“It’s ... a little creepy here, Mitch. I keep hearing something outside. And there’s this ... smell.”

“What kind of smell? Fuel?”

“No, nothing like that. More like ozone. Like a lightning strike. And the lights have dimmed a few times.”

“Maybe there’s a short somewhere. Do a visual on the electrical systems and get back to me, ok? Be careful. Wear one of the EVA suits, they’re grounded internally.”

There was a pause. “Roger, Search. Call me when you need me. Shuttle out.”

They re-clipped their comms. “She seemed tense,” Thomas said.

“I think all of this open atmosphere is getting to her. She’s spent most of her life in space. Kind of a shift in gears to be planet-side for so long.”

Thomas nodded. He couldn’t imagine what it must be like to go from being constantly surrounded by the walls of a spacecraft to being surrounded by an infinite-seeming expanse of open sky. At least she was in the shuttle, where she could pretend to be back out in space if need be. No wonder she seemed tense when Mitch told her to go outside and inspect the electrical system.

Something occurred to him. “You knew she’d be more comfortable staying with the shuttle, didn’t you?” he asked Mitch.

“Sure,” Mitch shrugged. “But someone would have had to stay anyway. She’s the pilot. It was a logical choice.”

But it seemed there was more to it than logic, Thomas thought. Still, he let it drop.

He turned his attention to the little princess, Penny, and her new favorite punching bag, Alan.

“Why can’t the shuttle fly down here and pick me up?” she asked, exasperated.

“The ravine is too narrow,” Alan explained patiently.

Thomas marveled at the boy’s ability to simply take the abuse, never seeming to get angry or impatient. He wished he had that skill himself. What would cause someone to develop that kind of trait? Had passion once burned Alan so badly that he now felt the need to void himself of it entirely?

“Lady and gentlemen,” Thomas said, “it’s time we were going. The pod is loaded into the rigging, and we have a tree to climb.”

“I’m not climbing that thing,” Penny said.

Thomas shrugged. "Suit yourself. I don't blame you; I nearly fell out of it earlier trying to get down here to rescue you. But it's a long walk to the end of this ravine, and there's no food or water along the way that I'm aware of. We have other pods to rescue, so we can't waste any time. If you'd like, I'll give you a radio and some food, and we'll come pick you up in a few days, once you've made your way out of the ravine."

Penny's eyes went wide for a moment, though whether from shock, fury, or fear Thomas wasn't sure. Finally, she seemed to huff and resolve herself to her fate. "Fine," she said. "I'll climb the stupid tree."

"Good," Thomas said. They began the slow and cautious climb to the top.

Seven

“Roger, Search,” Reilly said, trying not to sound too angry. “Call me when you need me. Shuttle out.”

She slammed the transmitter onto the console before her and spun in her chair, standing and walking away from the pilot’s station in a fury. She wasn’t entirely sure why she was angry—she just knew it had something to do with Mitch.

Actually, to be fair, it had a lot to do with the waiting, too. But it was Mitch’s attitude about her waiting that bugged her most. It was the fact that he was out rescuing the pod while she was stuck here. It was the fact that when she had told him about the sounds and the weird ozone smell, he’d been a little too dismissive. Check the electrical system? What, did he think she was an idiot? The first thing she’d done was run a full diagnostic and check all of the internal breakers and junctions. She’d found nothing.

True, she hadn’t yet gone outside.

And his warning to wear an EVA suit—that really ticked her off. As if she was too incompetent to know how to keep herself safe!

Again, to be fair, he was just looking out for her. He was doing what he would do for any Blue Collar under his command. Maybe that was what really bothered her. Maybe she didn’t want to be just any Blue Collar under his command. Maybe she wanted ... something else.

These were half-formed ideas, and she wasn’t exactly comfortable with them.

She had spent the past few hours watching the dots and blips that represented the men as they moved toward the ravine. She had never spent so much time on a planet before. She preferred the comforting curve of the walls of a ship. The womb-like feeling of safety that she only felt when she was on a starship in space.

The shuttle was a close substitute, at least for the time being, but the sight of blue sky, clouds, and trees out of the shuttle windows were incongruous and strange to her. They were constant reminders that just outside of these walls was a world of biology and nature, not the cold expanse of space to which she’d become accustomed. She wasn’t home, just in a place that looked a little like it.

That's why she was angry, then. Not at Mitch, not really. Not at the suggestions he had made, which seemed to imply she was both incompetent and silly for being frightened. She was angry that she was caught up in a situation that was totally out of her control and out of her realm of experience.

But those sounds ... that smell. Those might be real, and they seemed to be coming from outside of the shuttle. Outside ... where bugs and animals and maybe even strange, alien people might be.

Reilly reached up and flipped the switch that closed the cargo doors in the back. Anything that might be out there would have a hard time getting through the steel and titanium and re-entry insulation of the hull. There might as well be a mountain between her and the outside world. But still, she felt unsafe. She felt unsafe because there was something unknown happening around her. And after a lifetime of knowing every aspect of her world, of her existence depending on knowing what was happening around her at all times, the unknown was something she simply couldn't tolerate.

She would have to go outside.

There were no weapons onboard. Mitch had removed all three remaining disc guns and handed them over to Captain Somar before they'd left base. But there were plenty of pipes and other objects. After rifling through one of Mitch's tool kits, she came away with a large, metal wrench. Its handle was coated in rubber, which gave her a good grip. She hefted it a few times, smacked the palm of her hand with it, and satisfied, deemed it a worthy weapon. Just in case.

She left the cargo door closed and opted instead to go out of one of the emergency exits on the port side of the shuttle. She popped the lock and pushed the door open slowly, checking to make sure no one, or no *thing*, was waiting out of sight for her. Carefully she climbed down to the surface, holding the wrench at the ready. When she reached the ground, she quickly spun, looking for any sign of trouble.

There was nothing.

Nothing except for the faint smell of ozone in the air. The vaguely metallic smell was setting her on edge, big time. Electrical fires were a real danger in space because they were difficult to put out and they fed on the much-needed oxygen of the enclosed space. Not to mention that whatever system might be burning could potentially mean the difference between life and death. So for her entire life, Reilly and every other space rat she'd known had been keen to the smell of electricity, the smell of ozone and smoke.

The air was thick with it now. Maybe Mitch was right after all. Maybe there was a short somewhere. It was silly of her to start imagining monsters when it was probably just some relay or cable jarred loose on the outside of the shuttle.

If a cable was loose, it might be whipping about and causing the noises she'd heard.

It was the simplest explanation, and she was suddenly angry with herself for being so paranoid. What an idiot! What a moron! What a ... what a ... what a *girl!* She'd gotten all squeamish about being alone, without the big, strong men here to protect her. When, in her entire life, had she ever needed some guy to be her hero? She was every bit as tough as Mitch or Alan or Thomas. She could probably take them. Well, maybe not Mitch. But she could hold her own.

After a few minutes of cursing herself for being foolish, she came to her senses and realized that if there really was a problem with one of the electrical systems, she would have to find it and fix it. It might be something non-critical, but it might be something important. Either way, she'd have to search it out.

The mild paranoia she'd felt before still lingered a bit, but it was fading. The daylight actually helped, despite its strangeness to her. Being able to see all around you, she supposed, had its advantages. Still, she figured she'd keep the wrench handy. It had a comforting heft in her hand, and besides you just never knew.

It was warm out here. The climate control system in the shuttle had been one of the few systems that had remained undamaged, and inside it had remained a cool and comfortable 72 degrees. Out here it felt like it might be in the 90s. And it was humid. Within minutes of being outside, she felt sticky and oily from her own sweat.

She hated that feeling. Humidity was always low on a starship, and if you sweated at all, it would quickly evaporate into the air, leaving you cool and dry. But here the air was saturated with moisture, and the sweat had nowhere to go. It was one more reminder that she was stuck on a planet's surface instead of floating happily above it.

She followed the smell of ozone, carefully checking before her as she went. If a cable had broken loose, it might snake out unexpectedly from beneath the shuttle. Some of the systems on board had as much as 50,000 volts coursing through them, and the amperage could get unbelievably high. It was the amperage that killed, she knew. Just a slight contact from some wildly whipping cable could be enough to fry her.

She should have worn the EVA suit after all. Damn.

Reilly made a slow circle around the edge of the craft, and came finally to a place near one of the exterior data and power ports. These were non-critical systems, at least from the point of view of shuttle operations. They were one half of the physical connection made between the shuttle and another vessel, such as

a starship or even another shuttle. These ports were used to physically link power and computer systems, nothing else.

She sighed in relief. If this was where the smell was coming from, she had no worries. She could leave it be until they returned to Citadel. But she had to be sure, and so she leaned in to get a better look.

The metal around the port was charred and blackened. Some of the interior components looked as if they'd been fused, and some of the contacts were burned beyond recognition.

That was strange.

A few of these components weren't close enough to make contact with each other accidentally. Two of the power contacts were even insulated, so they couldn't possibly come in contact with other components. And yet those two were the most charred in the bunch. It was as if someone had shoved something into the port, making contact with both power nodes at once.

She looked around to see if maybe a stray piece of debris was lying nearby. It was possible that during the crash something had gotten wedged in this port. Maybe Mitch had missed it when he did his inspection. Or maybe, since this was a non-critical system, he'd decided to leave it be until they'd returned from the rescue.

But there was nothing on the ground and nothing in the port that could have caused a short like this.

"Reilly," she heard a voice say from behind her.

She whipped around quickly. Were the guys back? How could they have gotten back so quickly?

But there was no one behind her. In fact, she could see a great distance in almost every direction and there was no one for miles.

Had she imagined it? Was she cracking up? This was, after all, the longest she'd ever been on a planet's surface. Who knew what kind of psychosis a space rat might go through if they were stuck planet-side for too long?

"Reilly," she heard the voice again. This time it seemed to come from all around her, or nowhere at all. It was confusing. It was like hearing an echo and not being able to identify the source. She stepped away from the shuttle and looked out over the rocky terrain, toward the distant tree line.

"Hello?" she said aloud.

There was no answer. And she realized that her voice had been a bit soft, a bit quiet. She was scared. And being scared made her mad.

"Hello!" she shouted, forcing strength into her voice.

Still nothing.

Then a thought occurred to her. Maybe she was hearing the radio! Maybe the guys were calling her from their location. They could be ready to be picked up, right?

She started making her way around the shuttle again, back to the emergency exit that would lead her back inside.

“Reilly,” she heard again as she rounded the back of the shuttle.

She was sure now, this was not coming from within the shuttle. It was impossible. The radio wasn’t that loud, and the ship was insulated for sound. Unless the doors were open, no sound could get in or out. She had closed the emergency exit behind her, and so wherever this voice was coming from, it wasn’t coming from inside. It was out here, with her.

She whirled and faced the open expanse of the rocky terrain that stretched out before her. She looked up into the sky, defiantly. She was daring whatever it was to speak to her again. “I’m here!” she shouted. “What do you want?”

“Nothing, nothing,” the voice seemed to say. It was like a whisper, only louder. It was coming from all around her, but from nowhere at the same time. She spun around several times, trying to spot someone or something that might be responsible. She refused to acknowledge the thought that was rising in her mind.

This is all in my head.

“Reilly,” the voice said again, and this time it was close. She turned and saw him standing there, an impossible vision that she knew ... *knew* could not be real. And yet, here he was.

Her father. Dead for more than a decade. Dead since she was a little girl. And now, here he stood on an alien planet and looking exactly as she remembered him.

“Reilly,” he said, and smiled.

“Daddy?” she whispered. *This is impossible. This is impossible.*

“Why are you here?” he asked her.

She was having trouble understanding. The words were clear, but with them came ... something else. With the words came meaning. He wasn’t asking her why she was at this location, on this rocky terrain. He wasn’t asking why she was here with the shuttle. He was asking her, clearly, why she was on this world. Not as in, “How did you get here?” but as in “What is your purpose here?”

“We crashed,” she said. “We crashed here. We’re ... trying to find the others. The colonists.”

“The sleeping ones,” he said.

“Yes.”

“There are many of them here. A lot of dreams. New dreams, new stories.”

“ok,” she said. She wasn’t entirely sure what was happening. She knew this couldn’t be her father. Was it an alien? It had to be. It wasn’t her father. Her father was dead.

“Dead,” her father said. And the word conjured all sorts of images for Reilly. She suddenly remembered her father’s funeral. She then remembered every funeral she’d ever been to. It was like having a conversation with someone you knew, with someone you had a close, personal relationship with. It was like when one conversation led naturally to another, so you begin talking about your favorite food and end up talking about the nature of the universe.

It was like talking with someone who shared all of the same in-jokes with you. Someone who had your complete trust. Only she didn’t trust him. This wasn’t her father. This was some ... *thing*. She fought. She struggled. She stepped away from him.

“Please,” he said. “Please, tell me.”

“What are you?” she asked.

And now she began thinking of other things. She thought of infants. She thought of laughing about stupid jokes. She thought of sex. She thought of the chapel services she had (rarely) attended. One thought after another after another, and each leading into one inevitable string of thoughts, seemingly without end. And it was threatening her. It was overwhelming her. It was flooding her, drowning her.

“No!” she shouted. She suddenly felt the heft of the wrench in her hand, and without thinking, she swung it outward, aiming for her father’s head. As it made contact there was a bright flash, and the smell of ozone amped up. There was the sound of unbearably loud static, of popping and sparking.

She turned away from the vision of her father, stumbled, caught herself, and then made her way slowly to the shuttle’s emergency exit. When she reached it, she looked back, expecting to see her father there. But he was gone. No trace, and nowhere for him to go.

And suddenly Reilly felt a little confused.

Could she have imagined it? Could he have been some delusion, dredged up from her stressed brain as she dealt with these feelings of paranoia and fear about being so ... so *exposed*?

He had seemed so *real* a moment ago, but now he was fading. Now he was slowly becoming something vague, barely remembered. She did remember, she still held the idea of what had happened in her mind, but the specifics seemed to be draining away. Her father? What had brought *him* up? *Oh yes, I thought I heard his voice. I imagined him being here. Was he here to rescue me? I must really be cracking up.*

And by the time she had climbed up into the shuttle, she was laughing at herself. She felt silly. She felt like she had let the stress of the whole situation get to her.

Have to remember to tell Mitch about the data and power ports, she thought. He'll want to fix those.

She slumped into the pilot's seat again and settled in to wait for Mitch to call her for the pick-up. It might come any minute now, and it wouldn't be a minute too soon. She was sick of waiting here. It was boring. She was ready for something, *anything*, to happen.

She realized she was still holding the wrench in her hand, gripping it so tightly in fact that her hand was starting to hurt. Why was she gripping it so hard? She looked at it and realized it was blackened and scarred and melted in places, as if it had come in contact with an electrical discharge. Had she touched the power conduits with it? Had she shorted them out?

She thought back and realized that she couldn't remember much after finding the port. There was a vague memory of a spark and a flash, followed by the smell of ozone. Maybe she'd brushed a conduit with the wrench somehow, and the spark zapped her but good. If that was the case, she was lucky to be alive. Lucky that a bit of memory loss was all she'd suffered. It could have been a lot worse.

Damn Mitch for being right, she thought. I should have worn that EVA suit after all.

Thomas couldn't imagine how this could be any worse.

The girl—Penny—was more than just a pain. She was starting to become an obstacle. Everything had to be a battle with her. And Thomas found himself devolving to the type of guy who resorted to threats just to get things moving. He didn't like being that guy. He had dealt with too many bullies in the past to enjoy playing the part of one.

"I can't go up any further," Penny was panting after making it only a few feet since the last time she had claimed she couldn't go up any further. She was more than halfway to the ridgeline now, and Mitch stood on the ridge high above her, holding the rope they had tied around her waist. She couldn't fall, at least not to the ground, but that seemed to be of little comfort to her.

Alan was directly below her, and Thomas was below him. The climb, so far, had been laborious. Getting her into the tree in the first place had taken an effort of sheer will. Now it seemed every branch was a battle.

Alan climbed up next to her, sitting in the crook of one of the branches as she clung tightly to the trunk, eyes squeezed shut.

“You can make this climb,” Alan said plainly. It wasn’t in that nurturing, encouraging way you’d expect to hear in a situation like this, and it wasn’t harsh. It was matter-of-fact. He wasn’t encouraging Penny, he was *reminding* her.

It seemed strange to Thomas that Alan was so taken with this girl. He was a pretty levelheaded guy, by all accounts. Now, though, if Thomas didn’t know any better he’d swear that Alan’s hormones were getting the better of him.

Penny was very attractive, Thomas had to admit. Lean and shapely, blond hair, tanned—she was everything one would expect from the daughter of a very rich man. Including spoiled and obnoxious. Alan, who didn’t seem to be the kind of person to be taken with something so shallow as sex appeal, nevertheless seemed to be going out of his way to take care of the girl, to encourage her and protect her.

It occurred to Thomas that he might be this way with any “civilian” they encountered. Or maybe he really was letting his hormones guide him. Only time would tell.

“I can’t!” Penny was saying now, in a pout. Her eyes were welded shut, and she had a death grip on the tree’s trunk. She was digging in, prepared to stay in that spot until the tree itself fell down from old age.

Thomas, feeling the pressure of some unknown deadline pressing against them, was starting to become annoyed. But for the life of him, he couldn’t think of what to say to this girl to get her to finish the climb.

“You’ve made plenty of climbs that were much tougher than this,” Alan said. Silence.

To Thomas, it seemed as if the air around them was now crisp and still, even the sound of the local birds seemed to have dimmed. From above them, Mitch called down, “What does that mean?”

“She’s a climber,” Alan said, without taking his eyes off of her.

Penny, who until now was hugging the tree for dear life, now hung back casually and looked at Alan with a strange, slightly annoyed expression. “You knew?” she asked.

He shrugged, “I’ve read articles about you. I recognized you when we opened the pod.”

Thomas, jaw dropping was furious, though he wasn’t sure what, exactly he should be most angry about. “You ... you mean you’ve been *faking* this whole fear of climbing thing? Why the hell would you do that?”

Penny looked at Alan, then down to Thomas. Her expression was smug, and it made Thomas want to shimmy up the tree and smack her. To his credit, he

stayed where he was, waiting. “A girl has to have her secrets,” she said.

Thomas was infuriated. And apparently so was Mitch, who made a noise of pure disgust before stepping away from the edge of the ridge. Alan, however, clung passively to the branches closest to Penny. He seemed to be unaffected by the girl’s deception, possibly because he’d known about it all along.

“Why didn’t you say something?” Thomas said to him.

He shrugged. “She was keeping it to herself. I thought she might be trying to protect herself.”

“Protect herself?” Mitch called from above.

Alan looked up. “It was her advantage. She still wasn’t sure about us, but if she could make us think she was helpless when she really wasn’t ... ” he let the rest trail off, unsaid.

Thomas understood at once, and more than simply what Alan was saying. He understood that Alan had allowed Penny to keep her deception intact so she could feel safe, but was now telling her that he wasn’t fooled, to assure her that it was alright to trust them. It was an expert move, Thomas thought, and it showed that Alan had a much deeper understanding of people than anyone might have supposed.

It also showed that Alan would willingly allow those around him to be deceived, while he knew exactly what was going on. Thomas wasn’t entirely sure what that meant, or how he felt about it.

“So why did you tell on me?” Penny said, affecting a sort of childish pout that told Thomas she was still practicing deception, still trying to fool them into thinking she was helpless.

“You’re slowing us down,” Alan said. “And there are a lot of people who still need to be rescued. Including your parents.”

Penny stared at the young man for a long moment. *She’s realizing*, Thomas thought, *that she’s met her match. Heck, I’m realizing it, too.* No one had guessed that Alan was such a keen observer of humanity, and no one had known he was capable of letting a deception go on, just so the deceiver could feel at ease. It was kind of sneaky actually, and it had the effect of disarming Penny so that now she would have to suck it up and trust them.

“He’s right,” Mitch said from above. “We’ve wasted too much time already. You’ve slowed us down. Now get your ass in gear and get up here so we can go save someone else.”

Penny bristled but climbed faster. She paused long enough to untie the rope from her waist, letting it dangle until Mitch quickly wound it to the top. In a short time, they’d all made it safely to the top of the ridge, and the three men

pulled up the heavy stasis pod from the bottom of the ravine, while Penny brooded by herself at the edge.

When the pod was safe, all three men took a handle, not even bothering to ask Penny for help, and began the trek to the landing zone. Mitch keyed the comm on his shoulder, “Shuttle, this is Search, we have the first pod and a ... *guest*. Rendezvous at LZ in twenty minutes.”

“Roger that,” Reilly replied.

They made their way to the landing zone in silence.

The shuttle didn’t land, but it came as close to it as possible. As the cargo door lowered to the ground, the three men charged upward with the pod between them. *A bit like a funeral in reverse*, Mitch thought, with the pallbearers carrying the casket back into the chapel after retrieving it from the ground. They’d even gone to the extra trouble of raising the dead, and there she was walking among them as if nothing had ever happened. The rich girl. The princess. The liar.

Mitch didn’t care for liars. No matter what their motivation might be, he was pretty sure it all came down to the same thing—self-preservation. And it was one thing to do whatever it took to stay alive and safe, it was another to put others in jeopardy to do it. By slowing them down with her little act, this girl may have killed other colonists. There’d be no way to know for sure, of course, but that didn’t make her actions any less reckless.

To be fair, he wasn’t angry at her alone. He was also angry with Alan.

He’d known Alan for a few years now, since he’d come onto Alonzo’s crew as a young man. He had told them his parents had died in a colony ship explosion, and that had gained him a great deal of sympathy. Such things weren’t common, but they happened often enough that nearly every Blue Collar had been affected by such a loss.

Mitch, like everyone else in the Blue Collar crew, had taken Alan in as his own kin, looking out for him and protecting him as he grew and learned and became useful. He had potential, Mitch felt. He had a shot at becoming a White Collar engineer if he wanted. He could make the transition in status that half the Blue Collars yearned for and envied and the other half resented and scorned.

But why had he let Penny’s lies go on for so long?

So he was angry with Alan, angry at Penny, and even a little angry at himself for being fooled. He was so angry that once they were on board he started looking for something—*anything*—that he could do to keep his hands busy. He would hide his anger in work, just like he always had, and so by pissing him off,

this girl, Penny, would have only accomplished something good in the end. By being such a liar and a moron, she would get the environmental systems functioning again. And Alan, by letting liars delay them and possibly cause the deaths of some of the colonists, would help them all by causing the shuttle's stabilizers to be repaired.

They were in the air now, setting course for the hop to the colony module's wreckage some miles away. Mitch had picked up a wrench that was out of place, and somewhat worse for wear, burned and scarred and melted in places. What the heck had happened to this thing? Did someone shove it into a power cell?

"Mitch," Thomas said from behind him.

Mitch didn't turn around. "Yeah," he said.

"You seem ... well, you seem pissed off. Want to talk about it?"

Mitch whirled on him. Thomas had also been fooled by the girl, and had been caught up in the elaborate game she'd been playing. But for some reason, Thomas didn't seem angry about it. He seemed to have dealt with it somehow. "Yeah, I'm pissed," Mitch said, but his voice stayed low and calm so that only the two of them were part of the conversation. Everyone else was busy, except for the lying little snob who had strapped herself into one of the charred seats while wearing an expression of disgust. She might have said something, but if she did, Alan was the only one who would hear.

"It's the girl, right?"

"Yes," Mitch said.

"And Alan?"

Mitch paused, then suddenly, strangely, felt the anger unknot itself. It didn't fade away, it just became *lighter*. Less pressing. For the first time, Mitch started to wonder if it was these two kids he was really mad at, or if it was something else entirely.

"Yeah," he said, "I was pretty angry about the climbing thing. But I think I'm getting over it."

"It didn't exactly thrill me, either," Thomas said, with a tight smile. "But I think Alan handled it pretty well."

"You do?" Mitch was confused and a little annoyed. "He practically helped her lie to us."

"But that's not what he was doing. That may be how it felt to us, but I think he was doing what he had to do, to make her stop lying and start taking this seriously."

"By playing along?" Mitch asked.

"By letting her get to a point where she couldn't keep up the lie. I think that when he recognized her he also saw that she was scared. People do desperate

things when they're scared," Thomas said. Mitch thought there was more feeling behind it than there should have been. Something Thomas wasn't saying. "I think Alan knew she was feeling powerless, and so he let her do something that gave her power."

"By lying?"

"By keeping a secret. Secrets give people power, believe me. When you know something and your enemy doesn't, they can never be sure where your weak points are."

Mitch thought about this and thought about how he felt about it. He had never been one to stay angry for no good reason. He was rational, logical. He wasn't like most of the Blue Collar crew he knew—quick to anger and slow to forgive. He might still hold something of a grudge against this girl, but he knew Alan too well to let some passing offense color his judgment.

Slowly but steadily he calmed himself, and in moments the anger was gone. Now he was looking at Thomas, who was looking back at him, and he realized for the first time that this man was not who he said he was.

It occurred to him like an inspiration. There were hints, constant little things he did and said. Questions he asked. Concepts he should have been familiar with but of which he seemed to have only a cursory knowledge. Like Penny, Thomas was holding something back, pretending. He was deceiving them all somehow. But since the crash, Mitch had spent a lot of time with this man, had had many conversations with him, had laughed with him, and had struggled with him. Was it possible that he could have deceived them all so thoroughly? Was he evil in a decent-looking package?

Mitch wasn't sure. Thomas seemed genuine in most things. He seemed to genuinely care about rescuing the colonists, for example. He seemed concerned with his team, too. Hadn't he come to check on Mitch, to soothe his anger? Could an enemy do that? Mitch didn't know. But he was starting to get a deeper picture of this White Collar engineer. He liked him, that much he couldn't deny. But he wasn't sure how much he *trusted* him. *This man has secrets*, Mitch thought. *And I don't think he was placating me when he said secrets give you power. I think he was confessing.*

Mitch shook his head, smiled, let the humor return to him. Whatever Thomas was hiding, so far it hadn't brought them harm. Or it seemed so at any rate. Time might say something different, but for now he'd proven himself a friend and a colleague, and a decent leader too. "ok," Mitch said. "ok, I can let it go. I've let it go. Let's see if we can get this bird to fly like an eagle instead of like a turkey."

The shuttle settled down close to the wreckage. The first chunk of wreckage, anyway. This was the section of the module that was festooned with

atmospheric propulsion systems. Each thruster was controlled by its very own independent system, a redundancy that was meant to compensate for damage or failure of any one unit. The sudden entry into the atmosphere coupled with the collision with the Citadel module had rendered these redundancies useless, however, and the whole thing had spun out of control until it had plowed up miles of topsoil and foliage and rocks on the surface of an alien planet.

Thomas felt uneasy about the scene. He had never before seen a vessel of this size splayed open and spread out in a wake of destruction, but that didn't seem to stop him from associating it with another starship from a distant past—one that had not crashed to a planet's surface but had instead exploded with the force of a star, with enough power and energy to vaporize everyone and everything close by. The vision of peeled metal and fire damage that Thomas looked at now could not have existed in the explosion that had changed his life all those years ago, but that couldn't keep his mind from connecting the two.

"Thomas," Mitch said from beside him. "You ok?"

Thomas finally broke out of his reverie. Mitch, Alan, Reilly, and the girl, Penny, were all standing beside the shuttle, and all eyes were on him. He realized that he'd been standing with his back to them for some time, staring intently at the wreckage, and he must have missed something someone had asked him. "I'm sorry," Thomas said, trying to force a smile. "I guess ... well, it's just that this is a lot of destruction."

Mitch nodded, but still stared at him for a moment.

Mitch and Alan got to work on salvaging what systems they needed to bring the shuttle back to 100 percent. *Or at least 90 percent*, Thomas thought. Mitch had explained that they would be able to get full flight capability back, which would mean no more short hops with long cool-down periods. Getting the atmospheric controls back in shape would take longer, and it wasn't a priority right now. They'd deal with getting back into space once they'd reclaimed as many of the colonists as possible.

While the two Blue Collar engineers did their thing, though, Thomas found that he was suddenly useless. As were Reilly and Penny. After giving it a great deal of thought, he made his decision. "We're going on a little hike," he told the two ladies.

"What do you have in mind?" Reilly asked.

"What do you mean, a hike?" Penny snapped.

"There may be other pods in the wreckage. We're going to see if we can find them. If any are in trouble, like you were Penny," he said pointedly, "then we'll get them out. Timing could be crucial."

Reilly nodded, as expected. She would do her duty.

But to his surprised Penny was also nodding. “Do you think we might find my mother and father?”

Thomas had expected her to snap again, to demand that he and Reilly do it on their own while she rested in the shuttle or something. At once, he felt a little ashamed at his harsh judgment of her. At the same time, though, he couldn't help but note that her interest in finding the pods was strictly personal. “There's a chance,” he said quietly. It seemed to be enough.

And so, once again, Thomas found himself donning a backpack and canteen and trudging out on foot. This wasn't exactly how he and his fellows had always envisioned the colonization of alien worlds. In his dreams, there had been sophisticated computer systems handling all of the colony's needs, and there had been dozens of vehicles for transport. One hobbled shuttle wasn't really cutting it. Then again, the point of the current system was to arrive on a world, break down the colony module for parts and materials, and build everything else they would need, vehicles included. It was, on the whole, a much more efficient means of colonization than he had ever really envisioned. Nothing was wasted.

Still, even though he'd kept in decent enough shape in his previous life, over the past couple of days he'd done an awful lot of hiking, climbing, and carrying of heavy objects. His muscles were starting to rebel even as he forced himself to press on.

Reilly seemed a little beaten by the experience as well. She had grown up entirely in an environment where gravity had little to no hold on her most of the time. Artificial gravity was still relatively new throughout the human colony fleet—a gift from the Esool—and part of her lifetime had been spent floating among bulkheads and through corridors. Now that she was confronted with the real thing on a grand, planetary scale, it was kicking her butt. Or so he imagined. She seemed winded after a very short period and lagged a bit as they walked. Thomas slowed the pace enough for her to more easily keep up.

It was Penny that was the biggest surprise, though. She seemed to have no limitations. She was in good shape, despite the obviously pampered lifestyle she'd had. The designer clothes, the manicured nails, the perfect hair and skin—these things gave her away as one who had money and could afford to spend it on frivolous and luxurious things. But she had the movement and strength of someone who was used to being physical. She must have loved being outdoors, Thomas figured. And since she had no other responsibilities to distract her, she was outdoors a lot. Rock climbing, hiking, maybe some sports, and all in real gravity. Penny might be spoiled, but she hadn't sat idle.

Thomas found that his opinion of the girl was shifting slightly. He still wasn't thrilled at her frequent displays of childishness and selfishness. But he

had to admire her grace, her strength. No wonder Alan seemed to be infatuated with her.

Penny kept moving ahead of them and then pausing to let them catch up. She was obviously annoyed. "I thought we were in a hurry here," she said.

Reilly, huffing and obviously tired, said, "I'm sorry. I'm not used to real G."

"Real G?" Thomas said. He, too, was huffing a little, though it was probably due more to the fact that he'd already had a lengthy hike recently and his physical limits were closing in.

"Real Gravity," Penny sneered. "What else would she mean? Are you seriously an engineer? Because you don't seem to know anything."

"I know nothing at all," Thomas said, forcing a smile. "That's why they put me in charge."

Penny huffed her annoyance and stormed off in the direction they'd been moving.

"She's a snot, but she's right about one thing, you do seem to be a little out of the loop at times. No offense," Reilly said.

"I've been ... away. For a long time," Thomas replied.

"Away? Like on another colony? Or ... wait, are you a sleeper?"

When Thomas only blinked in reply she went on. "A sleeper is someone who goes into cryo and only comes out at certain times. I've met a few here and there, mostly they're specialists who are taking long voyages."

Thomas nodded, "That's as good a name as any. I was in cryo freeze for a very long time. I woke up about a month before the Citadel mission was launched."

Reilly regarded him for a moment, weighed what he was saying, apparently did some sort of side-by-side comparison in her head, sizing him up based on other people she had known. "That explains it," she said finally. "You tend to get most of everything right and then miss out on some saying or expression or something. So, what are you specialized in?"

"Computers," he said. "I used to design and build computer systems for spacecraft and for the colonies."

"For the colonies? But, those systems haven't changed much in about a hundred years. I thought they had all been designed long ago. You couldn't have been asleep that long."

To Thomas's relief, she laughed at the very idea, and he smiled and said, "No, I guess I couldn't. But I was under for a long time. When I went into suspension, they were still designing and refining some of the systems that you use now. They may not have changed much to the naked eye, but there's always some adjustment or something that you have to make. I'm not quite extinct yet."

She smiled and as they started hiking again, trying to catch up to Penny, she said, "I've never done anything other than fly ships. My whole life I've been part of a crew."

"That's what I hear. Did you ever think about doing something else? Did you always want to be a pilot?"

She smiled, "Well, no. I used to want to be an engineer. A White Collar, actually. Living in a house on some planet. Working in a building that's rooted to the ground. Clean. Well," she said, slightly embarrassed, "you know. You're a White Collar. You have money."

He laughed out loud, and when he saw her face, he immediately felt bad. "Sorry," he said. "But I'm not exactly Rockefeller."

"Who?"

He sighed. "It means I'm not rich. There was a family on Earth named Rockefeller, a long time ago, that was very rich at one time. They might still be, I'm not sure. But way back in the stone age when I was working on computers, we had that saying."

"Ah," she said. "Still, you were free to travel if you wanted, right? And you were free to settle somewhere. White Collars can choose a colony and stay there. Blues just have to keep flying."

"So why'd you give up your dream? Or have you? Do you still want to be a White Collar engineer?"

She was quiet for a moment, and Thomas wondered if he had somehow offended her. He waited until she finally answered. "I passed a bunch of tests. Did really well, in fact. But a few of my friends, Blue Collars, people I had grown up with and pretty much thought of as family, they made it clear that they wouldn't have anything to do with me anymore. If I left, I'd have to start all over. I don't have any other family, so, you know."

"That's terrible," Thomas said. "They'd cut you off because you're trying to better yourself?"

"Hey, I wouldn't be better than them, ok?" she said, sounding a little angry. "Just ... never mind. It kind of freaks me out to be planet-side anyway. It's not a big deal."

"I didn't mean to offend you, Reilly. I'm sorry. You're right, you wouldn't be better than them. You'd just be *improving* yourself. You'd be doing something for you. I think it's selfish of them to shun you for it."

She shrugged. "That's the way it is," she said.

Thomas could see that it was. Before they'd left Citadel, things seemed to be getting tense between the Blue Collars and the White Collars. It was almost like some sort of caste distinction. The White Collars were seen as a kind of elite

class. Not as rich and powerful as the wealthy colonists, but close. Close enough, in fact, to be considered “other,” to be considered the *outsider*. The Blue Collars seemed to play the social role of serfs, or the working class. They were the grease in the wheels of society, and they knew it. Apparently, they resented it, but they had developed a sense of pride and elitism themselves about the fact of their social status. They saw themselves as better than the White Collars because they, at least, weren’t afraid to get their hands dirty, to work hard and risk their lives in the service of others.

This sense of identity, Thomas knew, was important. It allowed them to make sense of their lives, thousands of days spent in the cold and dark of space with little more than each other to depend on. They became family, and just like any family, they held to their members fiercely. So when someone left, as Reilly had dreamt of doing, they were shunned. They were cast out and set loose.

Thomas had seen this kind of thing in his day, too. Weren’t the Amish like this? The unbelievers, the ones who refused to join the church, weren’t they shunned and cast out, never allowed to return? Before he’d gone to sleep, putting himself voluntarily in cryo suspension, there had been plenty of street gangs around, and hadn’t they had similar rules? When you joined a gang, you became part of a family, and if you tried to “better” yourself, you were showing disrespect to that family. You were cast out, sometimes violently, and never allowed to return.

It happened with poverty groups, too. There was this culture of poverty in which families and friends clung to their lifestyle and situation and saw anyone who tried to get out as turning their backs on their roots. It was a concept that Thomas had always found strange, this idea that the pursuit of an education could be seen as a statement that you are ashamed of where you came from. Nevertheless, he knew that it happened, and it had obviously played a part in shaping this girl’s life.

“Are you two going to camp here or something? Come on!” Penny shouted.

They had been walking at a somewhat leisurely pace. “I hate to say it, but she’s right,” Reilly said. “If we’re doing this, we need to get a leg up.”

“Agreed,” Thomas said, and the two of them practically ran to catch up to Penny as she trudged on to the next chunk of wreckage.

Eight

Jack had a tight feeling in the pit of his stomach, in the nape of his neck, in his shoulders. He had a sick pressure in his head, a pounding that made it nearly impossible to think straight. He saw the world in red, through a veil of rage. And it all came from one inescapable fact—

The alien was a threat.

Jack and his crew knew it, but it seemed like most people were just ignoring the fact. Especially the damned White Collars. They seemed perfectly willing to ignore all the evidence, to forget that they were stranded on a world with an alien that had tried to kill them all.

He had no proof. But who needed proof? Who needed anything more than to look around and see the wreckage, the injuries, the bodies of the dead? Who needed to see anything more than that green-tinted freak who called himself a Captain?

Mitch Garrison had all but surrendered to the alien with his talk about the “chain of command.” He had convinced some of the Blue Collars to accept this thing as their leader, but Jack never would. And neither would his crew.

The problem was that damned speech.

Somar’s little soapbox revival against the Citadel module, with the sun glinting off it and blinding anyone who looked his way. That was the alien’s way of trying to turn everyone against Jack and his crew. It was his way of elevating himself, telling everyone that he was somehow better than them. It was the alien’s way of rising above his place, and that was something Jack and the others could never tolerate. Not from anybody.

We’re a *family*? Jack laughed about that. *Me, my crew, the rest of the Blue Collars—we’re a family.*

These White Collars and their little pet, Somar, were just vultures and carrion. They lived on the carcasses of good people. *Somar, telling us we’re a family, Jack thought, that’s his way of making himself our papa. He’s our daddy, and we’re all his helpless little children. Don’t stray to far, little ones, or you’ll die in the scary woods.*

It made him sick when everyone, including a bunch of the Blue Collars, had joined in with the scrub, shouting “Citadel” like a bunch of idiots, as if the word

meant *anything*. It was the name of a colony vessel. It was the name of a chunk of useless metal and wire that did nothing more than take up space now.

They weren't a *family*, they were *cows*, lined up to be slaughtered. And Somar was the butcher.

Jack wasn't fooled, and neither was his crew, and together they'd spent the past day or so finding others who weren't fooled either. They went to every Blue Collar in turn, talked to them, hinted to them that something had to be done about the alien, about the *threat*. And many of them had agreed. Some, too many, had said they wanted nothing to do with a mutiny. A *mutiny*! How could they mutiny against someone who never should have been in charge in the first place? How could it be mutiny if the Captain was just some leaf-brained alien trying to con everyone into sitting in place, stupid expressions fixed on their faces while he cut their heads off one by one? He'd murder them all before it was over and this ... this is the man—no the creature, the monster, the *thing*—they wanted to follow?

“Jack?”

Jack was shaken from his rage, from the sick feeling that ran like a fever through his entire body. It was an unwelcome interruption. Right now, the hate fed Jack like mother's milk. Being pulled away from it was like being pulled off of life support. He turned with near rage to the source of the voice.

It was Billy Sans. The young man had been working side-by-side with the scrub this whole time. Jack had written the boy off as a lost cause, a future casualty in the coming war.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“I ... I've been hearing things.”

Oh, that was it. He'd heard of Jack's plan of mutiny, and he was coming to, what, bargain? To blackmail him? To threaten him?

“I want in,” he said.

For a moment, there was the feeling of shuttles colliding in space. The sick, slow feeling of an inevitable, jarring change in motion. The sickness within Jack faded for a moment as he had to readjust his thinking.

But he didn't believe it. He thought it was a trick. This kid had been in private meetings with Somar the whole time, and Jack had assumed he was working with the alien. But maybe ... maybe the boy had been fooled and now was coming to his senses. Maybe he had realized the threat this thing posed to all of them. Maybe he had learned something that had turned him around.

“In? What do you want in on?” *Gotta play it cool*, Jack thought. *Gotta make sure he isn't here to save the scrub.*

“The, you know ... ” he looked around, making sure no one was in ear shot. “The mutiny,” he whispered. “I want to be a part of it.”

“No mutiny,” Jack said. “There’s no mutiny.”

Billy looked confused. “But, I heard ... ”

Jack grabbed him by the front of his uniform, startling him. “I don’t care what you heard!” he shouted. “Who are you with? Are you with that thing in the command center, or are you here? Are you with us? Are you with *me*?”

Again Billy seemed confused and shaken. “I said it, didn’t I? I said I wanted in.”

“You can say anything you want, but that don’t make it so.” Jack quickly grabbed him by the back of the neck, squeezing painfully. Billy let out a small cry and struggled to pull away, but Jack’s grip was too strong for him, his passion and fury were too much. They stopped him from squirming, as Jack leaned in close and whispered, “So here’s what I’m asking you, Billy Sans. Who are you with?”

Billy swallowed, and sweat was beading on his forehead. His face and his neck were beet red, and an artery in his neck undulated with his pulse, which Jack could almost hear thumping out of the boy. “You,” Billy said hoarsely. “I’m with you. I’m in. Like I said.”

Jack stared into the boy’s eyes for a long moment.

This is it, he thought. This is what I am. My whole life I’ve worked in space, worked with these people, and I never really knew who I was. I was a crewman, a crew chief even, but never anything else. Never myself. And now, looking at this boy, holding his neck so hard I could snap it with one hand, now I know who and what I am. I’m in charge. This is the first time I’ve ever been myself.

“Good,” Jack said. “Then go back to the command center.”

He forcibly pushed Billy back. The boy recovered, stared, blinked. “But ...”

“Go back,” Jack said intensely. “Listen. Learn. And when you have something, you tell me about it. We’re not ready to move yet but we’re growing. We will be ready. And you’re going to help us get there. You’re going to listen to that thing and tell me everything it says and hears and sees. And then, when it’s time, you’re going to have the honor and privilege of stabbing it in the heart. When I tell you, you’ll kill him.”

Billy hesitated, as if on the brink of deciding to change his mind, to walk away and refuse to be a part of the mutiny after all. Then, slowly, he nodded. And with that he turned and ran back towards the command post and the alien monster waiting inside.

There could be no doubt that communication with the orbital platform had been fully restored. It was receiving and even transmitting as normal. It had

relayed their communications with the shuttle, which was far too distant for radio contact, and that meant that at the very least the secondary systems were functional. If they could talk to the shuttle, they should be able to talk to the platform.

So far, however, Somar had experienced no luck. For hours he had patiently called to the platform, taking up the duty personally when Billy Sans had become tired and restless and, Somar assumed, angry. When Somar had relieved him, the boy had hurried from the communications equipment as if it were on fire. He obviously had urgent business elsewhere, though Somar couldn't imagine what it might be.

“Captain Alonzo, this is Captain Somar. The Citadel survivors are here with me. Rescue operations are in progress to retrieve the colonists and return them to this location. We are in need of medical support. Please respond.” It was the exact message he had spoken dozens of times already. It was his hope that whatever was happening on the station eventually would be resolved and someone would think to check the planet-side communications network.

It had occurred to Somar that perhaps something had happened to the crew on the platform. Perhaps they had perished, and the automated systems had brought them into orbit. If this was the case, then there would be no help coming, and they would have to make due with the resources they had available. It wasn't an unbearable situation, but it was unfortunate.

They had the shuttle, which according to recent reports from Mitch Garrison would eventually be able to leave the atmosphere again. After the colonists were recovered and returned safely to Citadel, a team could take the shuttle up to the platform and assess the situation there. In the meantime, Somar had the remaining engineers and crewmen working to repair Citadel as best they could. They were stymied by the lack of replacement parts, but once the shuttle returned with the components from the pods and the colony module, they should have everything they needed.

Everything depended on the shuttle. This made Somar quite nervous.

He ignored his anxiety, deciding to momentarily abandon the attempt to make contact with the orbital platform in favor of reviewing the work roster and agenda for the next day. They were going to attempt to bring Citadel's power distribution system online.

This would be an incredible boost to the battered humans. Electricity meant they could have lights. It meant heat for cooking, and hot water for bathing, once they could replenish their water supply. Bathing was becoming more and more of a necessity as the sweat of the hard-working humans brought with it odorous bacteria. Somar's sense of smell was no more acute than a human's, but at times

the rank odor seemed overpowering to him. His people did not produce such foulness.

But they did suffer from other maladies. For instance, Somar was becoming aware of the dryness of his skin. He hadn't had access to much water during the journey to this world due to the long cryogenic sleep. And now, because they were forced to ration water until they found a reliable source, he had been forced to make due with the small amounts allotted to each individual. No human guessed that this tiny share, which was barely enough for a human being, was completely inadequate for his needs. His people required much more water than the humans. On the Esool home world, each home had a large vat of purified, cool water in which the Esool would immerse themselves for short periods. The water would be absorbed through millions of ducts and pores in the Esool's skin, each of which served to sip a tiny bit of water into the body and distribute it everywhere. An Esool could go a great length of time without water or food at all, taking nourishment from the sun if need be, but they would inevitably have to spend time immersed in water in order to replenish the reserves in every cell of their bodies.

Somar had been working on this issue when the rest of the work that fell on his shoulders did not preoccupy him. There was a river close by, with shallow areas where he could sit and absorb moisture. It could also serve as a source for replenishing the water supply and putting an end to the rationing. But almost of greater importance, it could be used as a power source for the community that would grow here, once they placed turbines and laid power cables.

At this point, though, there was no community here. There were only survivors, refugees who needed to concentrate only on those things that mattered. What mattered most to these people was more water. Perhaps a great swath of their problems could be solved all at once.

Billy Sans returned to the command post, much to Somar's surprise. Though he had appointed Sans as his aide and given him many duties, Somar expected the young human to chafe against his authority. He expected him to be late for his shifts, to be short-tempered and sullen, and to show up only for the time he'd been assigned. No more and no less. These were the traits that Somar had learned were part of the human character. A sort of passive resistance undercut with belligerence. Perhaps, though, he had been wrong in this assessment. Or at the very least, he must have been wrong about Mr. Billy Sans.

"Welcome back, Mr. Sans. I hadn't expected to see you again until your next shift."

"I thought you might need help. You haven't appointed any other aides," he said.

It was true, though it wasn't actually an oversight on Somar's part. There simply weren't that many people available for that sort of task. Most were working hard on simply keeping themselves and those around them alive. Repairs were being made, shelters were being built, and the wounded were being treated. Somar had determined that Billy Sans, a Junior Grade crewman, was one of the few that could be spared to do administrative work. It had seemed at first that the young man had resented it, but Somar was pleasantly surprised to find him eager to help.

Billy's availability, however, was only part of why he was chosen. Somar found himself suddenly surrounded by enemies, and there were few he could trust. He had sent three such trustworthy humans out on a mission of vital importance. That left him woefully short of allies here among the survivors of the crash.

With tensions rising between the two castes and with a general mistrust and hatred rearing its head towards Somar himself, it was imperative that he find people he could rely on. Mitch Garrison had told him that Billy Sans was reliable and trustworthy, and that despite having "a few rattling brain cells," as he put it, he was prone to doing the right thing. It was as close to an endorsement as Somar could hope for at this point, and so he had assigned Billy to be his aide.

"I do indeed need help, Mr. Sans," Somar said, with a slight bowing nod. "You honor me. Thank you for your diligence and resolve."

Billy seemed taken aback by the Captain's gratitude. "Th-thank you," he said. He took his post with only a brief, quick glance over his shoulder at the Captain. He then began attempting further communications with the orbital platform.

Freed from that responsibility for the moment, Somar turned back to the next day's schedule. The day was already filled with vital tasks that could mean the group's survival, but by moving things around, reassigning certain personnel and including himself as the project leader, Somar found a way for a group to make their way to the river and bring water back to the camp.

Somar thought for a moment. Leading the team to the water would solve many problems for the community, but it didn't necessarily solve his personal issue. Hauling water was a difficult and arduous task as it was. To haul back the amount Somar would need would seem unnecessarily tough and perhaps even wasteful to the humans. There was no telling how they might perceive his need to immerse himself.

"Mr. Sans," Somar said, "there's a matter I need to discuss with you."

Billy turned in his chair, "Yes, sir?"

“I have a difficulty that I need to address. It’s a sensitive matter for me, and it may be something that you and the others will not fully understand. You know that my people have a botanical component to our genome?”

Billy blinked. “Plants?” he supplied.

Somar smiled lightly. “Yes, plants. My people are plant-like in many ways. And as such, some of our biological needs are different than those of humans.”

Bill was listening, warily.

“Our water intake, in particular, is different. I can drink water, just as you do. But every so often, I must submerge myself in a great quantity of water in order for my cells to be fully replenished.”

Billy seemed confused, “You have to take a bath?”

“Of sorts. On my world, we have vessels full of purified water that we use for this process. But here, I would have to make due with a natural source, such as the river west of here.”

Billy seemed to understand. “You need to go to the river and soak in it?”

“Yes, that’s correct. However, I’m afraid that the others may not understand this need. They are short on water. The rationing has helped, but they are thirsty and the supply is dwindling. That is why I want to organize a team to go to the river and bring water back to Citadel. However, while we are there ... ” he let the issue hang.

“You need to soak in the river, so that you have enough water, too,” Billy said, picking up the thread of the conversation.

“Yes, that is exactly right,” Somar smiled. “So you do understand?”

“Yes,” Billy answered. There was a flash of something in his eyes that Somar didn’t understand. Had he been somehow offended by this conversation? Somar knew that there were certain subjects that were taboo among the humans. Sex, for one, was something Somar found most humans were unwilling to discuss except in the most vulgar ways used by some of the Blue Collar crew. Biological functions such as the excretion of waste were also off-the-table topics. Perhaps this fit in that category somehow? It was, after all, a biological need.

“I apologize if I have made you uncomfortable, Mr. Sans.”

Billy blinked again. “Huh?”

“You seem to be experiencing some discomfort about this conversation. I regret that it is necessary.”

Billy smiled and laughed lightly. “No, Sir. I’m not uncomfortable. I just ... I was remembering something someone told me. It’s nothing.”

Somar nodded. “Very well. Then if you do not mind, I would like you to accompany me as my second in command on this mission. You will assume authority over the group while I am immersing myself. I will be incapacitated for

some time while my body replenishes its water supply, and so it will be up to you to lead the workers and keep them on task.”

Billy’s eyes widened slightly. “Me? In *charge*?”

“Of course. I can think of no one better suited for the job. You have proven yourself to be diligent and capable.”

Billy’s expression changed then—in fact, it fairly undulated as some unexpressed emotions played themselves out within him. Finally, his features stabilized, and his expression was one of resolve, unaffected by emotion. “Thank you, sir. No one’s ever put me in charge before.”

Somar nodded respectfully and returned to his own work.

Billy didn’t really get the alien. A few hours after he’d come in from his talk with Jack, Somar said, “We are finished with a day’s work. The night is upon us, and it is time for us both to rest. Return to your bunk, and tomorrow we will lead an expedition for water.”

Somar was like that. Everything he said was so ... *large*. Not that he used too many words or anything, it was more like everything he said had some meaning beyond what he was saying. It was like hearing a song but not quite catching the words, so you knew there was something else to it. And when you listened to it again, or thought about it later, you picked up more than you did the first time around.

And it was that kind of thing that was bugging Billy Sans. Because he was starting to realize that the rude, arrogant, smug leaf-brain was actually a decent guy who just came from a different way of life.

Billy had to admit, though, that he had been somewhat swayed by Somar’s sudden bout of confidence in him. He had come back to the command post this afternoon, even though his duty shift was over, so that he could start his *real* work right away. His work for Jack.

He had been sure it was the right thing to do ... to approach Jack and offer to help him with his mutiny. The Captain was a mean and rude leaf-brain at the time, not just someone from a different culture with a different way of life. And Billy had been on board with overthrowing him as the unlikely leader of the group of humans who had managed to survive crashing into this planet. But kill him? Billy had never wanted to kill anyone. When Jack had told him that, he hadn’t really wanted to be a part of the mutiny anymore.

Before returning to the command post, he had convinced himself that Jack knew better than him what should be done about the leaf-brain. He had convinced himself that even if they killed Somar, he would not be the one doing it. It would be Jack and his crew.

But I’m one of his crew, Billy thought. I joined his crew.

Billy shook himself. A few kind words and a position of honor, was that Billy's price? Was that all it took to get him to betray his own kind? Somar wasn't human. He was an Esool—the aliens that, until recently, had been at war with humanity. Hell, if Jack was right, Somar might even be the reason they were all stuck on this planet. He might be the reason some of the crew and colonists were dead and some were hurt badly.

Maybe he was even the reason they couldn't reach Captain Alonzo on the orbital platform, even though the communication system was working.

It had taken only a few minutes to walk from the command center to the makeshift shelter where Jack and his crew were bunking. The night was very dark because of the trees surrounding them. The only lights Billy could see were the campfires dotting here and there around the clearing and the weirdly stationary points of light that were the stars in the unmoving sky overhead. The moon hadn't managed to peek over the treetops yet.

Billy stepped to the entrance of Jack's shelter. "Jack?" he called quietly.

Jack stepped out of the shelter and into the dim and inadequate light outside. Billy couldn't make out his features very well. He couldn't really see his face. In the darkness he could be anyone, even a slightly green-skinned Esool who had to soak in a tub of water every so often. Billy shook his head.

"What is it?" Jack hissed.

"Tomorrow," Billy said, "he's taking a team to the river, West of here. He'll be alone and vulnerable for a while."

Did Jack smile? He might have. Billy wasn't sure. "Good work," Jack said, and there was definitely a smile in his voice. There was the sound of pride.

For some reason, it made Billy feel like throwing up.

Billy turned and walked away without another word. He couldn't have said anything anyway because the quiet sobbing wouldn't have let his voice pass.

Nine

Penny was the biggest pain in the neck that Thomas had ever known. He still felt there was more to her than the manicured nails and designer clothes, but some of that “more” included a snotty attitude and a sense of imperialism. On the morning after their first night on the path to the wreckage, Thomas awoke to find Penny in a snit.

“What do you mean *there’s no coffee!*” she fairly screamed.

Reilly was awake and had already broken camp. Except for Thomas’s sleeping bundle, everything was packed and ready to go. He rose from the ground, stiff and hurting in places he’d never felt before. “Morning,” he said sleepily, blinking at the light of dawn.

“It’s about time you got up!” Penny yelled at him. “Did you know we don’t have coffee? What kind of hike is this?”

Thomas managed to stand without losing too much dignity and rolled up his sleeping bundle, attaching it to the top of his pack. “It’s the kind where we have only limited resources and a job to do.”

“How can you expect me to wake up without coffee?” Penny asked.

Thomas shrugged. “Open your eyes and keep them that way?”

Reilly took up the taunt. “How about closing your mouth and keeping it *that* way,” she offered.

Penny looked at both of them and then screamed. It was the kind of scream people made when they were dying, and she was making it over a cup of coffee that hadn’t materialized on demand. “You people are *so sued* when we get back to civilization!”

Reilly blinked, then turned to Thomas and said, “Do we really need the princess with us?”

Thomas shrugged, “Extra set of hands. But I’m starting to wonder if that’s worth it.”

“You both think you’re funny, but all you are is a couple of low, useless ... *Blue Collars!*”

Reilly bristled at that and started step into the girl. Thomas managed to put a hand on her arm to hold her back. “Now, just wait,” he said to her. “Remember, Her Majesty hasn’t had her royal coffee yet.”

Reilly couldn't help herself, she first smiled then laughed loudly.

"Stop saying that!" Penny said. "I'm not a princess!"

"Then stop trying to rule us, and let's get going," Thomas replied.

With a huff and without waiting, she plowed ahead.

Reilly stood for a moment watching her go, then rubbed her eyes. "Are we going to have to deal with this the whole time?"

"God, I hope not. But I have to say, I could use a cup of coffee myself."

Reilly looked up to see that Penny was a good distance away, then handed him a thermos. "I made it this morning," she said. "Before she got up."

"You hid it from her?" Thomas asked. He was pouring coffee into the tin cap.

"Well, I wasn't going to," she said. "But the first thing she did when she woke up was say, 'I'm awake. Make me coffee.' I suddenly forgot we had any."

"Not nice," Thomas said sipping the still-hot beverage and savoring the sharp, roasted taste of it.

Reilly smiled. "Yeah," she said. "Not nice at all."

The wreckage had loomed over them all morning, and now they were finding that it was finally seeming to get closer as they moved. Thomas could see the outlines of creases in the metal where it had been twisted and mutilated by the crash. It made him shudder, and he was glad that neither Reilly nor Penny noticed.

This wasn't going at all the way he'd planned. Or *hoped*, anyway. Could he really say he had a plan, after all of this?

A conversation from a hundred years ago echoed in his mind as they walked. Thomas had struggled continuously to keep his memories at bay, to somehow will them out of existence. But the hike to the distant wreckage didn't require much concentration, and the conversation had lulled between the three of them. Each step Thomas took now was a melodic rhythm that hypnotized him slightly, causing his mind to wander. And, because his memories weren't all that buried and were certainly younger than the hundred years or so since that conversation, he remembered it clearly.

He was standing in an open field with two guards at only a slight distance from him. They were far enough away that they couldn't hear the conversation but close enough that, if need be, they could put several bullets into his back. That would be the price of trying to run, he knew. Several pieces of lead, hurled toward him via one of the most primitive forms of propulsion, striking him in red blooms, ending his life.

"Paris," the man standing before him had said. "John Thomas Paris."

It would be a hundred years before he would go simply by the name of Thomas. It would be out of necessity, because his birth name would come to mean something wretched and horrific. He would eventually be known as one of history's greatest villains. Hitler? Stalin? Bin Laden? Who are they? He was John Thomas Paris ...

"The bastard who killed an entire world," the man said.

"To be fair," Paris replied, "it was a colony. They hadn't actually reached a world yet."

There was no sense denying the outrageous accusations this man made. Paris had been tried and convicted of the crime. He hadn't been allowed to speak at his own trial. He'd been escorted by a platoon of Marines to and from the court until finally that too had become too risky, and he was then tried in the comfort of his cell. He had watched as he was sentenced on a live television feed.

"You are the most hated man in all the world," the man said. He was smiling. "Hell, you may go down in history as the worst humanity ever had to offer."

He had no way of knowing, he'd be right, Thomas thought to himself a hundred years later. *How could he have known?*

"You've taken me out of my hole," Paris said. "Are you planning on finally executing me?"

"Would we go to that much trouble? It'd be a lot easier to let one of the other prisoners discover that you're alone in the shower. One roofing nail later, and we no longer have a problem."

Paris nodded. The man had something on his mind, but he wasn't spitting it out. Maybe he expected Paris to protest. Maybe he thought he could get Paris to beg for his life. But he'd already begged for his life and lost. He'd already fought hard to prove he wasn't the psychotic murderer everyone thought he was. He had already gone way past the point where he could fight what was happening to him. He was helpless.

As helpless as the two hundred thousand men, women, and children who had died fiery, screaming deaths as the Earth's first colony ship exploded—an act of terrorism so profound as to alter all of human history forever. Though Paris would not know that until he was Thomas, more than a century later.

"Don't you wonder who I am?" the man asked him. He seemed genuinely curious.

"Not really," Paris shrugged. "You have some kind of authority, or you wouldn't have been able to pull me out of maximum security. And you're not afraid of me, because you have two guards who could snap my neck with their bare hands."

“They’d use their guns, of course,” the man smiled. “No one uses their bare hands to kill anymore, Mr. Paris. You of all people know that.”

Paris said nothing and stood silent. He was numb. He was dead, as far as he was concerned. After more than two years of incarceration, a sensational trial, throngs of reporters trying to get some sound byte out of him, Paris found he had very little left to say. He had said enough for his lifetime.

“I have an offer for you,” the man said. “One that you’ll take. Because I’m not going to give you any choice.”

“ok,” Paris said.

The man’s eyes widened with amusement. “They really have beaten you, haven’t they? You’re not half as feisty as you were two years ago.” He waved the comment off. “No, no. I’m wrong. You were a smart ass, but you were always quiet in your way. Always logical. And when they blew up *First Colony* you were right there, arguing calmly that you had nothing to do with it.”

Paris had been prepared to let the man keep talking, to let him say anything he wanted. He didn’t have the strength left in him to fight. He had spent far too many days and nights staring at the walls of the cell that confined him. He had spent too many hours with only a book as a companion—the old-fashioned kind, with paper pages that were already become rare, even a hundred years ago.

Paris had been robbed of anything of value—his work, his ability to produce—for far too long to care what anyone said to him anymore. But what he had not been prepared for was the word “they.”

“Who?” Paris said. He was suddenly aware that his mouth had gone dry and his voice had the croaking, rasping quality of someone who has been lost in the desert, without shade or water, for some time.

“They call themselves ‘Earth First.’ Ever hear of them?”

Paris nearly spat on the ground at the sound of the name. “Of course,” he said sourly. “Everyone thinks I’m one of them.”

“But you’re not, are you?”

Paris eyed the man closely. What was his game? What was he trying to get out of this conversation? Some sort of confession? But that would be useless, since Paris was already sentenced to life in prison. No possibility of parole. No hope of seeing the world outside his cell.

Except that here he was, standing in an open field with the sun on his shoulders and a slight breeze cooling the sweat on his forehead. “What do you want?” Paris asked.

The man smiled. It was the sort of mirthless smile that said there was no real joy behind it. “Earth First has taken up your cause, Mr. Paris. They have a plan to break you out of prison. They plan to help you escape.”

Paris said nothing. What *could* he say? Obviously the authorities knew about the plan and wouldn't let it happen. Unless ... "You're going to let them break me out?"

The man laughed. "Not hardly. No, we've already put operatives on the inside, both in the organization and in the prison where we're keeping you. Earth First thinks they have their own inside man, but he's working for us."

Paris blinked. "I'm confused, then. What is it you want? Why are you telling me about this if you're going to prevent them from freeing me?"

"I didn't say they were going to free you, Mr. Paris. I said they were going to break you out. They want to remove you from the prison and use you as a symbol for their cause. Of course, a symbol that adamantly refuses to agree with them or, even worse, *opposes* them ... they can't have that."

Paris caught on immediately. "They want to kill me."

"A martyr for the cause," the man smiled. "I bet you never realized how important you would become, back when you were helping build the colony ship."

Paris felt weak. He had thought he was prepared for any horrific thing that might happen to him. He had prepared to live out a quiet existence in solitude. He had prepared for limited human contact, none of it filled with love or friendship or companionship. He had prepared to one day be a hopeless old man, clutching some oft-read book in his wrinkled hands. But he now found that he hadn't really prepared to die. He had never given serious thought to dying because his sentence had been life.

"So ... I don't ... "

The man held up a hand to calm him. "Don't worry, Mr. Paris. We have no intention of letting you die." He waited and Paris felt a bit of relief. It must have been what the man was waiting for. "Of course, we have no intention of letting you live, either."

Paris blinked. He thought for a moment, trying to puzzle together this thing that was happening to him. His life had taken a turn two years ago, and he'd lost control of it. He'd been accused of murder. Many murders, actually. More murders than any single man had ever really been accused of before. The accusations were enough to end him. The public outrage, the desire for an overcrowded world to put the blame on *someone*, had taken over, and in the process, his life had ended. In that sense, anyway.

"What is it you want here?" Paris said finally. He was annoyed, and his annoyance showed in his voice. He took a slight step forward, and the two guards let their hands go to the guns hidden in their jackets.

“Mr. Paris, I’m offering you a chance to start a fresh, new life. Isn’t that wonderful?”

Paris paused. “What? I ... ”

“A new life, Mr. Paris. A new start. Of course, some changes will have to be made. Your name, for one. That’s easy. Your face. That will take some doing. We have plastic surgeons who are part of witness relocation, so they can be trusted to be discreet. Most of the time. But you, you’re a special case.”

“I don’t understand any of this,” Paris said. His mind was numb. His body was numb. He could barely think.

“Of course not, it’s a lot to process. I didn’t fully understand it myself, but the orders were quite clear. And they came from the highest source.” He laughed. “I don’t even have the clearance to *verify* them. In fact, I have nothing but an encoded message with a security level so high that I had to have my computer destroyed after reading it.” He shook his head, obviously bitter about the destruction of his equipment.

He paused, thoughtful. “I’ll explain it to you as best I can. My orders are clear. We can’t let them make a martyr of you. And if we leave you in prison, they will eventually find a way to get to you. One guard with a gambling problem or one cafeteria worker who sympathizes with their cause, and you’d be a corpse. The public would never believe that it wasn’t in our power to protect you at all times. They’d assume that we’d circumvented the laws on capital punishment and allowed you to be executed. Earth First would have its martyr, and we’d have egg on our face. And frankly, since we’re still struggling with the bad PR of the *First Colony* explosion, your death is something we just don’t need.”

Paris was calmer now. His brain was shifting back to normal speed. “Won’t you be accomplishing the same thing?” he asked. “If you make me disappear, won’t you be giving Earth First what they want?”

“Of course not,” the man laughed. “You ever hear of Elvis? Amelia Earhart? Michael Jackson? People still think they’re alive somewhere, living in robot bodies or clones or magic fairy circles. No body means no answers. And in the absence of answers, people make up their own stories. Oh, yes, you’re right to an extent. There will be many who assume we’ve killed you. But they won’t find any credible witness who has seen your body. And there will be just as many, probably more, that will assume there was some sort of government conspiracy to let you out of prison and place you somewhere in the world with a new identity.” The man laughed again. “It will be pretty amusing, actually. There will be sightings of you all over the world. The tabloids will run doctored photos of you having lunch in some dive diner in London or Istanbul or Cleveland. You’re

going to be the new Elvis! People will look for you everywhere, and they'll be sure to find you."

"Except you don't plan for me to be found," Paris said. "You're not going to kill me because then someone might discover it's me, and you'll end up doing Earth First's dirty work for them. But you have another option."

"Everyone always said you were smart. I knew you'd get it right away."

"Cryogenic stasis?" Paris asked.

The man nodded. "You'll be put on ice, Mr. Paris. You'll be out of our hair and out of the public's eye in a place where only the most paranoid would suspect you to be."

Paris thought about this. It was actually not a bad plan. He would get a new identity and a new face. And then, he would go to sleep. Almost like being dead, only he would wake up later, in a world that was no longer looking for him. "How long?" he asked.

"We thought we'd be conservative about it," the man smiled. "Say, a century?"

Paris felt his skin go clammy. He was pale and light-headed. He stumbled a bit, and the guards, thinking he was lunging, drew their weapons.

The man signaled them that it was ok, and they holstered the guns, reluctantly.

"You ok?" he asked, and for the first time, Paris thought there might be real emotion in the man's voice. Real concern. It was the first Paris had experienced in two years.

"Yeah," he said.

The man helped him stand straight again. He left a hand on his shoulder, as if he were somehow supporting him, helping him stand. "Mr. Paris, I want you to know that we're fully aware that you're innocent."

Innocent? That was a word Paris had thought never to hear again. Not, at least, as it applied to him.

"We've known for some time, actually. But the way it went, there was nothing we could do. Earth First did too good of a job framing you. They didn't even have anything against you in particular. They hated the program, that's all. They're non-progressionists. This business of moving out into the stars, colonizing other worlds, it's a danger to them. They feel that we've only just recently gotten our act together on *this* world. They think that once we fracture ourselves, we'll fall apart and be at war with each other again."

Paris had heard all of this before. He'd read about it, studied it. Too late, of course. He'd only looked at all of it since being accused of the worst crime in human history. He was touted as somehow being a part of this insanity, this

refusal to move forward. It was so *different* from him, so *outside* of him, so *opposite* of him that when he'd first read an article detailing his supposed involvement in the organization, he had literally laughed out loud, and then he'd vomited. How could anyone believe that he, a man who had spent every waking moment working towards the colonization of other worlds, could ever be a part of something as profane as Earth First?

"We know you're innocent," the man said again. "That's one of the reasons why some of us felt we should give you another chance. The government isn't quite as corrupt and evil as everyone thinks it is, you know. A world government is hard to run without some sort of corruption, but we're all as human as you are. You have more supporters than you realize."

Paris couldn't take this. He spun around, looking for the van that had carried him here. He wanted to leave this man, to go back to his cell, to sit in solitude and pay for the crimes of a useless organization that had an insane goal. But the van was gone. Another vehicle had taken its place. A limo.

"Mr. Paris," the man said from behind him. "Your new name is Thomas. It was my idea to let you keep your middle name. Sort of ... well, sort of an *homage* of sorts. In a minute, you'll take a seat in that limo, and it will take you to a facility where your face will be altered. And after two months of recovery, you'll be put in a stasis chamber. A hundred years from now, you'll wake up and ... well, what you do from there is pretty much up to you. Maybe you and Walt Disney can have lunch, eh?" The man laughed and, strangely, put his hand on Paris's shoulder.

It felt as cold as space.

"You ok?" Reilly asked him.

"Huh?" He'd been lost in hypnosis. He'd been daydreaming of a different time on a different world—a different life.

"You spaced there for a minute. I was asking you if we should check in with Mick and Alan."

Thomas stopped and mopped sweat from his brow with the sleeve of his shirt. He caught a glimpse of his hands. Somewhere along the way, he'd managed to shed the bandages all together, and no one had noticed. He looked at his hands for a second and noted that the skin was unblemished, unscarred. New. Everything old is new again. How many second chances would his body get?

"Yeah," he said, smiling. He shook himself. Reilly looked at him oddly. "Sorry," he said. "I was just thinking about something that happened to me a long time ago."

"Must have really been something," Reilly said. "I can't imagine it. What made you want to go into cryo for so long?"

Thomas shook his head. “It’s a long story. I guess ... well, I guess it was really the only option I had at the time. Life wasn’t going in the direction I’d had in mind.” He smiled.

Reilly waved a hand around them. “Is this more like what you had in mind?” she asked. “Stuck on an alien planet, hiking to a crash site? Oh, and let’s not forget about Princess Penny over there.” She nodded to indicate the young woman who had stopped in the shade of a stubby tree to drink from her canteen. She was about a hundred feet ahead of them now.

“I don’t suppose I had this in mind exactly, but believe it or not, it beats the alternative.”

Reilly thought about this for a moment as the two of them picked up the pace in an effort to catch up to Penny. “You must have had a bad time of it,” she said.

Thomas nodded slightly. “It was like the end of a world.”

They marched on for the next half hour and finally came to the hunk of wreckage. Penny was already moving purposefully toward it.

“Careful!” Thomas yelled to her. “We don’t know what we’ll find. It could be dangerous.”

Penny seemed to pay no attention. She was moving with purpose, and Thomas and Reilly struggled to catch up. They finally caught her as she stopped, staring wide-eyed at the plain before them.

It was littered with stasis pods.

“Oh my God,” Reilly whispered. “They’re *everywhere*.”

Thomas surveyed the scene, and then looked at the two women beside him. Reilly was clearly shocked by the site of the pods scattered over the terrain. Penny’s reaction was more enigmatic. She was quiet, for once. Her expression, though, was nearly blank. Her face seemed ... *heavy*. Her body language seemed to contradict the expression of her face, however. She wasn’t stiff, as if in shock, but was slightly sagging. Her posture was bent just so, enough that her shoulders sank by a barely perceptible degree.

Thomas wasn’t sure how she would react, but he did what he would do for anyone who was suffering. He reached out to her, placed a hand on her shoulder. “You ok?”

To his surprise, she didn’t pull away or answer with scorn. She stood and stared and slumped, as if she were unsure of where she was or what she should do. Then, slowly, she folded inward, collapsed, fell into his chest and began to sob.

“It’s ok, *shhh*,” Thomas said, comforting and holding her. “It’s going to be ok. I’m sure your parents are fine. We’ll find them, I promise.”

She couldn't answer as the sobs wracked her body, and Thomas found himself once again feeling ashamed for the way he'd thought of her. Of course, she really was a snot. He shouldn't blame himself for his opinions. But right now, at this moment, she was a human being who was scared and worried and tired. She might have led a pampered life before, but that had been suddenly yanked away from her. Now she found herself in a life she had not chosen, one that was out of her control entirely.

Thomas could relate.

He glanced at Reilly, who watched in concern for a moment before turning to survey the acres of scattered pods before them. "We'll never get through them all today," she said. "But we need to get going. Every second may count."

Thomas nodded. "Give her another minute, ok?"

Reilly gave a brief nod in return and found a tree to sit against, taking advantage of the slight lull to get some rest.

Penny sobbed a few more times, and then slowly, quietly began to come out of her grief. She suddenly straightened, pulling away from him and turning her face so he couldn't see. She sniffed indelicately once, dabbed her eyes with her wrists and then folded her arms across her chest as she defiantly looked out over the field of pods.

There was something about her then, Thomas felt, that made her seem *strong*. He had never been one to judge someone as weak because of a show of emotion, but he had assumed that her posture, her arrogance, her purposeful stride were all part of a cover she'd made for herself, and that the weeping and fear were what was really inside of her. He'd been wrong. She was strength, after all. And maybe she was spoiled and had some sense of entitlement, but it was just as likely for that to be the façade and the strength to be the real girl underneath, hidden out of necessity to accommodate her life as a wealthy socialite.

It had never occurred to him before that wealth and social status might be a responsibility of sorts.

"Can we save them?" Penny asked. "Can we wake them up, like you did me?"

"Maybe," Thomas said. "Reilly's right, we can't get to all of them today. But we can try. Let's get going."

Reilly rose and joined them as they took up the last leg of their journey to the pods. As they walked, she called Mitch and Alan on the wireless to give them a report. They responded by saying it would be another day, at least, before the shuttle would be fully operational. They could come now, though. Should they?

“No,” Thomas told them, taking up the wireless. “Get the shuttle back to full working condition. We may need to ferry people out of here and back to Citadel a handful at a time.”

The numbers were growing. It had taken only a short time to realize that they were going to have to wake people up. It was too impractical and sometimes too risky to leave people in stasis here. Thomas realized right away that in order to accomplish their objectives and keep the people alive, he was going to need all the help he could get. The more hands, the better.

Many of the people they rescued were willing to jump to and lend a hand as soon as they realized what had happened. Some, though, were like Penny. Entitled. Resistant. *Only*, Thomas thought, *Penny isn't even like Penny. Is she?*

Since breaking down at the sight of the pods scattered everywhere, Penny had been different. Still arrogant at times. Still making demands and expecting that people would meet them without question. But Thomas had been watching her, and when she met resistance, she paused as if thinking. He hoped that was it, anyway. It seemed like it. Like growth.

But he couldn't be too concerned with Penny right now. He and Reilly had their hands full with the colonists as they awoke. They hadn't brought enough provisions for everyone, and many complained of thirst or hunger or nausea. There wasn't enough food, water, or medicine to go around.

“There are kits in the pods,” Reilly said. “I almost forgot about them.”

Sure enough, each pod contained a small kit with emergency rations, including bottles of water and a minor first aid kit. As they moved the pods into rows, they pulled the kits from them, and Penny distributed them to people as they awoke.

Soon enough, a few of the colonists had recovered enough from their sleep that they were becoming a work force. And in due time, they had liberated well over a hundred people and had moved the pods into neat rows to be picked up by the shuttle at a later time.

Among the awoken colonists was a man named Taggart. He had been among the first few pods recovered, and he had caught Thomas's attention at once. For one thing, his pod was different than the others.

It wasn't the standard issue pod assigned to colonists like an airplane seat. It was tougher. It was built with more safety features, including its own set of atmospheric thrusters and a repulsion drive. The casing was made of the same adamant alloy used in the hulls of starships, and it was quite a bit thicker than the standard, due to the heat tiles. This thing could withstand atmospheric entry.

It wasn't so much a cryo pod as a miniature shuttle.

Taggart, it seemed, was a man of great importance. But despite this, he immediately took to helping them with the others, even before the effects of cryogenic sleep had fully worn off. He was a fit man with a great deal of stamina, and it wasn't long before he was out-pacing Thomas and Reilly and the others.

Thomas had to admire him. He was a natural leader. As people awoke, he spoke gently to them, encouragingly. And when they regained their strength, he assigned duties to them. He never made demands. He merely charged them with a duty and then turned away, utterly confident that they would do as they were told.

If anyone bristled, he would smile, clap a shoulder, or maybe laugh lightly and say something to the effect of, "It is tough, isn't it? It's hard to pull together after such a tragedy. Thank you for representing the views of these people. You are a good leader to them." And just like that, the person turned from a potential enemy to a staunch ally, willing to sacrifice comfort and dignity in the aid of others.

Thomas was busy with his own tasks, but on occasion, he would come side by side with Taggart. "You have a way with people," he said to the man.

Taggart smiled and shrugged. "They do what they do. I make suggestions and offer opinions."

"Yeah, but they take those suggestions and opinions and run with them because they trust you. That's not an easy thing to pull off."

Again Taggart smiled, then clapped Thomas on the shoulder and laughed, nodding. "Too right. You're a very observant man. And you're doing a fine job getting these people to safety."

Me too? Thomas thought. *He's handling me too?* He hadn't considered that somehow Taggart had insinuated himself into a leadership role on this mission. But now he saw it plainly. The way others turned to Taggart for answers and advice, for direction. What, for Thomas, had begun as a bit of truly wanted and needed help had turned into something else. What, exactly? Thomas wasn't sure, but it was giving him an uneasy feeling.

He returned to the work at hand, but first made his way closer to Reilly. When he and the pilot were out of earshot of everyone else, he said, "Keep an eye on Taggart, ok?"

"Why?" she asked. "He seems like a good guy."

"Yeah, he does."

"You think he's got some kind of agenda? He just woke up from stasis!"

Thomas nodded. "You're right, of course. I know that. And, I don't know, maybe I'm being paranoid. But there's something about him that isn't sitting

well with me. He's a natural leader, sure. But it's almost like he's simply ... *handling* people."

Reilly was quiet for a moment, looking off towards the tan, well-built man as he helped carry pods and gave gentle instruction to those around him. "ok," she said. "I'll let you know if I see anything that doesn't sit right."

Thomas nodded and went back to work.

Penny was trying not to panic. She was, after all, heir to the Daunder fortune and holdings. It wouldn't be dignified for her to break down here among these people, the way she'd broken down in front of Thomas.

She felt ashamed.

But below the shame, deeper within her, she felt a rising panic. They had opened hundreds of pods already, and she had yet to find her parents. This was enough to put her on edge, to frighten her to the point of curling up into a ball and sobbing. But it wasn't the worst of it.

She was unsure if they had ever been on the starship in the first place.

It was too horrible to imagine, that Daddy had gone through with his threat. It had been a joke, surely. A cruel joke meant to scare her into obedience. She was, she admitted, a bit rebellious. She spent her nights on the social scene and had more than once contributed to a scandal. She was known in the tabloids as a "party girl." Too rich to care about the little people and too bitchy to care about the rich.

But she wasn't really like that at all, was she? Sure, she loved the parties and the clubs. She loved being photographed everywhere she went. She loved being the center of attention at every event. Penny Daunder, heiress and party girl. But underneath it all she felt she was much more.

She was famous for more than just being a scandal. She was a climber. She had scaled rock faces in some of the most dangerous places on Earth and the Near Colonies. She was also an athlete, competing in competitions on several worlds. Competing and, most of the time, winning.

This she did without her family's money. She earned her way into these competitions by being good at what she did. Running, climbing, jumping ... the act of physical competition had been her way of rebelling against the pampered life her parents had insisted on for her. It was her way of telling them that she was her own person.

So what if she spent her evenings partying with celebrities and the *über*-wealthy? So what, if on occasion, she had too much to drink or did too many drugs and ended up with photos on some trash news site that no one of any importance ever read anyway? Was that any reason for her father to treat her the way he did?

“I’m cutting you off,” he had told her, as he had on numerous occasions.

She had laughed. First, because he would never do it, not for long. Second, because she had her own money now, thanks to her fame. He could never touch it and never take it away from her. It gave her power, even over him. And she was, after, all, the only child. She was the heir to the Daunder fortune and holdings. They’d never forget that.

But maybe this one thing, this final thing, had been too much. Even for her, maybe she’d gone too far.

It had all started when she had attended the Earth First rally.

She had no real interest in these people or their ideas, but Corey did. Corey, an A-list actor with a hundred movies under his belt, was very active in the anti-colony movement. He attended their events. He threw gobs of money at them. He threw wild, outlandish parties and invited all of the A-list crowd to attend, including Penny. These parties were, of course, thinly masked fundraisers and recruitment events for Earth First.

“Why does a group that’s been around for more than a hundred years need to recruit anyone?” Penny asked during one of these parties. She was spectacularly drunk and more than a little horny for Corey. The two had been dating for three months now, a record for both of them.

“Fresh blood,” Corey said. “A new generation to take up the cause.”

“What a cause,” someone said nearby. Penny never learned who. “We’ve already colonized other worlds. Why are they still kicking that old dead horse?”

“It’s about more than colonization,” Corey said. There was an intensity in his voice that Penny had never heard before. “Earth First wants to reunite humanity. The more we spread out, the weaker we become. Look at this war with the Esool.”

“The war is over,” a woman said. She wasn’t an A-list guest. She was someone Penny didn’t know.

“For now,” Corey nodded. “But what about the next war? What about the next alien species we encounter? How many humans will be born, live, and die out in space without ever knowing what it’s like to walk here on Earth, to feel the sun on their skin?”

This seemed like no real tragedy for Penny. Earth had become the center of things, but it was hardly the best of the worlds. She could think of at least a dozen Near Colony worlds that had cleaner air, better views, more beaches. There was one world, called “Arctica,” where you could ski year round on one of thousands of different mountains. The snow never melted, and it covered the entire world.

“We are spreading ourselves too thin out there among the stars. We’re forgetting our heritage. We’re forgetting who and what we are, and fooling ourselves into thinking we’re some grand species spread across the universe. But we’re not grand—we’re fragile. And we’re in danger. If we don’t pull everyone back home, to Earth, then we’ll soon die out as a species and leave a void in the universe forever.”

The crowd had gone silent, contemplating. It was pathetic, really, how everyone suddenly became somber about something so ridiculous. Penny couldn’t help herself, she laughed out loud. And because of that the tension broke and the rest of the crowd laughed as well.

For the briefest of moments, Penny saw an expression on Corey’s face that said he was angry with her. She worried that he might do something vulgar, like break up with her in front of everyone. But instead he said nothing.

Until later.

The argument was grand and loud, and involved a great deal of smashing things. Corey raged at her, screaming obscenities at her as she ducked and hid from the lamps that flew across the room. She had never faced fury before, had never thought anyone could dare to try to do her harm. But she was afraid now. She was scared for her life, because Corey wasn’t holding anything back. He wasn’t trying to laugh it off or smile or have sex with her or any of the things she’d grown accustomed to from men. He was trying to kill her.

“I’m so sorry!” she screamed, even though by this point she wasn’t even sure what she’d done wrong. All she knew was that she wanted him to stop. She wanted him to be nice and funny and sexy again. Throwing things, yelling, breaking everything in sight—she hadn’t signed on for this. She wanted the A-list parties and the envy of her friends. She wanted to show Daddy that she didn’t care what he said.

“*Bitch!*” he screamed at her. “You *humiliated* me!” He smashed another of the dwindling supply of lamps in the room. In a fury, he rushed forward, shoving aside the sofa that Penny was using as a barrier between the two of them. Instantly he had her pinned, slamming her into the wall of glass blocks that separated the room from the corridor.

Corey leaned in close, his face only inches from hers. His eyes were wide, and his nose flared. His mouth formed a snarl, and she could smell his breath, laced in alcohol. It was horrible. Wretched.

“Swear allegiance to Earth First,” he said, growling.

“What ... I ... ”

“*Swear it!*” he said, squeezing her throat with his hand.

“I ... I swear,” she croaked. “I swear!”

He held her for a moment more, staring at her. Then, slowly, he released her throat. He gave her a last push that sent her head bouncing off of the glass blocks. It hurt, but Penny was simply glad he had let go.

“I believe you,” Corey said. “You didn’t mean anything by what you did.” He seemed calm now, at peace. It was unnatural.

“In two days there is a Earth First rally on the California Shelf. You’re going with me.”

Penny was sobbing now, unable to keep herself from it as the fear and the pain took their toll. “Two days?” she asked, her voice going up in pitch. “But the luncheon ... ”

“I don’t care about your family’s idiotic luncheon!” Corey yelled. “It’s an excuse to bring together the rich and close-minded people who have robbed Earth of its greatest resource!”

Once again he pounced on her, but this time he merely smacked the glass blocks on either side of her head with his hands. Quietly he asked, “What is the Earth’s greatest resource?”

“P ... people,” Penny managed. Her eyes were squeezed shut, and she was prepared for him to attack her again.

Instead he reached out and gently stroked her cheek. “Yes,” he said quietly, tenderly. “People. You were listening,” he said profoundly. “I knew you were listening.”

Penny had gone from there as quickly as she could, and by the time she reached the family estate, she had decided to never see Corey again. He was *insane*! He had almost *hurt* her! The very notion of it suddenly caused her to seethe with anger. How dare he! How could he lay his hands on the heir to the Daunder fortune and holdings?

But he had dared. And the memory of it was still strong with her. With the memory came a fear that perhaps he might be able to get to her whether she wanted him to or not. She was on the social scene, after all. She went to the same parties he did. What would prevent him from reaching her?

And what about her reputation? Break-ups were nothing new, and nothing to be worried about. But if it ever got out that he had abused her? That kind of scandal would stick with her forever, and it would drive the questions of every reporter that ever talked to her for the rest of her life. She would become “the girl Corey beat up.” She would lose her identity. She would be nothing but a joke.

No, for the time being she had to stick things out with him. She would have to plan their break-up, orchestrate it in such a way that it was very public, very noticeable, and very scandalous. The scandal of the break-up had to outweigh

the scandal of the abuse by far. But for now, she would have to suck it up and go with him to his ridiculous, useless rally. She would have to support his insane ideas of pulling back the human race and abandoning the colonies.

Daddy was livid. “Do you know what this luncheon *means*?”

The memory of the violence and anger was too recent, and Penny found herself becoming afraid at her father’s tone. Fear, though, was quickly replaced by fury. After all, her father had never laid a hand on her. He had never attempted to hurt her. He had never smashed a room full of furniture while screaming at her.

So, in anger, she retaliated. “This luncheon is just an excuse for your rich friends to push their agenda for ... for colonization!”

Daddy blinked, confused. “What?”

“Earth First says we should pull people back to Earth! People are our greatest resource, and you’re just sending them out into space!” She barely knew what she was saying. In her desperation, she had latched on to the only thing that had come to mind. Her memories of Corey’s tirade were the clearest thing, at present, and so they were the memories she drew upon. They were the only fuel she had to burn. And even as she said it all, she felt sick to her stomach.

“Little girl, what sort of insane drivel has that boyfriend of yours put in your head?”

“I’m going to that rally, Daddy. And you can’t stop me!”

He paused, then yelled, “Maybe I should strap you into a cryogenic pod and ship your ungrateful backside to a colony world somewhere! It would probably do you some good, considering all you seem to care about here is causing as big a scandal as possible!”

She blinked, unsure what to say. It had been an empty threat, she was sure, but somehow it had hit her hard. Would he really send her away? Was he really so disappointed with her that he would rather she be light years from him?

“Daddy ... ”

“If you are not at that luncheon, then I will personally put you on a starship for the furthest world I can find!” he yelled.

And that was the end of the argument.

Daddy stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him. Penny flung herself onto a sofa and cried, though whether it was because of her father’s fury or because of Corey’s attack she wasn’t entirely sure.

Regardless of how her father might feel about it, Penny knew that she simply had to go to this rally with Corey. It was important, for the moment, to let him know that she was “with him” on this. She would just slip in and make a few appearances, get her photo in a few hundred articles, and maybe make a

comment or two about how precious a *resource* people were. It made her sick to think about it. She didn't want to spend even one second in Corey's company now. But she'd do it. And in a day or two, they'd be at some party, and she would accuse him of something outlandish, something so bizarre and strange that for a time, the press would have no choice but to hound him about it. Maybe she could claim he had sex with horses. He did own a private stable, which was pretty rare in this age, and was always the source of comments from Corey's detractors.

The rally had gone over pretty much as she had thought. It was mostly a bunch of people standing on a platform yelling things to the crowd. There were signs that had slogans such as "STAY HERE! EARTH NEEDS YOU!" and "EARTH FIRST!" It was all meaningless to Penny. She was there to play a role.

But when the rally was done and she boarded Corey's private shuttle she was relieved that he seemed to feel that the whole thing had been a success. He smiled and laughed, making jokes about things she didn't quite understand. At times, he put his hands on her in places she no longer wished him to touch. She endured it. And finally, the shuttle settled on the pad near her home, and she left Corey sitting in the passenger bay, his idiotic smile still flashing. She couldn't resist turning back, just before the door lowered. "Saddle up, cowboy," she smiled, coy.

He didn't get it, of course. Took it as some sort of sexual innuendo, she was sure. The door to the shuttle closed, and the craft lifted off as she stepped down the steps and took the limo back to the house.

When she arrived, her intention was to slip quietly up to her room. She took the kitchen entrance, passing by servants who were busily preparing meals. The back stairs were just outside the kitchen door, and it was her best chance to avoid her father.

"Penny!" her father shouted as she crested the stairs. He was in the hall near her room, carrying what appeared to be an empty suitcase. "Get your bags packed."

Penny blinked. "Are ... are you serious?"

"Pack, Penny. We don't have much time. We're boarding a colony vessel that's leaving in just a few hours!"

Penny was taken aback by this. She was shocked, actually. Was he going through with his threat? Putting her on a ship to some distant world, simply because she had skipped a luncheon?

"Daddy, I'm sorry!" she said. "I ... you don't understand, I had to ..."

"Penny, dear, I do not have the time. I must corral your mother and get the two of you going. The luncheon kept me far longer than I had expected, and we

simply must get going this instant!”

He rushed away, suitcase in hand. Penny felt a sudden wave of relief. This wasn't some punishment. This was just one of her father's crazy "adventures," when he would uproot the three of them for a few weeks and carry them along on some business venture or pseudo-vacation.

He had done this sort of thing all her life. So why had she been so afraid that he was going to send her away? Maybe it was just some left over feeling from her experience with Corey. Maybe she was just being paranoid.

She went to her room and packed. She would only need a few things, actually. Her years of competing off world and climbing rock faces in far-off lands had taught her the value of traveling light. Besides, it gave her an excuse to buy more things wherever they went, didn't it?

She paused for a moment when she caught her reflection in the mirror. There, on her neck, was a thick covering of make-up. She had blended it well, no one suspected a thing. But she knew what was under it. The bruises had shown up during the night, and they were purple and awful. They were small, though. Easy to miss. The make-up helped.

She thought about Corey and about the Earth First rally. What would all of them say if they knew she were boarding a starship and heading for some colony world? Well, she'd have to be sure to tell them about it. She opened a passive channel from her comm and sent time-delayed messages to everyone she knew, especially people who were known to be publicity whores. They would be there to see her off at the shuttle pad. And with them, would be hundreds of members of the press. Get that many of the rich and famous together in one place, and there are sure to be cameras.

As she hoisted her suitcase and made her way into the hall, she practiced the sound byte she would say before the shuttle doors closed. "Earth First is nothing but a bunch of imbeciles who are too afraid to fly!" And then she would pause, look into the lens of a camera, smile, and deliver the final blow. "Saddle up, cowboy."

That would do nicely.

Now here she was, desperate and alone and frantically searching for her parents. With every pod they opened, there seemed to come a bitter disappointment and the confirmation of her fear. Was it possible, she asked herself over and over? Would they have fooled her like this? Would they have put her in stasis and then slipped quietly back to Earth on the shuttle?

Would they send her away?

She fought the urge to sob as another pod opened and some man who was not her father stumbled out. Thomas, the White Collar engineer who had been bossing her around for the past couple of days, came to her.

“Still no luck?” he asked quietly.

What did he expect? She would fawn all over him for giving her a hug while she was crying? Did he think she was in love with him or something? “No, I haven’t had any *luck*,” she snapped.

He held up his hands in surrender. “ok,” he said. “Penny, look, I know you’re worried about them. We have a lot of help now, though. I’m sure we’ll find them eventually. Why don’t you take a rest, ok?” He nodded to where the pods were being placed in rows. “Taggart has set up a place for people to get something to eat and drink.”

Penny blinked. “Taggart?” she asked.

Thomas nodded. “Yeah, you know him?”

“He ... ” she paused, unsure of what to say. “My father knows him. I think they were doing business together.”

“I see,” Thomas said. “Seems like a nice enough guy.”

For some reason, that felt like probing. She thought that maybe Thomas wasn’t being entirely truthful about how he felt about the man. “He’s very rich. The richest man in the colonies,” she said.

Thomas looked up and watched Taggart for a moment. Penny watched Thomas. Was he jealous of Taggart? Now that someone of real power and authority was here, was Mr. Thomas feeling left out?

She wanted to smile, but it didn’t seem that funny to her. She didn’t know Thomas that well and had only met him a few days ago. But she suddenly felt as if she knew he was bigger than that. He was, somehow, *beyond* the need to be in charge. It was the kind of realization that startled Penny less because it might be true and more because she, herself, had thought of it.

“How well do you know him?” Thomas asked suddenly.

She shook her head. “Not very well. We went to different kinds of parties. He and Daddy used to play golf together. I’ve met him a few times.”

Thomas looked on for a few minutes then turned back to her, smiling. “Get some rest, ok? We’ll find your folks.” And with that he walked away.

Penny found that she wasn’t sure how she should act. This guy, Thomas, seemed to be quiet and kind of a jerk at the same time, but then he would let her cry all over his chest. He was in charge, but he didn’t have a problem letting someone else tell people what to do. And even when she was being a bitch ...

Well, he was pretty good about it. She knew she'd been kind of snotty lately, and he'd said some things that really pissed her off. But the truth was she wasn't as mad at him as much as she was scared for herself. And maybe he made her feel a little better. Whatever.

Penny went to where Mr. Taggart had set up the food. The man was giving instructions to everyone, telling them what was next. He looked up and spotted her, then made his way to her.

"Penny Daunder?"

"Hi, Mr. Taggart."

He laughed. "I never expected to see you here! Are your parents here, as well?"

She tried not to react. She tried to smile and say that they would come along soon. They were likely safe and among the unopened pods. But instead she began crying again. She shuddered uncontrollably as Taggart rushed forward, engulfed her in his arms, and held her.

"Can't ... can't find them," she sobbed.

"*Shhhh*, it's ok. It's fine, little one. We'll find them. I promise that."

It was the second time someone had said these things to her, the second time someone had held her like this. But it felt so ... *different*. It was wrong somehow. It wasn't as *true*.

Penny's tears stopped, along with the sobs, and she pulled from his embrace. He kept his hands on her shoulders and squared her to him, looking down into her eyes. "Penny, it will be fine, I promise. We will find them."

She nodded, and Taggart, smiling, wiped away one of her tears and then went back to the work of leading everyone.

Thomas was right, Penny thought. He seemed like a nice enough guy. But deep down there was something about him that she didn't like. Something *familiar*.

After a while, it hit her. And when it did, she shuddered.

He reminded her, she realized, of Corey.

Ten

The expedition for water started early in the morning. Somar had met individually with each of the party the night before, explaining to them the task ahead. For the time being, he told them, they would gather water in containers and bring it back. Along the way, they would survey a route for running power lines and plumbing. The next phase would take place the following day, when they would concentrate their efforts on erecting a hydroelectric system and water pumps. After that, they could run pipes and cables along the same route, and the Citadel community, as he'd taken to calling it, would have power and running water once again.

This had immediately lifted the spirits of the men and women he'd spoken with, which was exactly what Somar had hoped. They each went out in their individual excitement and spread the news that things were getting better. Somar had spaced them out as he talked with each of them so that the entire community would be inundated with wave after wave of exciting, positive news. Just as the trickle of excitement might have started to fade, another crewmember would come along and say, "Did you hear? Running water in a few days!"

It had the desired effect. The camp was definitely picking up in spirit. Somar now heard laughter and pleasant conversation. The hope of these amenities was enough, at least for the moment, to take their minds off of the terrible events that had brought them here.

Now they were off, and as they left the camp cheers and shouts and laughter followed them. Somar, leading them with Billy Sans at his side, could feel the adoration of the people and knew that it meant they were becoming the community he hoped they would be. He also knew that it depended entirely on what happened over the next week, and how quickly and surely they could deliver on the promise of water and electricity.

Water was vital. So was power. But of more importance, greater than anything else, was hope. If there were any major setbacks on this expedition, then they ran the risk of the community losing hope or having it dashed. Somar prayed silently that they would run into no such problems and would return victorious.

Billy Sans was quiet beside him. While the rest of the expedition chattered and joked, Billy stuck by Somar's side and said very little. Somar didn't mind, of course. He was used to moving in silence. With the humans, it felt almost as if he were dragging along a parade of some kind. Where he was quiet and contemplative, the humans were largely loud and boisterous. He had come to expect and accept this as typical human behavior. And so it was that since Billy Sans was not laughing and talking, Somar suspected that something was wrong.

"Mr. Sans, is your health suffering?"

Billy started. "N-no, sir. I'm fine."

"You seem unusually quiet. I worry that the exertion of the past few days might be taking its toll on you."

Billy looked at him for a moment. Somar was unable to read the expression on the young man's face. He had spent a great deal of time with the humans so far, but they were so complex. They wore every feeling and emotion on their faces, in the way they held their bodies, in the timber and tone of their voices. It was like trying to pick out a meaningful story from someone who chattered constantly about anything that was in his or her head. Which, Somar realized, was another trait that many humans possessed. He was learning much about humanity, but it was taking a great deal of time.

"Captain, do you have any family? Back on Esool?"

Somar nodded. Sudden changes in the topic of conversation were to be expected from humans. What was interesting was that they were not always as unrelated as they seemed. Humans had a fairly powerful gift—to be able to relate a variety of concepts into one meaning. "I do. Our culture is a little different than what you are used to, however. Let us just say that I have many children."

"No wife?" Billy asked.

Somar hesitated. He was unsure what might be considered too "alien" to Billy. He knew from conversations with several of the high-ranking human officers he'd met, that the topic of procreation among his species was strange and disturbing to them. And yet, despite what seemed to be revulsion on their part, the humans always seemed to come back to procreation as a topic of discussion. They were infinitely curious about sex, it seemed. The Esool considered sex to be as mundane a topic as any other, not usually worthy of discussion. After all, all Esool performed it the same way, whenever there was need. To the humans, though, sex was akin to "recreation." And so, just as he'd been asked about sports and books and films on his home world, he would be asked about sex. Albeit more discreetly than when asked about the other topics.

“The Esool are different than Humans when it comes to ... interpersonal relationships. We have mates. But monogamy isn't a practice among my people.”

Billy considered this for a moment. “You have more than one ... mate?”

“Many. Some I know, some I do not.”

“What?”

For the first time, Somar smiled. He knew that this was usually when humans became most interested. “Many times, we mate with whomever is available. This may be difficult for you to understand fully, Mr. Sans. I apologize if I confuse you.”

“Your people, they don't get married? They don't fall in love?”

“Oh,” Somar said, smiling, “We love. One of my mates, Martome, is my fondest. She and I make a point to meet at least once per year to mate. She has borne more of my offspring than any other Esool.”

Billy shook his head. “Sounds like a wife to me,” he said.

“In a sense, I suppose that is true. I have a particular fondness for Martome. However, among my people mating is something done for a purpose. And it is not limited to one bloodline. We mate because of biological need.”

Billy nodded. “So you do have family. A big one.”

“Many sons and daughters,” Somar said, feeling a swell of pride. “And many grandchildren. Since the Expansion began, my progeny have made their homes on new worlds, and they carry me with them. My family is very large indeed.”

Billy walked on in silence, and Somar contemplated their conversation. There was a thread here, he was sure. Something related to Billy's present mood.

“I guess I never thought about you having a family,” Billy said. His voice was quiet, pained. “Do you miss them?”

“I only know a few of them personally,” Somar said. “Many of my children were born to random mates met during star travel or battle. I never knew their names.”

“What!” Billy said, shocked.

Somar nodded once. “That is the way of my people, Mr. Sans. We are all part of the community, and we all share in the responsibilities of each individual. When I mate, my offspring become part of the whole. They are not mine, as you might perceive it. They are part of the Esool. They become the responsibility of every Esool everywhere, until they are able to act as individuals.”

Billy thought about this for a moment. “So, you don't know your parents?”

“I know my mother. My father, I believe, was a prospector who helped chart some of the first worlds we settled. I've never met him.”

Billy laughed, and Somar looked at him, curiously. “Sorry,” he said. “It’s just, I never met my father either. He and my mom were both space rats. They met on a long haul. Mom told him she was pregnant just before they went into cryo for a few months, and when she woke up, he was gone.”

Somar absorbed this for a moment. “He abandoned you and your mother?” It was something Somar had learned early on, that humans were capable of thinking only of themselves. And because they lacked the sense of unity that the Esool possessed, the family unit became much more important. For a father to leave his mate and his child ...

Billy shrugged. “We got by. We had the crew to look after us.”

Somar smiled. “Yes. The crew was your community. I’ve heard about this. It is much like the way of the Esool. We have more in common than we might first have suspected, Mr. Sans.”

Billy suddenly seemed startled.

“I apologize, have I offended you Mr. Sans?”

“N-no. No, sir. It’s just ... well, I think you’re right. You’re more like us ... more like me than I thought at first. I was just surprised, that’s all.”

Somar nodded. “I understand. No matter what our differences, however, we are all part of one community now. For the foreseeable future, at least. This is why we travel to the water. I have my personal need, of course. But it is of much greater importance that we get water and power to the people of Citadel. Especially now that the rescue team is waking the colonists. When they arrive, would it not be best if we could greet them with clean water and hot meals and open arms?” Somar smiled.

Billy smiled back, “Yes, sir. That would be best. I can see it now.”

Somar nodded. He liked this young man. “You are a good person, Billy Sans. You have the heart of an Esool.”

Billy laughed. “I guess so,” he said. Then, without explanation or apparent cause, his face paled and his eyes widened slightly.

“Mr. Sans? Are you ill?”

“No, Captain. I’m fine. I ... just can’t wait to get the water flowing. It’ll be nice.”

Somar nodded. “It will indeed.” And the two of them walked on with the rest of the team in tow.

The river below them had cut deeply into the terrain, leaving sheer, cliff-like banks on either side of its passage. The banks were mostly soil with some rock

here and there and trees hanging so far over that they looked as if they might fall at any moment. The team made its way down the slope of one embankment, through the brush and trees, and found a rocky basin where water had pooled. The river flowed on from this point, going into rapids a bit further downstream.

Billy looked at the surrounding banks and brush and trees with a growing sense of dread. This place, this area, was perfect for an ambush.

Somar was directing the team in their duties. He had them unload the equipment and begin setting up the workstations. He had the technicians test the water for purity and then asked everyone to fill the containers they had brought. This he did further up stream from the basin, around a slight bend. This spot would provide cover for what he was planning next.

“What can I do to help?” Billy asked him. He was desperate to help the man for some reason. Desperate to do something good.

“Nothing, Mr. Sans. If you will keep watch I will submerge myself for a few minutes to absorb the water.”

Billy nodded and walked a bit upstream, watching the bend in the river.

Somar took off his clothes and laid them on one of the larger rocks. Billy couldn't help but stare every now and then. The Captain was now completely naked, and his skin had a distinct hue—mostly green but also a bit brown in patches. Was this the dryness of being low on water? Was he withering in spots, like a plant would? The Esool, plant-based life forms, were so strange and weird to Billy. He had resented the fact that one of them was in charge here. But now, looking at this man as he slipped into the basin and submerged himself entirely, Billy could see that they really weren't that different after all. Plant-based, maybe, but still human. Human-looking anyway. Close enough that Billy was starting to feel a sick knot in his stomach.

“Sans,” he heard someone whisper. He turned to look at the tree line on the bank above. There, hidden by the brush, was Jack. Was he alone?

No. The others, his crew, were with him. They were hidden further back in the brush. Now Jack pushed through and climbed down the embankment, coming to stand before Billy. “The alien's in the water?” he asked.

Billy said nothing and did nothing. He looked at the bend in the river and wondered how quickly the others could get here if someone shouted to them.

“Sans ... *Billy*,” Jack said, putting a hand on Billy's shoulder. “Don't lose your nerve on us. This has to be done.”

Billy felt slimy with Jack's hand on him. He stepped back. “Look, I don't think this is a good idea, Jack. Somar's not really that bad, ya know? I mean he's a good guy.”

Jack's expression changed. His face became twisted. His nose rose and crinkled at the bridge. "Martins!" he shouted over his right shoulder.

Ted Martins came scrambling down the bank, followed by five other members of Jack's crew. In his hands, Martins carried one of the molecular disc guns that were supposed to be under lock and key back at Citadel. When he reached the bottom of the bank, he handed it to Jack.

Jack took it, sighted down the barrel, then looked up at Billy and shoved the gun into his hands. "I told you when it was time I'd give you the word and you'd kill the scrub. Well, it's time Billy Sans. You can stand here, now, with the real people. Or you can stand with that ... *thing*. But if you pick Somar, you're picking a firing squad, you got it?"

"Jack, look ... "

"Take this and shoot that bastard when he comes out of the water!" Jack shouted, leaning in so close that bits of spittle hit Billy in the face. Against his own volition, Billy took the gun. He held it loosely in his hands, as if it might suddenly wriggle and strike at him.

He turned slowly to face the water. Somar had been under for some time. When he came back out, he would immediately see Jack and the others. And Billy. Holding a gun. The thought was suddenly repulsive to him. Billy let the gun fall to the ground and kicked it away.

He turned to face Jack. "I can't let you do it."

Jack screamed in rage and leapt at Billy, punching him square in the jaw. Billy fell hard to the ground, and the rest of Jack's crew jumped him in an instant, kicking him hard.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the others—the team that had come to bring water back for the colony—as they came around the bend. *They'll see Somar*, he thought absently as someone connected hard with his ribs. This, for some reason, seemed more terrible than the beating he was getting.

"Hold!" someone shouted. The kicking suddenly stopped, and Billy found himself sprawled on the rocky ground. Jagged stones cut their way into his side and his back. His hands were bleeding from a thousand scrapes and cuts, and his ribs felt like they might be broken to bits. He coughed, and the pain nearly made him pass out.

He looked up to see Somar standing waist deep in the water.

Jack leapt for the disc gun, which lay a few feet away. "No!" Billy cried, scrambling to get to it first. The others in Jack's crew kicked him again, kept him down.

Before he knew it, Jack had the gun in hand and stood, raising it to point squarely at Somar. The alien did not move.

“You’ve had this comin’,” Jack said. He was grinning, and his eyes were wide. He looked ... insane. The only word for it was insanity.

Far worse than the beating, the cuts and scrapes, than any physical injury he’d suffered, Billy felt the sickening, gut-twisting guilt of having caused this. The man, Somar, had done nothing but try to lead them. He’d done nothing but help them survive. And Billy had sold him out, for no better reason than he’d thought the man was cold and rude and so very different. And now, it seemed, Billy would be the cause of Somar’s death.

And mine, too, he realized. His betrayal of Jack would end with the gun being turned on Billy as well.

Somar made no move. He simply stood in the water, watching. What was he waiting for? Why didn’t he run, or at least dive into the deeper water at the center of the pool? Why didn’t he call for help, at the very least?

Jack raised the gun, casually took aim, and fired.

“No!” Billy cried. There were similar shouts from the team behind them as some raced forward. Billy watched as two discs hit Somar, one lopping off his left arm while another sliced through his chest and emerged on the other side, flying on. Somar staggered backward for a moment, then fell back into the water, disappearing into the pool.

Jack turned, aiming the gun at Billy, and the others, who had nearly reached the spot where Jack’s crew stood, stopped in their tracks. “Anyone who worked with him is our enemy,” Jack spat.

Billy was staring up at the slotted barrel of the gun. He was aware that any second now a molecular disruption disc would fire down the length of that barrel and slice his head in two.

He’d be dead, but at least, in the end, he had tried to stop the evil he’d started. This was his fault, and he deserved to die for Somar’s death. He deserved to die for betraying his Captain.

Jack settled the gun, preparing to pull the trigger, when one of Somar’s team shouted, “Look!”

All eyes turned to look back at the water. Somar rose, slowly. He staggered, naked, out of the pool. The stump of his left arm waggled and writhed as he moved forward. The hole in his chest closed, slowly. And before their eyes, a sprout formed on the stump of his left arm, budding into a bicep, a forearm, a wrist, a palm, five digits. As they watched, Somar’s arm grew back to what it had once been. The group, both his team and Jack’s crew, stared in a mix of shock and horror.

Jack screamed in what Billy thought might be a jumble of frustration, rage, and fear. He raised the disc gun once again, taking aim.

Billy wasted no time. He grabbed one of the sharp, jagged rocks that had only moments ago dug into the skin of his side. He quickly leaped to his feet, raised the stone, and drove it hard into the back of Jack's neck.

In a convulsion, Jack pulled the trigger on the disc gun, but the aim was off. The disc sailed wildly, striking a tree across the bank of the river. The damaged trunk folded and the tree fell slowly into the river.

Jack stood, swaggering, for just a moment. And then he, too, fell. Like the tree, Jack tumbled forward with his face in the river. Dead.

The gun dropped to the ground, and Billy quickly scooped it up. He jumped away from Jack's crew and held the gun on them. He was prepared to fire if they wouldn't back down. He felt it within himself, where yesterday there had been no room for thoughts of murder. He was prepared to kill every one of them with whatever remained in the clip of the disc gun. There would be a few thousand shots in there, he knew. More than enough to slice these men into not much more than atoms.

"Hold, Mr. Sans," Somar said. His voice was weak and quiet. He stepped forward and stood beside Billy, surveying Jack's crew.

They were scared. All eyes drifted, inevitably, to their leader. Jack still lay face down in the river, and the slight current caused his head to bobble and bang into one of the medium-sized stones that broke the water's surface, now coated in a scrim of blood. From here they looked to Billy, who had the gun trained on them. But their real fear, the unmasked and unhidden fear that dominated their gaze, was directed toward Somar. The Captain had proven himself to be far more alien than they had imagined. He was immortal, they must have thought. He couldn't be killed. But he could and would kill them all.

"Your leader is dead," Somar said. Some of the strength had returned to his voice. "What path will you now choose?"

They looked at each other, helpless to understand.

"Will you choose to join your leader, face down in the river, or will you join the community here? Will you die a pointless, useless death, or will you become one with your people? Do humans have to die to be at peace?"

It was shocking language, but it worked. The men who had only a moment ago been eager to see Somar die now bowed their heads, refusing to look at him. They suddenly found the ground to be the thing that drew their attention. They said nothing at all.

Billy lowered the gun, then handed it to Somar. "I was one of them," he said simply.

"I know," Somar said.

"You do? But ... "

“They came knowing I would be vulnerable. You are the only one who knew where I would be and what would occupy me. You had planned to betray me.”

He said it plainly with no anger or malice. He wasn't accusing Billy, he was naming his sin. And in naming it he seemed to be forgiving it.

“Captain Somar,” Billy said, feeling tears burn in his eyes, “I'll take any punishment you feel I deserve.” As he said it, Billy knew he meant it. He was prepared even for death if that's what the price of betrayal would be.

Somar suddenly raised the gun and aimed it at Billy's throat. He locked eyes with him and said slowly, “Do you consent to die, Billy Sans?”

Billy swallowed. He blinked. He took a deep breath and said, without wavering, “Yes, Sir.”

“What path do you choose?” Somar asked.

Billy paused and thought for a moment. “The one I should have chosen in the first place,” he said. “I choose to be a part of the community.”

Somar stared him down, and then lowered the gun. He looked up at the team that had accompanied him to the river. He looked then at Jack's crew. And finally his eyes rested on Billy. “Mr. Sans, please take charge of the water collection team at this time. These new recruits are no doubt eager to help bring water to the people of Citadel.”

There was a shocked moment of silence as everyone looked at each other, wondering what to make of this. “Sir,” Billy said, “We'll get right to work.” He motioned for Jack's crew, now part of Somar's team, to join the others. As they did so he glanced over to see Jack's body still lying on the bank of the river. “Captain Somar, should we bury Jack?”

“No,” Somar said.

There was a moment of quiet outrage among his crew. He was, after all, someone they had followed and respected. “But Captain ... ” Billy started.

“I will take care of his burial myself,” Somar said. “He was a man fighting for his beliefs, and he will be honored as such.”

The quiet of the group now turned to astonishment, even reverence. And as Billy led them back upstream to where the water containers would be filled, he heard the starts of whispered conversations. Could it be, they all asked, that Somar could be so forgiving? Could he really respect life so much, that even his enemies deserved an honorable burial?

Billy knew that was exactly how it was. And once the team was back at the task of gathering water, now with new recruits to help, he made his way back to Somar. Silently he joined the Captain in digging a grave high on the embankment. Somar was dressed in his uniform once again, and was silent as he worked. Billy didn't interrupt. He merely helped dig, and when it was time, he

helped place Jack's body in the grave and covered it with dirt. When it was done, Somar took a knife from its scabbard on his side and sliced into the flesh of his hand, letting his blood fall on the grave of his enemy.

Billy, who knew he would not heal as quickly or easily as Somar would, took the knife and did the same, before Somar could stop him or object. And there, over a grave on the bank of a river on an alien world, human and Esool blood mingled and soaked into the soil.

Mitch tightened the final bolt as Alan put their tools and gear into stowage in the cargo bay of the shuttle. It had taken longer than he would have liked, but the repairs had gone surprisingly well. In fact, with the parts they'd scavenged at the crash site they'd actually managed to make the shuttle space-worthy again. The environmental systems had been easy to replace with parts from the colony module, and the thrusters and propulsion systems had been a cinch to patch up and repair now that they had the parts they needed. They had stayed to take a risk on fixing the shuttle, just to get it to a point where it could fly reliably. Now it was fully repaired. The risk had paid off bigger than they'd hoped.

And yet, Mitch felt uneasy.

It had started as a general sort of anxiety. He and Alan had worked tirelessly at removing and repairing the components they had needed. They had a singular goal—fix the shuttle and get the colonists back to Citadel. But as they had worked, in relative silence, Mitch began to feel as if they were not alone among the wreckage. It was beyond paranoid, and maybe even a little cliché, to think that someone—or some *thing*—might be watching them. He'd seen enough horror vids to know that he was being paranoid. Still ...

There were the malfunctions. The external data and power port, for example, had been a particular problem. He had fixed it by replacing the port all together with a spare from the module. But a few minutes later, as he was working on one of the atmospheric stabilizers, he heard a sizzle and pop, and smelled the unmistakable aroma of electrical burning. Within minutes, he'd tracked it to its source and found to his frustration that the external port was burned out again.

Shortly after that, one of the relays for the navigation system blew. He and Alan heard the pop from where they were working on the other side of the shuttle. It sounded like a gunshot. They ran to it and found it smoldering and arcing. It took half an hour to replace it with one from the module.

And it wasn't just the shuttle. Several times they had been forced to suddenly put out an electrical fire in the crashed remains of the module. The power cells

for the module were dwindling, but they still had enough charge to cause damage. The fires had been a threat to the two of them and the shuttle, and had had to be put out, but Mitch was frustrated by the delays they caused. What was it about this place, this area that caused electrical anomalies like this?

The real question, however, was voiced by Alan as they put the finishing touches on the shuttle repairs. "Are we being watched?"

Mitch had just stepped away from where he'd been working, and he looked quickly up at the young man. There was no trace of fear or worry on his face, and his voice had been even-toned and matter-of-fact. He wasn't asking out of fear. It was more like ... curiosity.

"I don't know," Mitch said.

"I have a feeling we are," Alan said, looking around at the horizon, the line of wreckage, the distant hills. "But I don't think they're hostile."

"What makes you say that?" Mitch asked.

Alan shrugged. "More of a feeling than anything."

Mitch followed his gaze, taking in their surroundings. The wreckage of the module still had quite a few salvageable parts in it, and they were going to need them. The question now was whether it would be safe until they could return. He locked up the tool kit he'd been using and made his way into the shuttle's bay. Alan followed, silent.

As Mitch stowed the kit, he turned to face Alan, who was standing just inside the bay door. Something caught his eye. A movement, a vague shape, passed just out of sight. "Hey!" Mitch shouted. He lunged forward and leapt out onto the ground.

Alan was beside him now, holding a wrench that looked slightly melted. Mitch had seen it earlier but had no idea what had happened to it. It had been in his kit, he thought, but it had never looked like that.

"What was it?" Alan asked. Mitch found to his relief that there was at least some tension in the young man's voice.

He shook his head, turning slowly to survey the area. "I don't know. I caught a movement, but it was gone before I could tell what it was."

"Some kind of animal, maybe?" Alan asked.

Mitch looked on. There were no footprints in the dust and soil around the shuttle. None but their own, anyway. No animal tracks, either. "Have we seen any animals since coming to this planet?"

Alan shrugged. "Not really. A few birds."

"I don't think it was an animal. It seemed to be upright."

"We don't know what the animals here might be like," Alan said. "Maybe they all walk upright."

“Good point. What do you think?”

Alan looked around again, hefting the wrench like a weapon. “I think we also don’t know if there are any people here. For all we know this planet is inhabited. It’s not the one we were supposed to land on.”

Mitch stared at him. “How do you know?”

“The maps,” Alan said. “The photos we have from just before the crash don’t match the survey maps in the navigational computer. That’s why we had to use the photos in the first place, isn’t it?”

Mitch stared at the young man for a moment. “Do you always know more than you let on?” he asked.

Alan said nothing.

Mitch shrugged. “You’re right. Our maps don’t match. Captain Somar said something to me about it before we left. But I was hoping some of the maps were just missing.”

“They aren’t,” Alan said. “I checked the nav computer. Everything’s there. We’re just in the wrong place.”

Mitch looked at him for a moment, then turned back to the wreckage that loomed over them. “We need to leave now,” he said. “Those colonists need to be taken back to Citadel. Wherever we may be in the universe, we have work to do here.”

They turned and walked back into the shuttle’s cargo bay. As the door rose to a close, Mitch took one last glance outside. There was nothing but wreckage and terrain for him to see. Now, inside the confines of the shuttle, he at last was able to shake the feeling of being watched.

Eleven

Thomas was amazed at the progress they had made in such a short time. And he knew it was due in large part to Taggart. The man was a dynamo of leadership. He settled every squabble, dealt down every conflict and organized even those who had declared they had no intention of lifting a finger. He was much better at leadership than Thomas was, that was for sure.

Still, despite his charm and the smooth way in which he dealt with people, Thomas couldn't help feeling that there was something off about the man. He hadn't been able to dwell on it for some time, but now that things were settling a little and he found himself able to move at a slightly slower pace, his mind lingered on the problem of Mr. Taggart. What was it about this man that made Thomas feel so uneasy?

Eventually Thomas came to a conclusion—something that didn't entirely make sense to him, and he was unsure of what it meant.

Taggart was *comfortable*.

It was a strange idea but the more he thought about it the more sure he was of it. Taggart, unlike any of the others who came out of stasis, had seemed instantly prepared for their situation. He had sprung into action immediately, organizing the colonists, directing the actions that must be taken. Thomas himself had been privy to their situation and circumstances from the start, but he was only able to adopt a shifting, constantly evolving sort of half-plan as to what to do. Taggart, on the other hand, seemed to come out of stasis with full knowledge of what it would take to survive here.

Was he really that good? Was he really that natural of a leader? Thomas didn't know the man or his history, but he felt sure that no one was as instantly adaptive as Taggart was. It was as if ...

Thomas stopped in mid-thought. If he was right, then the danger they faced was suddenly much greater than he had expected. They had survived all of this, crash landing on an alien world and rescuing the colonists. They had managed to get the shuttle working again. They had even, according to reports, begun restoring water and power to Citadel itself. All of this they had accomplished with the knowledge that there was hope and that their enemy, whomever he or

she might be, was light years away and probably thought they were all dead. But what if their enemy was right here with them all along?

Taggart was appointing leaders for the several small groups he had created. Each would return to Citadel together, one group at a time. That was Taggart's plan. Suddenly, Thomas wondered if it was in their best interest to be following Taggart's plans.

Despite his distrust and sudden suspicions of the man, however, Thomas could find no real fault in what he was doing. He was helping these people survive, after all. The majority of the colonists were used to being the wealthy and the elite. They acted with a sense of entitlement at times. Most were soft and somewhat weak, and almost all were completely resentful of their situation. They had expected to be awakened to a fully functional colony with a serving class in place. Now they found themselves in a command structure, following the guidance of the richest among them. It was natural, Thomas assumed, for them to look to Taggart for leadership. He had led them financially for years. Whatever *he* invested in, *they* invested in. Whatever property *he* bought, *they* clamored to buy adjoining lots. It was possible that many of them were here, on this world, only because Taggart himself had been in that colony module.

"Thomas," Reilly said from behind him. He turned to see her holding the wireless to her side. "Mitch and Alan will be here any minute. It's time to get the first group ready."

Thomas nodded. "ok," he said.

She peered at him. "You alright?"

He glanced back at Taggart. "How much do you know about that guy?" he asked.

She looked at him and shrugged. "Rich, like most of the people we transport. I think I read that he bought a planet once."

Thomas blinked. "Really?"

"Yeah. Actually, maybe it was a moon or something. It was for mining, that's all I know. It was set to be a colony when he bought it, but he shut that down, I think."

"Must be nice to own your own planet. So why's he here?"

She shrugged. "Who knows? The rich have their own way of doing things. Maybe he was bored. Maybe he wants to buy this planet, too."

Thomas again looked at Taggart. He didn't think the man wanted to buy this planet. For one thing, Thomas was relatively sure this wasn't the world they had been aiming for. Also, why allow these colonists to come here if he was going to buy it and use it for mining? Was he thinking of setting up his own little kingdom?

Just then the wireless at Reilly's side beeped. "We're coming in now," Mitch's voice said, and in a moment the shuttle sailed overhead. The noise from the atmospheric stabilizers was loud but not deafening. The backwash was a strong wind that made clothes and hair flutter and wave. As the shuttle touched down and the engines shut off, Thomas became aware of the cheering. The colonists, seeing the shuttle as a ray of hope, were celebrating. Taggart stood at the head of the crowd, applauding in large gestures as the door to the cargo bay lowered to the ground.

Thomas couldn't help but wonder whether this was a good sign or a bad omen.

Mitch guided the colonists into the shuttle one at a time. They reached full capacity in just a few minutes. "Sorry there aren't any seats, folks. But if you can be patient, we should be back at Citadel in about half an hour."

There was little in way of acknowledgement as the crowd stood in the cargo bay and crew area of the shuttle. They were just shy of maximum capacity for the trip. Mitch was confident the shuttle could handle the load. But that didn't stop him from worrying that some unseen problem might arise.

Reilly had taken her place in the pilot's seat and was going over the pre-flight checklist. Mitch slid next to her. "How'd it go?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Lots of rich people. That Taggart guy took over as soon as he was awake. Had everyone lined up pretty well."

"No problems on the ground?"

"Nope. What's up?"

Mitch looked around to make sure none of their passengers was listening. "When you were alone, back on the other side of the ridge, you said you heard noises outside the shuttle."

Reilly blinked. "I did? I ... I don't remember that."

"No? You sounded pretty scared," Mitch said.

Reilly glared at him. "I don't get *scared*," she said.

He grinned. "Sure you don't. But back there, I'm serious, you were telling me something was outside. And you smelled something like ozone. Like an electrical fire."

Reilly was concentrating on the checklist. "So? I was going stir crazy, I guess."

He looked around, again made sure no one was paying attention, then reached out and touched her chin, turning her gaze to him. He had never done this before and wondered if it would offend her. But she just looked at him with a slight surprise in her eyes.

“Reilly, I need to know what you saw. Or heard. Or whatever. What happened there?”

Reilly looked at him for a moment, then closed her eyes, struggling. “I ... I can’t remember,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I can remember talking to you guys on the radio, and I can kind of remember a smell, like ozone. But the rest is blank. I can’t remember anything until I was in the air and on my way to get you guys.”

Mitch nodded, letting his hand fall from her chin. Their eyes locked for a second. “I think whatever you were sensing, we ran into it, too.”

“What was it?” she asked quietly. Was that fear in her voice? He wasn’t sure.

“I don’t know. But when we were repairing the shuttle, we kept having all of these electrical problems. And the whole time I felt like someone was watching us. I ... saw something.”

“What did you see?” she asked.

“Nothing. I mean, I’m not sure. It was vague. Like I caught a glimpse of a reflection or something. Only there was nothing there to reflect. It wasn’t a trick of the light. Something moved.”

“Did you ... did it say something to you?” Reilly’s manner had changed now. She seemed frightened. She was staring at the console before her but wasn’t moving.

“No. Like I said, I caught a glimpse of it. Why? Did you see or hear something?”

“I ... ” she started but stopped. She squeezed her eyes shut, concentrating. “I can’t remember, Mitch.” Tears gathered at her eyelids, and one slid down her cheek. Mitch put a hand on her shoulder.

“It’s ok,” he said. She looked up at him then, tears in her eyes. Mitch suddenly found himself unsure of what to say or what to do. But then she sprang forward and kissed him.

In an instant, she pulled back. “I’m sorry,” she said.

Mitch was staring, wide-eyed. “No,” he said. “No, it’s ok. I just ... well, I didn’t know ... ”

“Yes, you did,” she said to him, and now she was smiling, softly, shyly, eyes averted. “You knew.”

He stared, then smiled and nodded. “ok,” he said. “Yeah, I knew.”

She turned slightly, blushing, but then looked at him again. The smile had faded. “Mitch, something happened to me back there, and I can’t remember it. But I know it had something to do with the external data and power port. And a wrench.”

“Did you short the port with my wrench? We found one that looked melted.”
She shook her head. “No. I wouldn’t do that. I’m not stupid, you know?”

“I know,” he said. “I had to ask.”

“Whatever it was, it wiped my memory. Maybe I did get a shock or something. But I have this vague memory, like I was having a conversation with someone. And I keep thinking about my dad.”

“Your dad? Why?”

“I don’t know,” she cried.

He reached out and touched her face, and she responded by pressing her cheek into his palm. Then she sniffed and wiped her tears with her sleeve. “I’ve gone all girly since crashing on this planet,” she said.

Mitch laughed. “I don’t think anyone can blame you. Listen, if there’s anything else you remember, tell me. ok?”

She nodded. “Are you going back to Citadel with this group?”

“Yeah. I need to debrief. Also, I hear that there was some trouble back at camp. Jack’s dead.”

“Jack? Wha ... what happened?”

Mitch shrugged. “I’m not sure yet. Billy Sans was manning the radio, and he was being tight-lipped about the whole thing. He said the Captain wanted to talk to me when I got back.”

“Well, it’s going to take about ten trips to get all of the colonists back. But what about the rest of the pods? The one’s that weren’t here with the wreckage?”

“Now that the shuttle’s back to flight, we’ll be able to retrieve the rest quickly, I think. But the first priority is to get these people back to base.”

She nodded.

Mitch made his way out of the shuttle to find Thomas and Alan waiting for him. Taggart, the man who had organized the exodus from the crash site, was with them. “We’re taking off in a moment,” Mitch said. “Anything you want me to tell Captain Somar when we get back?”

For a brief instant, Mitch saw Thomas glance in Taggart’s direction. It wasn’t obvious, but it was there. Mitch looked at the man for a moment, assessing. Was he a threat?

“Nothing,” Thomas said. “But on your next run back, we could use some food and water. The supplies are running low. It looks like we’ll be here for another few hours at least.”

Mitch nodded. “I’ll make sure something is loaded for the return trip.”

Just then Taggart stepped forward. “Mr. Garrison,” he said.

Mitch looked at him. “Sir?”

“You’ve done an excellent job in repairing the shuttle.”

It was such a strange compliment to come out of the blue. “Yes, sir. Thank you.”

Taggart held out his hand, and Mitch took it with only slight hesitation. “Son, it’s time you got going,” he said. “The sooner everyone is safe, the better.”

Mitch had been on the verge of leaving anyway, but to have it come as something of a directive from this man chafed him a bit. Then he realized, Taggart had said it loud enough for some of the people gathered around to hear. Clever. Mitch had seen this before, mostly from officers in the Colonization Fleet. Establish yourself as the one giving orders, even if you’re just stating the obvious, and people will perceive you as being in charge.

Mitch was on to this, though. “Yes, sir,” he said loudly. “That’s excellent advice. Now, I’m afraid I’ll have to order you and the other colonists to step back. These shuttle takeoffs can sometimes throw debris. I’d hate for any of civilians under my charge to be injured.”

Taggart’s eyes registered something for a brief instant, but after a pause he stood back smiling and nodding.

Mitch turned and Thomas stepped in beside him. Mitch said quietly, “Watch out for that one.”

Thomas grinned. “Way ahead of you.”

Mitch nodded and entered the shuttle. As the cargo door rose and locked in place, he spared a quick glance outside. Taggart was already back to issuing orders to his new flock.

Twelve

Somar was unaccustomed to being watched so closely. In all of his experience in leading others, he had never been the subject of such scrutiny. The men he led in combat had all followed him without reservation. The crew of Citadel had, so far, followed him with only a small form of reluctance. But the humans who had accompanied him to the river were now following him with something very much like fear and awe.

“They saw you re-grow a severed arm,” Billy Sans said, when Somar asked about it. “That makes an impression.”

Somar nodded. “This is something my people do without thinking. We’ve rarely shown it to humans. I was unaware that it would be so disturbing to them.”

Billy was quiet. Since the incident on the riverbank, he had barely said a word to Somar unless he was asked a question. “Do you fear me, Mr. Sans?”

Billy looked up, startled. “No sir! I just ... I betrayed you.”

“Did you?” Somar asked.

“Yes,” Billy said miserably.

They were nearly back to camp and had stopped for a moment’s rest. Billy was the only human who sat close to Somar. In fact, he had been the only human to make any contact with Somar since leaving the river. The others watched him and whispered among themselves. No one, not even Jack’s old crew members, refused any order he gave them. But none volunteered to be near him.

“Mr. Sans, it might have been your intention to betray me, but you did not. In the end, you defended me and stopped them from killing me.”

“But I led them to you! I told Jack and the others where you would be and that you would be vulnerable! This was my fault.”

Somar again nodded. “I see. But Mr. Sans ... Billy ... despite this, you changed your heart. I hold no grudge for what might have happened. You may have given them information, but it was they who chose to use it. And in the end, you redeemed yourself by standing up to them, even risking your own life for mine.”

He reached out and took Billy’s forearm, raising his hand so that the palm was up. The cut he’d made had now stopped bleeding and was scabbing over.

“Our blood has mingled over the grave of our enemy. Among my people, there is no greater bond. I have shared my blood with only one other human. Now both of you are part of my family.”

Billy was staring at his hand, and then looked up at Somar with tears in his eyes. “You are a good man,” he said simply.

Somar nodded, smiled. “Thank you. You, too, are a good man, Billy Sans. Though you do not think so now. That is, perhaps, part of what makes you good.”

Billy looked past Somar to the other humans, and Somar followed his gaze. “Maybe we should get back to camp,” he said.

“Yes, I believe we should.” He rose and began issuing orders. Everyone present took hold of handles on the water and equipment transports and began moving slowly towards camp.

They broke through the brush and came back to the camp in a short time. Everyone greeted them with cheers, failing to notice the strange, somber mood of the team. In fact, Somar noticed, the humans who had been with him began to smile and wave at the crowd that gathered. The memory of the events on the river seemed to fade slightly for them, and they began to soak in the adulation of people who truly appreciated what they’d done.

Whatever might have happened, even the fact that they came back with more people than they had left with, made no difference to the growing community in the shadow of Citadel. They were simply grateful to have the water.

Somar split off from the group with Billy in tow. He found one of the engineers who had been working to install plumbing and water lines at the base site. “Is all prepared?” Somar asked.

“Yes, sir,” the engineer grinned. “We’re good to go. All we need now is that main water line. We’ve also installed a line and breakers on Citadel’s main power input. She’s ready to take a line whenever we run it.”

“How are the solar panels coming?”

The engineer’s expression soured. “All damaged beyond repair for the moment, sir. But Mitch radioed that there are some intact on the colony module, and there are the small panels on the pods. When they’ve finished bringing back the colonists, we can send the shuttle out to get the parts we need.”

Somar nodded. “Very well. Meet with the members of the survey team. They’ll need to rest for the night, but tomorrow you and your team will begin running power and water lines from the river.”

The engineer smiled and nodded, then went to find someone from the survey team.

“Word’s going to get out,” Billy said. “They’ll tell people how you healed yourself after being shot.”

“Yes,” Somar said. “That cannot be prevented now.”

“I’m going to tell a few stories, too. And I’m bringing Jack’s crew in on it. The real story of what happened there is going to be told.”

Somar looked at Billy, who now seemed far less like the young man he’d known before and more like ... what? An adult? A man? *More like an Esool*, Somar thought. As if somehow by mingling their blood on alien soil, Billy Sans had taken in some of the character, some of the strength of Somar’s people.

“Captain Somar!” a young woman called, rushing to him. “The shuttle is returning, sir. It will arrive any minute now. They have a load of colonists on board.”

Somar nodded. He had been briefed on this over the wireless but had expected more time before their arrival. He turned to Billy, “Please see that arrangements are made for food, shelter, and medical treatment, Mr. Sans.”

“Yes, sir,” Billy said. He immediately began recruiting help from all of the crewmembers he could find, organizing them into groups and giving orders on what should be done.

Somar turned then and went back to the command post. He had other matters to attend to at the moment.

The cargo bay door had barely opened and the shuttle hadn’t even touched down completely before Mitch sprang out and made his way to the command center. He brushed past Billy Sans and a group of Blue and White Collars who were preparing for the arrival of the colonist survivors. When he stepped into command, he found Somar pretty much where he’d left him several days ago. He was pouring over printouts and computer screens.

“Captain Somar,” he said.

“Mr. Garrison. I am pleased you’ve returned safely.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“You have a great deal to report, I take it?”

Mitch spied a chair and pulled it close, slumping into it. He rubbed his eyes for a moment, and then said, “Yeah, a great deal. A lot has happened since we took off.”

“More than just the recovery of the colonists?”

“Yeah. One of the colonists is named Taggart. Do you know him?”

Somar thought for a moment. “I do not.”

“He’s the wealthiest man in the colonies. I think he may be up to something.”

“What has he done that has led to your suspicions?”

Mitch stared at Somar for a moment, then glanced away. He studied the command center. The makeshift tables were covered in stacks of papers and communications equipment. The computer that Somar was using glowed with images and data. “It’s a feeling, more than anything. It’s the way he’s taken charge at the crash site.” He looked back to Somar. “Don’t get me wrong, what he’s doing is good work. He has everyone organized and ready to be picked up. And he has the pods lined up for us to load as soon as we can. In fact, I want to take a few men back with me to stand guard over them after the colonists are back here.”

Somar was surprised. “Stand guard?”

Mitch waved. “It’s something else. Something I saw out there. I think ... well, I think we may not be as alone on this planet as we thought.”

“You saw a life form? A humanoid?”

“Not exactly.” He relayed Reilly’s story first, then told Somar about his and Alan’s ordeal with the electrical fires and short circuits. “It just seems too much of a coincidence,” he said finally.

Somar nodded. “I agree. Unfortunately we can spare no one to go and investigate.”

“I know. But I’d at least like a couple of guys to stay at the crash site while we use the shuttle to find the remaining pods.”

“I believe it can be arranged. You may have three crew members of your choosing.”

Mitch nodded, “Thanks.”

“And as for Taggart ... until we have something more, there is little we can do. I trust your judgment, Mr. Garrison. If you distrust this man, then there is good reason to be wary of him. But until he demonstrates some measure of malice or some ill intent, I see nothing for us to do about him.”

Mitch nodded again. “ok,” he said. “I’ll keep an eye on him.”

“As will I.”

“And I think that Thomas is watching him closely, too. “

Gravely, Somar said, “In that case, I truly am distrustful of the man.”

Mitch wondered at how Somar could have such faith in Thomas. Whatever bond they shared must be strong indeed.

It took the better part of the day, but finally Thomas and the last of the colonists arrived at Citadel. Alan and Taggart had come back on this final run as well. Thomas marveled at Alan’s ability to completely avoid a conversation with

Taggart. He envied it. Every conversation that Thomas had with the man made him wish they could be stranded on two different planets.

As the shuttle settled to the ground everyone exited in a slow but organized manner. Except Taggart. No sooner had the doors opened than he pushed through and was on the ground directing people as they made their exits. When he was approached by the Blue Collar who had guided the shuttle in he quickly shook the young woman's hand, asked her a few pointed questions, and then issued the order for her to guide the rest of the passengers out into the camp.

This was a job she was assigned to do anyway, but Thomas noted she jumped to when Taggart issued his order, as if it hadn't occurred to her before he'd said anything.

Thomas shook his head. Was it possible he was viewing Taggart a little harshly? This was a man who was used to being in charge. It was entirely within reason that he would continue in a comfortable role, whether he'd earned the right or not. What chafed Thomas, though, was how the man's "leadership" was always so public. Every command was given boisterously, loud enough for others to hear. In this, Thomas felt, Taggart was establishing himself as being in charge in the minds of the colonists. He was setting up an elaborate pretense of authority so that he might solidify it and make it real. He was using the crash and the chaos surrounding it to position himself as the head of the colony.

It was the act of a self-preservationist.

Thomas had known quite a few men like Taggart in his time. They were mostly businessmen who espoused "The Art of War" as their personal belief system and who saw everyone around them as a resource and not much more. Thomas understood this, because he had worked with men like this all his life. The first colony ship had been built by men like Taggart, who saw the stars as a means for financial and corporate growth.

Strangely, Thomas felt no resentment towards these men. In fact, in many ways he admired them. They were brilliant, usually, and masters of a science that Thomas had never fully understood—the science of controlling human beings, of manipulating the minds of men to their own means.

How much different would his life be, Thomas wondered, if he could have had this gift? He would not be standing on this world right now, having run from a crime he didn't commit. He would not have slept through the past hundred years.

He'd have been long in the grave by now; forgotten like all of the Taggart-like men he'd ever known.

Having handed off the task of guiding the colonists into the camp, Taggart now began asking for directions to Captain Somar. Thomas and Alan managed

to free themselves from the confines of the shuttle in time enough to see a White Collar engineer giving directions and, ultimately, volunteering to take Taggart to wherever Somar might be.

Thomas looked at Alan, "I think I need to tag along and sit in on this meeting."

Alan nodded slightly. "I would, if I were you."

Thomas turned and was just about to follow after Taggart when Penny stepped into his path. "Hey," she said.

She had come back on the shuttle just prior to his, and she had apparently had time to get cleaned up and into a change of clothes.

"Hey," he replied.

"I wanted ... I wanted to say thanks," she said. Her words and her demeanor were both stiff. Her brow was furrowed and her face was tight, and with her arms crossed at her chest Thomas thought she looked more like she was angry with him than grateful.

"Thanks?" he asked.

"For rescuing me. For helping me look for my parents. For ... " she didn't finish.

"You're welcome. I'm sorry we haven't found them yet," he said.

She looked away. "They're out there. I know it."

To Thomas, it didn't sound like an assertion. It was more like hope mixed with dread. As if she feared she might be wrong.

He reached out and rubbed the bare skin of her upper arm. "We'll find them. I promised, didn't I?"

She turned and looked up at him, and suddenly her expression was different. Tears were gathered in her eyes, and her face muscles relaxed. Suddenly she sprang forward and hugged him, tight. He was taken by surprise but did manage to hug her back.

When she was done, she turned and fairly ran away. "Penny!" Thomas called after her, but she didn't pause, just kept moving.

The mystery of Penny Daunder, Thomas wondered. He shook his head and then hurried to catch up with Taggart before he could reach Somar.

As the White Collar engineer stopped in front of the tented area that was serving as the command center, Thomas finally caught up to them. Taggart was thanking her extravagantly, and she blushed and near-curtisied as she turned to leave. Thomas couldn't help but grin. "Looks like you've got a fan," he said.

Taggart looked up at him in surprise. "Thomas! Good, you should be here for this meeting."

Again, Taggart was directing, asserting authority where none had existed before. Thomas marveled at the man's ability, and then nodded, smiling. He kept it cheerful despite the cold feeling that was coming over him. He was becoming certain that Taggart had more to do with their present situation than he might previously have thought.

The two of them entered the tent and found Captain Somar and a young Blue Collar, Billy Sans, discussing the work of the engineers who had gone out to establish water and power for the colony. Somar looked up as they entered and smiled to see Thomas.

"Mr. Thomas," Somar said. He stood and, following human custom, clasped Thomas's hand. It had not been that long ago, less than a week, since Somar had used his own blood to heal Thomas, to give him back the use of his hands. No one seemed to remember it now with all of the business and activity surrounding them, but Thomas remembered.

"Captain Somar," Thomas said, and he was surprised to hear a hint of emotion in his own voice. He cleared his throat and shook the Captain's hand firmly, grasping his forearm as he did so.

Through this all, Taggart only watched. *What secrets have you learned from us? Thomas asked silently. What will you do with them?*

"Captain Somar," Taggart said. His voice was sudden and loud, filled with mirth that sounded genuine enough. It jarred Thomas to hear him.

He reached out his hand, and even though the alien had just clasped hands in this gesture a moment before, Somar tentatively took it, as if he were unsure of the custom. "I am," Somar said. "And you must be Mr. Taggart."

"Just Taggart," he replied. "It's the only name that matters." Thomas wasn't sure if this were a boast or not.

"How may I serve you, Taggart?" Somar nodded respectfully.

Taggart looked around the command center, taking in the papers and equipment, the makeshift tables and chairs. He moved to stand beside the terminal that Somar and Billy Sans had been using moments before. "I was wondering what the situation was here. I hear that you're doing a fine job in getting the colony up and running."

"Yes," Somar nodded. "We will have water within the week. The engineers are working diligently. I am pleased with them. I asked that they rest before moving to the river, but they took it upon themselves to begin right away."

Thomas blinked. This was sounding a great deal like a debriefing. Taggart had asked for a status report, and Somar had obliged. Thomas felt his heart sink a little. He saw a future, suddenly, in which Taggart governed the colony. For some reason, this felt like a tremendous injustice.

“Good,” Taggart said. “How soon can we get Citadel back to full operation?”

Somar looked to Billy Sans, who answered, “Best estimate is within five days.”

“Very good!” Taggart said. Thomas thought he showed some personal constraint in not clapping Billy on the shoulders.

“Taggart,” Captain Somar said, “what is your purpose in the command center?”

The room fell silent. The directness of Somar’s question made everyone suddenly curious about Taggart’s answer.

Taggart blinked and said, “I wanted to know the status of the colony, Captain. What else would my purpose be?”

Somar nodded. “How is it that you came to be on the colony vessel?”

Taggart looked to Thomas, smiling, then back to Somar. “Why, I bought passage and boarded. Not much more to it than that,” he grinned.

“There is,” Somar said. “And I wish to know it. What is your purpose?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know what you mean, Captain.”

“You do,” Somar said. His voice was even, plain. There was no hint of frustration, anger, or fear. Thomas felt his respect for the man grow. “You surely must be aware that by now I would have looked at your travel record.”

Again the room fell silent. Thomas wasn’t sure what was happening, but he felt a sudden tension from Taggart. Billy Sans was standing at Somar’s side, watching with an almost blank expression. It was obvious Somar and Billy knew something that Thomas wasn’t privy to. The fact that they were confronting Taggart in his presence, though, said enough. Somar was bringing Thomas in on the secret.

Taggart looked from one face to another. “Gentlemen, I don’t know what you think you’ve learned, but I assure you that my intentions here were the same as any other passenger.”

“That is not true,” Somar said.

For the first time, Taggart let anger enter his voice. “And how would you know whether it is true or not, Captain?”

“Because,” Somar said calmly, “unlike the other wealthy passengers, you booked no return passage. This implies that you either intended to go back at a much later time or you intended never to return. Upon further investigation, we discovered that you have turned over control of your financial empire to a board of directors. This leaves only one possible conclusion—you never intended to return from this world.”

Taggart laughed, a sharp and sudden sound. “You may be unfamiliar with the customs of humans, Captain. I assure you, I’ve done nothing unusual.

Regardless, I can't see how this is any concern to you. It doesn't matter what my plans were before. I'm here now. And since I am, I plan to do everything I can to make sure this colony succeeds."

"That may be true," Captain Somar said. There was a hesitation from everyone in the room, expecting the captain to go on. But he made no further statement and instead simply stared at Taggart for a moment.

Thomas was elated. Since meeting Taggart, he had seen the man systematically work people, taking charge of every situation. He had been prepared to see Taggart take over the colony and bend it to whatever purpose he had in mind. But now, as Somar watched him with sharp green eyes, Taggart seemed to deflate a bit. Thomas fought the urge to grin.

"Captain Somar," Taggart said, "I intend to govern this colony."

There it was. Somar had put the man in a corner and left him with only one option—telling the truth. Taggart had designs on the colony.

"If the people elect you," Somar said, "then it shall be so."

Taggart was having trouble, Thomas could tell. He was clearly not accustomed to dealing with someone who could not be goaded, manipulated, or controlled. "Have these people elected you as their leader?" he asked.

"They have not," Somar said.

"Then by what right do you lead them?"

"By the only right available at the moment. Necessity. These men and women needed someone to direct them and I stepped into that capacity, fulfilling my duties as the only ranking officer present. I will step down again when the people decide it is time for me to do so. At such time, you may well govern here, if you are elected."

"But not you," Taggart said, suddenly smiling. "I'll never govern you, will I?"

Thomas couldn't handle it anymore. "What is this, Taggart? What kind of game are you playing here?"

Taggart looked as if he'd only just remembered Thomas was there. "Thomas, son, this is about humanity. Something I suspect will always be a curiosity to Captain Somar here."

Somar turned to the computer, punched a few buttons, and turned the screen for them to see. On it was a photo of Taggart with a short dossier. "Captain Alonzo was curious about you as well, it seems."

The text of the document was largely a log of things Captain Alonzo had written about Taggart. There was too much to read at a glance but Thomas caught a few alarming phrases right away.

“Earth First!” he said, shocked. He looked up at Taggart who was eyeing him quietly. “You’re with Earth First?”

“He’s their leader,” Billy Sans said. His voice was full of bile.

They all looked at Taggart who suddenly broke into a smile. “Oh, yes,” he said. “That’s me. Leader of Earth First. It’s something of a legacy.” He turned to look at Thomas and his grin deepened, “But of everyone here I suppose you, yourself, are most familiar with my organization. Aren’t you Mr. Paris?”

There was a brief pause. “Paris?” Billy Sans asked, confused.

“Gentlemen, allow me to introduce you to John Thomas Paris,” Taggart said in the grand voice of one introducing a man of great importance. Thomas felt his stomach sour, and the blood rushed from his face, even as he knew what Taggart would say next.

“The man who murdered a world.”

Thirteen

There it was. It had been named for everyone in the room to hear. Thomas turned to see the expressions on the faces of the others. He had never expected anyone to ever discover his secret. Why would they? No one had any real reason to suspect that John Thomas Paris, mass murderer, was still alive, much less on a colony world. He was, after all, the man that history recorded as being the loudest voice against colonization. He was the literal death stroke of man's first venture towards the colonization of other worlds.

"Well, Mr. Paris?" Taggart said. "Don't you have anything to say?"

He didn't. He simply looked from Taggart to Somar, wondering suddenly if the alien captain regretted sharing his own secret with him.

Somar was not looking at Thomas. Instead, he was staring at Taggart. "This man's historical background is irrelevant," he said.

"Oh?" Taggart laughed. "Well, maybe it is at that."

"You are attempting to shift our attention away from your purpose here by placing suspicion on Mr. Thomas."

"Paris," Taggart corrected.

"But I, for one, would still like to know what your intentions are."

"Get used to disappointment," Taggart said. "I'm not obligated to you in any way. And don't think you can deny me the right to serve this community. Take a closer look at the name stamped on most of the equipment here."

He was right. "Taggart Industries" was printed on nearly everything. It was so prevalent that Thomas had stopped noticing it long ago, like overlooking a flaw in a paint job.

"I funded this colony, Captain Somar. Now, by the laws of the Earth Colonization Fleet I can't claim to own the place, because I signed the colony agreement. But I do own the equipment. "

"That seems clear," Somar said. "But the people will dictate its use, not you."

"We'll see how much they dictate if I decide to turn on the fail-safes and shut down every piece of technology on this world."

"You would do this and endanger the lives of these colonists?"

“Only if I’m forced to,” Taggart said. He was not smiling now. And he wasn’t looking at Somar. He was looking at Thomas.

“You think I have some influence here, Taggart?” Thomas said.

“More than you’d ever know, actually. See, your name ... it’s hated throughout the colonies. But what if I told you, I could make your name beloved by all of mankind?”

“I wouldn’t care in any way,” Thomas said.

Taggart laughed. “You know, I think you’re telling the truth! Well, that’s ok. I’m going to make you famous anyway.”

Thomas felt his stomach churn. Was Taggart going to reveal that he was still alive? Never mind the impact on the rest of humanity, this small group of survivors would shred him before word ever got out elsewhere.

“Oh, Thomas, don’t worry too much about it. I can see it scares you. Believe me, when I choose to reveal your secret it will make you a hero. No one will think of you as the man who killed a world ever again. Eventually, anyway.”

“You have some sort of plan, I take it?” Thomas said.

Taggart smiled. “Always. And forever. I’m the only one in the colonies who can redeem your name and save humanity.”

Billy Sans, who had been quiet through this conversation, laughed aloud. “Save humanity! From what?”

“From itself, young man,” Taggart said, eyeing him. “From people like you, who would sooner roll over and play lackey to an alien species than stand up and fight for control of what rightfully belongs to you.”

“What, the colony?” Thomas asked.

“All of the colonies,” Taggart said.

Again Thomas laughed, “This doesn’t sound like Earth First to me. What kind of game are you playing?”

“Oh, it’s Earth First. But I’m not as narrow-minded as my great-grandfather.” He looked around to see the reaction to this statement. “Oh yes, Earth First is a family business, didn’t you know?”

“You are speaking of the Esool,” Somar said.

They all turned to him. “Yes,” Taggart said. “I’m talking about the Esool. Or rather, *removing* the Esool. Your species occupies several worlds at present that should, by rights, belong to the Earth colonies.”

“We obtained all of our worlds through our own independent expansion,” Somar said.

“And through *bargaining* with humanity,” Taggart replied. There was a slight note of bitterness in his voice, the first real emotion that Thomas felt he’d heard from the man.

“Yes,” Somar said simply.

“We will have them back,” Taggart said, matching Somar’s tone.

“How?” Thomas asked.

Taggart shrugged. “Before boarding Citadel, I made numerous arrangements. I have Earth First followers on every colony world. And Taggart Industries manufactures all of the hubs that are used for faster-than-light travel.”

“You ... ” Thomas started, unable to believe what he was hearing. “You would shut down the lightrail network? Just to further your insane cause?”

“No, no. That would be treason, Thomas. Of course, I wouldn’t shut it down. But I will exercise an option in my contract with the Earth Colony Fleet. Only vessels that Taggart Industries approves may travel the network. And it’s enforceable by code. Every vessel built by Taggart Industries has a ‘safety,’ as it were. A code that tells the hubs to let the ship pass. It’s built into the hardware of each vessel, and any attempt to replicate it or reverse engineer it will cause it to self-destruct.

“Right now, all of the hubs are set to allow passing traffic, without hindrance. But at my word, the safety is triggered and only TI-approved vessels will be able to make faster-than-light journeys on the Earth hub network. I will have complete say over who moves among the stars.”

“You’re killing the colonies!” Billy shouted.

“Nothing of the kind. I’m freeing them.”

“How?” Thomas asked.

It was Somar who spoke. “By refusing to allow the Esool to travel on them.” Again they turned and stared at him. “Since the end of the conflict between the Esool and the humans, we have become dependent upon the human lightrail network. We have abandoned our old network and allowed it to be replaced by the human system. For that, we are now at the mercy of humanity.”

Taggart’s smile was so smug, Thomas wanted to rip it off of his face. “You bastard,” Thomas snarled. He moved forward, ready to physically attack the man. Somar put out a hand and stopped him.

“Your plan for the human colonies is ambitious and quite brilliant,” Somar said. Everyone, including Taggart, seemed surprised. “But that does not explain why you purposefully sabotaged Citadel.”

Taggart suddenly broke into laughter. He laughed so hard that he had to stumble back slightly, leaning on one of the tables. He wiped his eyes with his sleeve and looked up at the men gathered around him, each of whom wore an expression that was not amused.

“I had nothing to do with the sabotage, Captain Somar. But I’m afraid Earth First did.”

“What?” Thomas asked. “What do you mean by that?”

“I have rivals, son. People within my organization who believe I’ve drifted from the one, true way. They still hold to the old-fashioned idea that humanity should stick to Earth. But they forget that we’ve grown since those days. We couldn’t possibly reel ourselves back in now. Earth is smaller than it used to be. Humanity is much bigger. We are no longer one world with a division of nations—we are *hundreds* of worlds with a division of *societies*. The rich, the White Collars, the Blue Collars—we had to have our prejudices, didn’t we? That’s who we are now. Earth First has to adapt or die.”

“So someone decided you weren’t fit to lead, and they tried to wipe out an entire colony?”

Taggart shrugged. “It wouldn’t be the first time. There’s historical precedence. Oh, but you know that!” he laughed again.

Thomas didn’t find it funny. “So, what now? What about your grand scheme now?”

Taggart shrugged. “It goes on. My people are already in place all over the colonies. The moon I bought is already set up to be the nerve center to coordinate everything. What? You thought I’d buy a whole moon just for mining purposes? I’ve connected every lightrail hub in the galaxy to a system on Taggart Prime. Do you like the name? A bit self aggrandizing, I know, but it rings so well. Oh, and I’ve even had my scientists fix a little problem we had. Communication.”

“What? You’ve overcome the light speed barrier?” Thomas asked.

“What is a barrier, anyway?” Taggart replied. “It’s just something that’s in the way, between you and your goal. No barrier is impenetrable. Oh, don’t ask for details. I’ve read the reports, but I’m no physicist. Something to do with twined quantum particles or some such. Fascinating stuff. I’m sure you’d appreciate it, Thomas.”

Somar spoke, “You are able to communicate across the gulf of space? With any world?”

Taggart shrugged, “With any hub, anyway. I was planning on expanding the system, to put it on every colony world. It’s quite a leap in technology, and it will change everything. And it will have the Taggart name stamped on it.”

“Interesting,” Somar replied.

Thomas marveled at the alien’s mastery of understatement. Then something occurred to him. “How did you know about me?”

Again Taggart laughed. “Son, you really are dense. Did you really think the government could keep a secret? When they changed your face and put you in stasis, my grandfather used his position and influence to make the Taggart family

your guardians. He always felt that someday you'd come in handy. Granted, he had no way to know of the infamy that your name would achieve. But infamy and fame have just a narrow line between them in the view of the public. So, if I suddenly announce that you are alive and well, here on a colony world with me, it would shock the colonies. They would hear me say that this was your second chance, an opportunity for redemption. And they would be so in love with this romantic notion that they would listen to anything I had to say. I would be, after all, the man who raised the dead and in infinite generosity helped to redeem the greatest murderer of all time."

Thomas dropped to one of the stools surrounding the table. He was stunned. Was it possible, that he was here not by accident or fortune but by the grand design of a man he'd never met, over a century ago?

Captain Somar put a hand on his shoulder. "You do not need redemption, Thomas. Nor do you have to allow yourself to be used in this way."

"I don't see how he has a choice," Taggart smiled.

Somar turned to him. "He does indeed. Your plan seems to rely on your network of communication and the worlds that you've infiltrated. No doubt you planted one of your devices on the colony world in advance. Unfortunately, you failed to account for all variables. You are trapped here with us, on a world that was not our destination."

Taggart's smile stayed, but his eyes revealed a glimmer of irritation. "What do you mean?" he asked.

Somar turned back to the computer and brought up the survey maps, letting them slide side-by-side with the satellite images. "We are not on the world we were destined to land upon."

Taggart studied the maps for a moment, then slammed his palm on the table. He turned, glared first at Somar and then at Thomas, and without another word, left the command center.

Thomas blinked. "He didn't know."

"I suspected he did not," Somar replied. "Mr. Taggart's plan was meticulous and detailed, but I do not believe it included Citadel crashing, and it certainly did not include being on a different world entirely."

Thomas rubbed his eyes. "Well, not that it isn't fun to thwart a madman's plans for galactic conquest, but I'm still facing a very angry mob of people when they find out who I am."

"They'll rip you to shreds," Billy Sans marveled. "There's no way you could convince them that you didn't have anything to do with us being stuck here."

Thomas looked at the young man. "What do *you* believe?" he asked.

"Are you really John Thomas Paris?"

Thomas hesitated, “That man died over a hundred years ago. I’m Thomas. New face, new name ... ” he waved a hand to indicate the images of the planet on the computer screen, “ ... and what was supposed to be a new start. Of course, if Taggart spills about who I was, then I’m not only back to square one, I’m buried under it.”

Billy thought about this. “You’re as much a victim here as anyone,” Billy said plainly.

Thomas looked up at Somar who, strangely, was smiling. “Something funny?” Thomas asked.

“Mr. Sans has gained great wisdom since coming to this world. It is my hope that others will as well.”

“Don’t bet on it,” Thomas said. “Individuals can be wise, but people ... people usually make horrible mistakes and reason that they did it in the name of society. If they find out about me, there will be plenty of voices to convince the crowd that I’m a threat. I’ll be lying in ribbons by the morning.”

“As will I,” Somar said. “After all, I am the alien who tolerated your presence. We will both be suspect. But you need not worry. Taggart will say nothing.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because this information is the only true leverage he has at the moment.”

Thomas thought about this and realized Somar was right. It was cold comfort, though. And deep down, he just couldn’t bring himself to rely on it as protection.

Taggart was unaccustomed to his plans being so openly thwarted. He was a man of patience and planning as well as action. He never committed himself unless he knew two things for certain: His plan would succeed, and he had a way out if it didn’t.

Here, he couldn’t be certain of either. It had not occurred to him that this wasn’t the world that he’d thought it was. It hadn’t occurred to him that the one element of his plan he’d taken for granted might not be a given. Who could have planned on something like this? A different world! How would he manage to pull the pieces together when there were light years separating them?

But he would. He would because that’s what he always did. He’d done it his whole life, just as his father had. Just as his grandfather had. Just as every man in the Taggart line had done since history had begun recording the name. He wouldn’t fail—he would just change the objective.

This was the wrong world. That meant all of his preparations were useless. For close to two years, he'd been secretly placing his communications arrays on various worlds, including that first one—the planet that had been their original destination.

Taggart had orchestrated this without the knowledge of the Earth Colony Fleet, sending out unmanned, robotic spacecraft that had no need of returning. If the planet had been uninhabitable, he'd have lost a paltry billion dollars worth of materials, nothing more. But the world hadn't been uninhabitable, and within days of the craft's arrival, he'd begun receiving telemetry, faster than light, from the world that would become the symbol of a new empire. The Taggart Empire. The empire of Earth First, if they could get their heads out of their isolationist asses.

But this wasn't the right world, and his array wasn't here. Everything, absolutely *everything*, had depended on one element—that *he land on the right world*. It hadn't even been in his consideration that he'd land on the wrong one. It was inconceivable. Utterly ... completely ... totally *inconceivable*.

Yet, here he was. Damn him for being complacent.

He'd pull it together. It would be more difficult than before, that was all. Despite not having *all* of the resources he'd planned on, he still had a few. The people, for one, were a resource. Most of the colonists were part of his chosen group—wealthy elitists who cowed to his whims in every way—and they would follow his lead in anything he declared. The rest, the crew of Citadel who had been stranded among them, they might prove more problematic.

The Blue Collars were a breed he understood. In his childhood, his father had made him work in all of the businesses owned by Taggart Industries. It was his father's way of encouraging character, principle, and a work ethic. And it had worked. Taggart loved working in the factories and fields, putting his hands on equipment, figuring out solutions to basic mechanical problems. He became a quick study of engineering in all of its forms. He could design a circuit, build equipment, and draft union agreements. He learned the principles of accounting and of marketing as well as the principles of physics and thermodynamics. He studied under masters in every discipline and came away with a much greater whole of knowledge than any one man he'd ever met.

His education was thorough and all-inclusive, but it wasn't complete until his father had shown him the pod.

“This will be your ultimate weapon, son,” Taggart Sr. said.

“Who is he?” Taggart had asked. He was in his early twenties and had already risen in the ranks by his own strengths. His father had done nothing to help him, other than give him opportunities to learn and work.

“He is the man who killed a world.”

John Thomas Paris—the man that history recorded as the mastermind behind the destruction of the first colony ship. Here he was, a new face and a new name, but otherwise preserved in a way that vids and history books could never approach. He slept, now for a century, in a pod protected by Taggart Industries. Through subsidiary holdings, of course.

Taggart, Sr. explained how this ultimate weapon would work. “When you are the head of Earth First, you will raise the martyr. You will show the world his face. You will remind them of this war with the Esool and of the way in which humanity has spread itself out in the galaxy, destroying our unity, our sense of self. Right now humanity hates that it is so far spread. By the time you are the head of Taggart Industries and that more secret and sacred trust, Earth First, humans will be seeking a new way. They will hunger for leadership, for symbols. And at that time you will awaken the World Destroyer and show humanity that there is nothing you cannot tame, and that if John Thomas Paris can get a second chance, so can humanity. You will pull them all back to Earth, son. It is your destiny.”

Taggart knew nothing of destiny. He knew only of the plans of a brilliant mind, of the schematics of a revolutionary design, of the map of a new and powerful empire. As his training had continued and he left the Blue Collar world behind, he began to learn the art of business. He learned how to build and maintain a financial empire. He learned how to bend the will of a man using nothing but what the man wanted most.

He learned the power of symbols.

But he also learned that vision of his father and grandfather was flawed. The goals of Earth First were foolishness. Draw humanity back to Earth? What would be the point of that? What good would come of it? The Earth was a tapped-out whore who had given everything to her children and was now retiring into obscurity. Her minerals had been mined, her strength had been sapped. It was only by constant attention that humanity was able to keep the old girl around. She might not last another millennia.

So Taggart began to think of things in a different way. Earth First? He changed the meaning. Now, instead of a selfish contraction of humanity, it would be a noble expansion, a growing domain. Earth First would now stand for Earth as the *beginning*. Earth as the *first* of a collection of worlds—a union of planets that all bore the weight of humanity. Earth First, the organization that his small-minded grandfather had begun in answer to expansion, would become a spanning interplanetary government. It would become a new and powerful Rome among the stars. It would be the battle cry of conquerors, who would slay alien

monsters who took what rightly belonged to humanity. Travel among the stars would become a human privilege, to be denied to anyone who did not comply.

Earth First would be Taggart's legacy and a new order—one that would live on as the greatest empire of humanity.

And it had all hinged on landing on the *right damn world*.

Taggart watched several Blue Collars as they worked. He propped himself against a tree, resting in the shade as activity buzzed all around him. This was his way, when he needed to regroup. He became quiet and contemplative. In his office at Taggart Industries, back on Earth, he would sit for hours in one spot mulling over a dilemma. He was a man of action, and sitting still for so long took a great deal of concentration and effort, but it always paid off. By thinking through a problem, from beginning to end, he would always come up with a solution.

The Blue Collar workers were hoisting equipment into place all over the encampment. These would be relay stations for power and water, which would be supplied by the lines that were being laid from the river at this very moment. Stands for the solar panels were going up as well. The panels would supplement their power needs once they could be retrieved from the colony module. No possible watt would be spared, if it could be helped. This was survival. In survival, you use every resource available.

Taggart watched as one of the White Collars stepped into the scene. He was holding some plans on actual paper, or the artificial equivalent that sometimes still saw use. These were rolled tightly in one hand and he spread them out now, directing the Blue Collars to look at them and make adjustments. The Blue Collars all looked at each other for just a brief instant, but it was enough. Taggart saw, in that fraction of a second, a means to his end.

He might not be on the right world, and he might not be able to communicate with the rest of humanity, but he was still surrounded by humans.

Thomas—John Thomas Paris—was safe for now. Taggart couldn't risk playing that trump card just yet. There would be a time and a place to reveal what he knew. But his other opposition—the alien captain—he was one problem Taggart could deal with.

It would all depend on humans being humans.

Penny was going to be a nuisance. Mitch looked her up and down before shaking his head and firmly saying, "No."

"What do you mean, no?" she asked, indignant.

"I mean you're not going with us. We have enough trouble without some debutante tagging along."

He heard Reilly cough and saw her turn her head to keep her smile from showing.

Penny, obviously, had noticed it too. "Listen, grease monkey. My parents are still out there. For all I know, they could be dying! I'm going with you and that's that."

"That's nothing," Mitch sneered. "This may be dangerous, and I'm not about to let a colonist with no useful skills tag along."

It was Alan, that noble, quiet bastard, who ended up ruining Mitch's day. "She's a professional climber and an expert hiker," he said quietly. "We've been in space most of our lives. We might need someone with her skills."

Mitch turned on the young man and glared. Alan was always levelheaded, making decisions based on cool reasoning and common sense. Why would he suddenly flaunt protocol and speak out in direct contradiction of his commanding officer?

It took only an instant for Mitch to realize why. He spoke out only when he felt that the one in command wasn't thinking things through. He was a good worker and a very smart young man, and he would never contradict his commander unless he had a damn good reason.

These things came to Mitch in an instant, but his temper didn't catch up immediately. He turned back to Penny, who was beaming with the sudden realization that she was, in fact, going on this trip. "Get her set up with gear," he snapped and then walked away.

If he'd stayed another moment, he would have wiped the smug smile off of Penny's face.

Reilly caught up with him as he stormed around the shuttle, doing the last-minute inspection. "Hey," she said.

He didn't stop, just kept moving. "What?" he snapped.

"Hey, just because you're pissed doesn't mean you can take it out on me," Reilly snapped back.

He whirled and faced her, bore down on her. He stood over her with fury tightening his arms and shoulders and neck. She looked up at him, defiant and unblinking. For a long moment they stood that way, silent.

They both suddenly broke into laughter.

"Why does that girl get to me so bad?" he asked.

Reilly smiled and briefly put a hand on his chest. Noticing, she quickly pulled it away, and Mitch suddenly wondered why he wished she'd put it back.

"Maybe it's because you want her to be this weak and weepy rich girl, but she's actually got some edge to her."

"So, what, I just don't want to respect her so I resent her because I do?"

“All of a sudden you respect her?” Reilly asked.

Mitch was silent, then sighed. “Yeah, I do. She comes off as a spoiled brat sometimes, but the truth is she can really pull it together.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed.”

“So what is it? What bugs me about her?” Mitch asked.

“Maybe it’s just that *you* know she can do better, but *she* doesn’t seem to know it.”

Mitch thought about this for a moment before realizing that it was true. He shook his head. “Penny Daunder is the last of our concerns right now. She’ll pull her weight, I guess. But what I’m more worried about is the fact that we haven’t heard from Captain Alonzo.”

Reilly absorbed this. “Nothing? No attempt at contact?”

“We have full satellite communications now, everything works. We have access to the ship’s computer, as far as our access codes can take us. But our hails aren’t being answered, and when we try to access any of the logs, we’re blocked. It’s as if the Captain and the remaining crew up there are not just ignoring us, but are going out of their way to keep us from knowing anything.”

“No one would be able to block all of the logs,” she said.

“One person could.”

She thought for a moment. “Captain Alonzo? Why would he do that?”

Mitch shook his head. “I have no idea. It doesn’t make sense. This definitely qualifies as a time of emergency, so we really need to have all communication channels open. He needs to be the one directing everything, and instead he seems to be leaving it to Captain Somar.”

“Somar’s doing a good job,” Reilly said.

“He is,” Mitch agreed. “He has my full support. But at the moment, we have no way of knowing what’s going on upstairs. And that’s why I didn’t want Penny with us.”

Reilly thought for a moment. “You’re planning on going out of atmo? Back up to the orbital platform?”

“Captain Somar has given me a directive. I’m supposed to drop off Alan and a small team to retrieve the pods and get them ready for transport, wake up the colonists, whatever. But while he’s doing that, you and I are going into space.”

Reilly absorbed this information. “I can’t say that I’m not happy to hear that, I guess.”

“I figured. But this isn’t going to be a homecoming, Reilly. We’re going up there to find out what the hell is going on with Captain Alonzo and the crew.”

She nodded. “It’s funny,” she said.

“What’s that?”

“I never thought I’d see the day when I trusted an Esool more than Captain Alonzo.”

Mitch said nothing. He was afraid to tell her he’d been feeling that way for some time now.

Instead he buried himself in the details of pre-launch. He loaded the gear that the rescue team would need. He tested the communications equipment and signal beacons. And he made doubly sure that there was enough food and water for several people to make the long journey back to Citadel on foot.

Just in case.

Half an hour before they were set to launch, Mitch called Alan into the shuttle’s crew bay. He had Alan sit in what would be considered the command seat. It was a gesture on his part, meant to emphasize what he was about to tell the young man. “You’re a solid guy, Alan,” Mitch said. “Squared. You know what you’re doing, and you always act with a cool head.”

Alan nodded.

Mitch marveled that the young man could agree with compliments on his character without so much as a smile of pride on his lips, and yet he still seemed utterly humble. “I’ve been given another mission by Captain Somar.”

“You’re going into space,” Alan said.

Mitch blinked. “What are you, psychic?”

“It makes sense. We haven’t heard from Captain Alonzo since the crash, and now that the shuttle’s back in working condition you’re going up to find out what’s going on.”

Mitch nodded. “Good. Then you’ll have no problem leading this rescue expedition.”

For the first time, Alan seemed surprised. “Me?” he asked.

Mitch fought the urge to smile but failed. “You’re the best qualified. You’ve already been out on the terrain further than anyone else, and you know how to repair the pods and get those colonists out safely. And besides, you’ll have Miss Daunder to help you navigate the rough terrain.”

Alan’s expression was back to its usual mask of stoicism. “Yes, sir,” he said.

“Don’t ‘sir’ me, Alan. As of right now, you’re being promoted to Engineer First Class. You and me, we have the same rank now.”

“Promoted?”

“By order of Captain Somar. He’s the acting commander here, and he has the authority. I suggested it to him this morning.”

Alan nodded. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet. You’ve got a tough job ahead of you. And if anything goes wrong while we’re in orbit, you’ll have to figure out a way to get a bunch

of weak and whining rich people back to base a few hundred miles away.”

“I’ll manage,” Alan said.

Mitch was surprised to see the younger man smiling, a hint of wry humor in his voice. “Well, I never thought I’d see it. You’re actually proud of yourself, aren’t you?”

“No, sir,” Alan said. “Just approving of a wise command decision.”

Mitch laughed.

“What about Thomas,” Alan asked. “Is he going with you?”

Mitch shook his head, “Not this time. Apparently Somar has something in mind for him. They wouldn’t tell me what it was.”

“Interesting,” Alan said in a tone that told Mitch that the young man knew Thomas wouldn’t be with *him*, either.

“Do you know something I don’t know?”

“No,” Alan said, his expression blank.

Mitch didn’t know what to believe. “ok, well, anyway this is your mission. The team is the group you selected, including Miss Daunder.”

“Penny will do fine,” he said.

“Let’s hope so. Now, go get ready. We lift off in about twenty minutes.”

Alan nodded and rose to leave. He paused just at the door to the cargo bay.

“Mitch?” Alan said, “When you see Captain Alonzo ask him how he knew we were off-course.”

Mitch blinked. “What makes you think he knew it?”

Alan shook his head. “It’s too much of a coincidence to think that this planet was on the same flight path as the one we were supposed to land on. That means that someone had to adjust our course somehow. The Captain is one of the few people who could have done this.”

Mitch thought this over. “ok,” he said. “I’ll ask him.”

It was just one of many questions he planned to ask when he saw Captain Alonzo face-to-face.

Fourteen

They landed near the first pod on the list. Alan and the crew disembarked with their gear and supplies in tow.

“This will be your base camp for a while,” Mitch told Alan, as he hung out of the back of the shuttle. “Make sure you secure your supplies. The maps we’re leaving you show the locations of all the pods. You have a communicator, so you can call me if you need anything.”

“Roger that,” Alan said.

Mitch, feeling a little like a mother bird pushing her young out of the nest, nodded to the young man as he stepped deeper into the cargo bay. The platform rose and closed with a *thunk*, and Mitch made his way to the crew bay and into the seat near Reilly. “We’re clear,” he said.

Reilly wasted no time in pushing the shuttle upward, slowly gaining speed as they approached the edge of the atmosphere.

“What do you think we’ll find up there?” Reilly asked.

Mitch had no answer. He looked at the growing darkness as they left the atmosphere of the planet and entered orbit. The orbital platform came into view, a metallic dot glinting in the sun, floating impossibly at the edge of an invisible barrier. “We should call ahead,” he told her.

Reilly nodded and hit the comms. “Orbital Platform this is Citadel Shuttle. We are on vector for your orbit, ETA of 2 minutes. Please respond.”

They waited with the channel open. It was a tense moment, and Mitch hadn’t realized how much he had longed to hear the Captain’s voice. He had known the man for more than eight years now, having traveled with him on various colony drop-offs. He wasn’t sure what was happening on board the platform, but he was sure something had gone horribly wrong.

“Captain Alonzo,” he said into the communicator. “This is Engineer First Class Mitch Garrison. We’re approaching Dock 1. Do you copy?”

No response.

Mitch looked to Reilly once more. She seemed shaken. “What do we do?” she asked.

Mitch turned to the console before him and initiated the docking procedure. The shuttle’s computer began syncing with the orbital platform. They were

getting the proper responses. The computers, at least, were talking to them.

“Well, the computer has cleared us for docking. I guess we board her.”

Reilly was biting her lower lip. “I think we should go in EVA suits,” she said.

Mitch blinked, “Seriously?”

“Don’t you?”

He hadn’t thought about it, but now it did seem like a sensible precaution. There was no evidence of an atmospheric break in the platform. No visible damage that he could see. But any number of things could have gone wrong up here. With Alonzo and the rest of the platform crew out of communication, there was no way to know what kind of danger they were facing.

“We go EVA,” Mitch agreed.

The computers handled all of the complex manipulations for the docking. Mitch and Reilly could walk away from the navigation and controls and suit up while the shuttle finished its complicated duet with the platform, linking by a few cables and ports, as well as the membrane of the docking bay. By the time they jolted to a stop, the two of them were protected inside a couple of EVA suits.

To Mitch’s relief, the pressure equalized between the two vessels. That meant the environmental systems on the platform were functioning. At least they wouldn’t have to contend with zero gravity. But the relief was only momentary as the doors of the shuttle’s docking bay opened and they made their way through the membrane to the platform’s main bay.

There was no one there to greet them.

Mitch hit the communicator button on his shoulder. “Orbital Platform this is Mitch Garrison. We have boarded and are in Docking Bay 1. Request a debriefing with someone in authority.”

“Should we wait here? Maybe they need medical attention?”

Mitch nodded. He stopped long enough to pull a med kit from one of the racks on the bay wall. Together he and Reilly had to force open the bay doors using the hand crank system.

“That’s odd,” Mitch said.

“What?”

“The platform is still in light speed mode. Everything’s manual. The computers should have kicked in for the automated systems, just like the docking bay.”

“Maybe there was some damage?” Reilly asked.

Mitch didn’t think so. Something about this whole situation made him edgy. The automated systems had numerous back-ups, and they would have kicked in as soon as the spacecraft left light speed and began separation. Of course, the

Citadel and Colony modules had been sabotaged, so maybe the automated systems had, too.

The two of them walked through the main corridor. “No one’s around,” Reilly whispered.

“Where’s the platform crew?” Mitch asked. There would only be a skeleton crew, but surely by now they should have run into someone. The silence and stillness was eerie, and Mitch found himself gripping the med kit as if it were a weapon. He was wishing he had brought a disc gun, or maybe even a wrench. Anything, really. “We should check the crew bay,” he said.

“Why?” Reilly asked.

“Just ... just a hunch,” Mitch replied, hoping he was wrong.

The crew bay was along their path to the bridge. The doors were closed tight, and yet again he and Reilly had to work the hand cranks to get them open. This was routine, however, and they slid smoothly to either side. When they were fully wide, Mitch and Reilly stepped into the crew bay and looked around.

There were dozens of unopened pods standing on their platforms, all around the room.

“The crew is still under,” Reilly said in awe.

“Why weren’t they woken with the rest of us? They should have been on duty whenever we came out of the lightrail.”

“Mitch, what the hell is going on? What’s happened?”

“I don’t know,” Mitch said quietly, shaking his head.

He checked the display on the sleeve of the EVA suit. The oxygen and pressure read normal. He reached up and took off his helmet with a *woosh*. Reilly followed suit and soon the two of them were shucking the suits altogether.

Mitch made his way to one of the pods and entered the code to open it. Nothing. He tried the manual releases and still the lid wouldn’t budge. “They’re locked down,” he said. “Only Captain Alonzo or Commander Marcos has the authority to do that.”

“It couldn’t have been Marcos, he died outside. Why would the Captain lock down the pods?”

“I don’t know,” Mitch replied. He took off one of the panels and tried to override the controls. All he received for his efforts was a mild shock and a series of sparks. He replaced the panel, afraid that he might damage the life support systems if he pushed it too far. There would be time enough to override the locks on the pods later. “We need to get to the bridge. We have to find Captain Alonzo.”

“Ok,” Reilly said. She didn’t sound too enthusiastic about it.

They left the bay and made their way quickly toward the bridge. Mitch still carried the med kit, unsure of what they would find when they arrived. He found himself experiencing a bit of cognitive dissonance. On the one hand, he wanted nothing more than to see his Captain alive and well. On the other, the strangeness of their situation and the number of shocks they'd experienced thus far had filled him with a sense of anxiety and even anger. Something was definitely happening here, but he had no idea what. The only thing he was certain of was that Captain Alonzo was somehow tied to it.

The doors to the bridge opened smoothly as they used the hand cranks. Upon entering, they found themselves in a darkened room, lit only by the numerous computer screens and terminals. The large view screen, which had lowered over the main observation window after leaving light speed, gave them a crisp view of the planet below, with readouts of data dancing at each corner. Among the data were notices of the communications from planet-side, as well as those from the shuttle's approach. They had the earmarks of messages that had been received and heard but placed in the queue, ignored.

"Captain Alonzo?" Mitch asked loudly.

The room was too quiet. Then, "Engineer First Class Mitch Garrison."

The voice came from Captain Alonzo, who seemed to be sitting with his back to them. He was in the command chair at the bottom of the gangway. He made no move to look at them.

"Captain!" Reilly said, her enthusiasm growing. "We've been trying to reach you!"

"Yes," the captain said. He still had not turned around.

"Captain," Mitch asked, "are you ok?"

Finally, slowly, the Captain rose from his seat and turned to look at them.

Reilly gasped. Mitch managed to keep himself in check. They both gazed into the face of the man they had known and trusted for years.

His face was horribly burned and scarred, and one eye looked as if it had been boiled out of its socket. Puss oozed from the gaping hole, and the rest of his skin was scarlet and purple from infection.

"Captain!" Reilly called.

Mitch started forward with the med kit.

"Stay where you are," Captain Alonzo said.

"But Captain, you need medical attention," Mitch said.

"Mr. Garrison, I'm well beyond the need for medical attention. I'm afraid I won't last much longer."

This stunned the two of them.

"Before I go, though, I think I'd better fill you in on what's happened."

Mitch nodded, “Yes, sir. I think there are some things we need to know. Starting with why is the platform crew still in stasis?”

Captain Alonzo laughed. “Believe me, Mr. Garrison, I’ve tried to wake them. But our saboteur was smarter than I thought. He’s hung us out to dry but good.”

“Who?” Mitch asked. “Who caused all of this?”

Captain Alonzo’s neck seemed to tighten and his jaw clenched. “A miserable bastard who, until only a few days ago, I would have trusted with my life.”

Mitch looked at Reilly, who was staring at the Captain with a mixture of awe and revulsion. He turned back to Alonzo. “Who? Who was it?” he asked.

The Captain fairly spat as he said, “It was Alan Angelou.”

Penny tried not to think about the shuttle. She hadn’t realized until the last possible instant that Mitch and Reilly weren’t going to land and help with recovering the pods. Without them, this was going to take much longer. Without them there was a chance that the people in those pods ... people like her parents ... might not make it. *So why the hell ...*

No. She refused to think about it. Her mission was to find her parents and that was all she could afford to think about. If this pod wasn’t one of them, then she would hike to the next one. And she’d keep moving from pod to pod until she found them.

And God help Mitch Garrison if she couldn’t reach them in time.

This whole thing had been one big joke. The trouble was, Penny couldn’t figure out who the butt of it was supposed to be. Was it her? The sudden urgency of her father as he told her to pack made her wonder what the big emergency was. At the time, she was just happy to know that he and her mother were going too. Now, though, she wondered ... why the rush?

They had made no plans, as far as she could tell. This had been some last-minute decision to sail across the galaxy on the lightrail and set down on a new colony world. So why? What was it that her father had hoped to accomplish here?

It had to have something to do with Mr. Taggart. He was the only person she knew who could tell her father to do something, anything, and it was done immediately. And since Taggart was here, for whatever reason, she felt pretty sure that was the explanation. He wanted her father with him for something.

Now here they all were, trapped on this planet and struggling to survive. She was alone now, because of Taggart. Her parents might be dead now, because of Taggart. Everything here, it seemed, was Taggart’s fault.

She shivered, even though the sun was making the air almost uncomfortably warm. Looking around she saw the rest of the team that would be helping on the rescue. Among them was Alan, the man who had called her out as a climber and

hiker. She had thought she'd had everyone fooled, sticking with the advantage of having more knowledge than she let on. But she was the one who had been taken in, and he had fooled her pretty good, just by saying nothing at all.

So what else was he keeping to himself?

Alan had given orders to the rest of the group, and they began to spread out, searching for the first pod in the brush and brambles of the area. He looked up and saw her standing with her pack, and made his way to her.

"You ready?" he asked.

She nodded. "Do you think ... " she couldn't finish.

Alan studied her for a moment. He was always so ... *stoic*. Couldn't he be human just once? Couldn't he show some emotion?

"We'll find your parents," he said.

The words had been spoken to her before, at least twice. The first time was by Thomas, who seemed to honestly mean them. The second time was by Taggart, who seemed to use them as tools, a means of controlling her somehow. This time, though, Penny found that she wasn't sure what was meant by them. It was as if, somehow, Alan were using her parents as a metaphor for something else. They weren't her parents to him, they were—*something*. Something important but undefined.

"We'd better get going," Alan said, and Penny only nodded in agreement.

The two of them hiked together, searching through the brambles to find the pod that had landed locally. Suddenly the communicator on Alan's shoulder came to life. "We have it," one of the team reported. He announced their location and soon Alan and Penny were pushing back through the path they had made. It was much easier going back out than going in, and they soon found themselves at the spot where the pod had been uncovered.

It had been banged up but was still in decent enough shape. The windows— not glass, but some kind of transparent metal that Penny had never fully understood—were scarred and scratched so badly that she couldn't make out who was inside.

The engineers were already at work on it, and in moments the lid *shooshed* open. Penny clambered forward, not realizing that she'd been leaning towards the pod all this time. She nearly fell as she pushed through the small group of engineers, breaking through any gap.

She let out a gasp, realizing suddenly that she'd been holding her breath. For a brief instant, she thought she saw her mother there, lying prone in the pod. But the woman inside was in her mid-thirties, and though she had a similar hairstyle and was dressed in a familiar-looking outfit, it wasn't her mother. Penny turned and pushed back through the group as someone came forward with a med kit.

Alan was waiting just outside the ring of engineers.

“Not them,” Penny said. Strangely, she felt the urge to cry pass. The sob that had built in her chest faded, and now she felt a cool resolve. She would be able to push through to the next pod site—and the next and the next—until she found her parents.

Alan nodded, more of an acknowledgment than a sign of sympathy. He looked to the medical crew and technicians who were helping the woman out of stasis. “Get her to the camp. Leave the pod for now. Grab the rations and med kit from its storage.” Alan was directing everyone with proficiency. He seemed born to it. Penny wished she felt some kind of peace about that, but she just couldn’t. It was nice to have someone in charge, and it helped her overcome her feelings of being out-of-control. But her only goal, her only motive, was to find her parents.

What she’d do to them when she found them, she couldn’t guess.

It was the first time she realized that she was angry with them. Not just afraid that they might have been hurt. Not just afraid they might have abandoned her to this colony. She was truly, thoroughly, *angry* with them.

Maybe it was for bringing her here in the first place. Or maybe it was just that she had given her father more credit than to fall in with someone like Taggart—a man who clearly had his own agenda and saw others only as pawns for his purpose.

Penny knew she was probably letting her experience with Corey impact her judgment of the man, but his *zeal*, his *arrogance*, his *pretentiousness*—it seemed so clear to her now. As she had watched Taggart move through the crowd at the crash site, she had become certain that he and Corey shared some common bond. They were two of a kind. They had agendas beyond their wealth and fame, and they saw human beings as tools.

Penny knew she was considered a party girl by the public. She knew what it was to live one life in the public eye and quite another in private. She had maintained her party girl image over the years because, well, she *enjoyed* it. Just as she enjoyed rock climbing and hiking and competing. It was a *game* to her. It was the social equivalent to strategic sports. But in all of her time as the consummate party girl, mixing-in with celebrities and playing games with the press, she had never felt like she was in the presence of evil until she had met Corey.

And then Taggart.

She shivered once again.

Alan ordered two of the engineers to stay behind with the woman they brought back to base camp. They were to set up camp while the rest of the team

moved on to the next pod. This time they would go together for two miles east, then split up to cover more territory as they came to the general area where the next pod should lie.

“We’ll be in teams of two,” he said. “Penny and I are team one.” He split the remaining four people into two groups, and they began their trek.

At the two-mile marker, they split up and Penny found herself alone with Alan—someone who was so different from anyone else she’d ever known, she wasn’t sure how to deal with him.

“Why don’t we have exact locations on the pods?” she asked him, hoping maybe their common ground might make things more comfortable.

“We only have the one platform in orbit right now. We need at least three other satellites to give us triangulation. No other satellites have been launched yet, so we have to rely on the platform’s array to guide us. That means we can only narrow it down to a mile or so. Give or take.”

Penny nodded, then thought. “Wait, isn’t there supposed to be another satellite in orbit already? The probe?”

Alan answered carefully. “There was *supposed* to be.”

Penny thought about this for a moment. “Where is it?”

Alan didn’t answer. Instead he consulted the map. “We’re in range of the pod now. This terrain is kind of wide open. We should be able to spot it. Keep your eyes peeled.”

Penny let it go. He might be under orders or something. *Who cares anyway*, she thought. She had problems of her own.

She had to find her father so she could beat the crap out of him.

The pod gleamed in the sun and as they approached Penny had to force herself not to break into a run. The terrain was rough and treacherous here. A misstep might cause her to twist an ankle or even break something. Years of adventure racing and hiking expeditions had trained her to keep herself in check in rough terrain. She held out.

As they approached, it became clear that something was wrong.

“The pod’s upside down,” Alan said. She could hear a slight tension in his voice.

“Aren’t they supposed to have some kind of stabilizers? To keep them upright and help them land?”

“Yes,” Alan said, picking up the pace a bit.

She matched him. “So if it’s upside down ... ”

“The stabilizers might have failed altogether. This could be bad.”

They reached the pod in moments, and together they took hold of its sides and began to hoist. It took all of their effort, but finally it rocked and tilted, then rolled into place.

Alan wasted no time. He pulled the control panel open and sparked wires together, shorting them to cause the lid to release. With a *woosh* it popped out of its seam, and Alan and Penny practically yanked it open.

Penny nearly screamed when she looked inside.

“Daddy!” she shouted.

The man inside the pod was indeed her father, but he was in very bad shape. The ride to the surface had been a rough one for him, and only the pod’s internal buffers and shock supports had prevented him from being scrambled like a yolk inside an egg. Still there were wounds on his forehead and cheek, where he had collided with the inner ridge of the stasis pod.

“Don’t,” Alan said, grasping her hands as she reached in to try to help her father out.

“Let me go!” she shouted.

“Don’t move him. He may have a neck injury or something. We need to check him out first.”

Penny was vaguely aware that this was a good idea. Some part of her screamed at the slow pace of the process, though, and she felt herself resenting Alan just a little. She wanted to tear the pod away from her father and free him. It was quite a different desire than what she’d felt for the past morning, when she had wanted to hurt him for being at the root of all of the fear and suffering she’d been through lately. Now she just wanted to hug him and have him tell her everything was going to be alright. She’d smack him later.

“P-Penny?” he asked, coming to consciousness.

“Daddy,” she cried.

“Penny, where’s your mother? What’s happened? Why does my head hurt?”

“You’ve been injured, Mr. Daunder. Try to remain still. I’m checking you for internal injuries now.” Alan was a dean of efficiency at the moment, with unquestionable authority.

Penny helped keep her father calm and still by placing her hand on his uninjured cheek.

It took half an hour, but Alan eventually deemed it safe for her father to be pulled from the pod. Penny helped him sit up, and then guided him to the ground as he stepped out and over. He was wobbly and weak but otherwise stable. “Where’s your mother?” he asked again.

“We haven’t found her yet, Daddy. She’s still in a pod somewhere.”

“What ... what the hell happened?” he asked.

Alan spoke up, “There was a problem as we came into orbit, Mr. Daunder. We crashed here. Your pod and several others were thrown out of the colony module. We’re attempting to rescue everyone now.”

Her father nodded. “Good. What ... what about Taggart? Has he been recovered?”

Alan and Penny glanced at each other, and it was Penny who answered, a bit of ice creeping into her voice. “Yes, Daddy. Taggart’s fine. He’s back at the base camp.”

“Good, good,” her father said, slumping against the pod. He looked terrible, weary, and injured. Penny tried to support him as best she could.

Alan moved away from them while he called to the rest of the search team. When they arrived, he had them begin to salvage the food and med kits from the pod. “You should take your father back to base,” he told Penny.

“What about my mother?” she asked.

“We’ll find her. Get him back safely.”

Penny looked at her father for a moment before coming to a decision. “Daddy,” she said. “Go with them back to base. I’m going on to find Mom.”

“Penny ...” Alan started.

She stared him down. “I’m going to find my *mother*. I’m the only one who really knows what to do out here. The rest of you spent most of your lives in a soda can in space. So don’t try to stop me.”

Alan looked at her for a moment, then nodded. He gave orders to one of the team to take Mr. Daunder back to camp, and then he and the rest, including Penny, set out to find the next pod on the list.

Fifteen

Thomas was cautious around the others. He kept to himself as he went about making adjustments to Citadel's systems. He tried not to concentrate on the irony that he was doing work meant to save these people, even though everyone here thought of him as the most vicious murderer of all time.

Actually, that wasn't quite true, was it? They didn't know, yet, that he was John Thomas Paris. They only knew him as Thomas. So far.

Taggart hadn't told anyone yet. It had been a day since their impromptu meeting in Somar's command center, and Thomas had slept fitfully the night before. Somar had assigned Billy to the same tent, as his guard, though Thomas wasn't at all sure it would have mattered. If the crowd suddenly discovered his identity, there might be nothing that could stop them from tearing him to pieces.

He fought to concentrate on the work at hand. These computer systems were much more advanced than those of his time, but he had been a quick study. Immediately after coming out of stasis, he had read every technical manual and white paper he could get his hands on. For weeks he had poured over documentation, schematics, and source sites to bring himself up to speed. He had studied computer technology his whole life, and even though there had been many advances since he'd gone under, the principles were still very much the same.

It was the mechanical engineering that was throwing him for a loop.

Who would have expected that star travel would revert back to older, much more ancient technologies? The computers were still there and still vital. But to operate at faster-than-light, racing along the lightrail, required pure mechanics. The nature of faster-than-light travel made it impossible for computers and wireless systems to function. Mankind had to depend, once again, on gears, cranks, pulleys, and hydraulics.

In some ways, this pleased Thomas more than he could say. It was like awakening to find he'd slipped backward—not forward—into time. The first time he had encountered a hand-cranked communicator, he had laughed out loud, prompting strange looks from the people around him. It seemed so archaic and yet so brilliant. It was elegant in design, and yet it functioned better than any device he'd known in his own time. It was enough to make him feel somewhat

ashamed of the world he'd left behind, where technology was becoming so much plastic and silicon junk, replaceable at a moment's notice and, therefore, disposable. This mentality led to even more cheap junk, and before long it was nearly impossible to buy something of any quality. Quality had become an endangered species.

But now, in this time when mankind had returned to technological simplicity and elegance, the earmarks of quality could be seen again. Because resources onboard a lightrail ship could become scarce in an instant, great care was taken to preserve everything, to reuse and repurpose everything.

Thomas couldn't get over how much had changed. The world, yes. It had no choice but to change, with the mass exodus of many of the Earth's inhabitants. With the creation of new technologies and the inhabiting of new worlds.

And humanity had changed so much in the past century. In some ways for the better—there seemed to be a unity to humanity that had been utterly lacking in Thomas's time. But in some ways for the worse—with working class distinctions taking the place of racial prejudices. Thomas wasn't sure what was worse—bigotry over class or bigotry over race, religion, and gender. Maybe it was impossible for humans to just “be.” Maybe they couldn't exist without that component of hatred for the “other.” *So in that respect, humanity hasn't changed so much after all*, Thomas thought.

Then again, as he looked at the elegant computer system before him, framed more in brass and wood than in plastic, and as he noticed the attention that had been paid to every detail and the high quality of every component, he felt that humanity now, once again, seemed to care about the quality of what it built. It took pride in its work. That was something Thomas hadn't seen in his time. It was a concept that belonged to the world a hundred years before he was born. That was how humanity had changed during his absence—it had gotten a work ethic.

Most surprising, Thomas was startled to discover, was that he himself had changed.

To think that his biggest ambition over a hundred years ago had been to sit in a room with thirty or forty other men and women and watch a spacecraft launch into space! It seemed so useless, so passive now. Here he was now, on an alien world! Not watching it, himself static and unchanging. He was *participating!* He was living his life, it seemed, for the very first time.

It would be a shame if that life came to a sudden and tragic end over crimes he'd never actually committed, over a hundred years ago.

“Mr. Taggart told me,” Thomas heard someone say. He looked up from the computer terminal and saw two Blue Collar workers walking past. They paid no

attention to him, and he realized suddenly that he'd expected them to glance his way. He had expected them to say that Taggart had revealed his secret. He hadn't realized he was so paranoid.

"But how can it be true? I know some of them, and I've met a lot more since we got here. I don't think it's true."

"Why would Mr. Taggart lie? What's he got to gain?" the first Blue Collar man said.

The second thought for a moment. "I can't think of any reason. But it just seems wrong somehow."

"What's wrong," the first said sternly, "is that you and me have spent more time on this planet than any other planet we've ever been to in our whole lives. Don't you think it's funny that we ain't heard from Captain Alonzo even once since we've been here?"

"Yeah," the second said. "How come?"

"Mr. Taggart says that the alien's keeping everything to himself. He's shut off the comms. And the White Collars are helping him. Especially that ..."

It was then that they finally noticed Thomas, who at this point was making quite a show of being engrossed in the computer in front of him. The two men silently but quickly made their way from his vicinity, and Thomas spared a glance toward them as they left.

This was not good.

Taggart was sowing seeds of discord among the Blue Collars, getting them worked up against Somar. But more than that, he'd tied the White Collars in as the enemy as well.

A civil war between the White Collars and the Blue Collars would be a disaster here. It would hurt everyone's chances of survival, including Taggart's. Without the support of the White Collars, things would grind to a halt quickly. So what was Taggart's game exactly?

And what about the colonists? Taggart was well known to be at the top of that particular food chain. How was it to his advantage to stir up a class war? The wealthy elite that he depended on for support would surely be the next target of the Blue Collars' ire, and that couldn't be good for him.

Thomas wrapped up what he was doing and made his way to where Somar was working with several crewmembers. The water purification system was in place, pipe had been laid along the trenches that led to the major areas of the camp. Several lines of water and power stretched to spots that had no tents or inhabitants but were the sites chosen for future building. They would be homes, government facilities, a hospital—anything the colony needed. Thomas felt once again that Somar was a truly great leader, a truly great man. His goals were

unselfish and were aimed at the survival and prosperity of the colony. The tension that was building around him would destroy everything he was working toward, unless something was done now.

“I need to talk to you,” he said to Somar as soon as he stood beside him.

Somar looked at him for only an instant and turned to assign duties to the crew before following Thomas away toward the command center.

“Not there,” Somar said. He indicated, instead, an opening in the base platform of Citadel. It was an access to the large cargo bay of the module, and just within, there was a set of stairs that wound to the upper levels. The module, the nerve center of the colony, was also meant to serve as temporary shelter for a support crew as the colony was built. In a normal scenario, the colony module and the Citadel module would have stood side by side on an alien world. The citizens would have slept while the crews built their future homes.

As Thomas and Somar mounted the stairs, Thomas noted the narrow lanes between the rows of bunks. There wasn't much room here, only enough for people to squeeze in and out on their way to and from a place to sleep. There wasn't even enough room for two people to stand side-by-side. Thomas found himself feeling a bit claustrophobic.

Finally, Somar led him through a door at the end of the bunk-lined corridor, and the two emerged in an equipment room that had been gutted and emptied by the crew. Racks lined the walls, and Thomas saw that a desk space had been built using empty shelves and a crate for a chair.

“You've been nesting,” Thomas smiled.

“A precaution,” Somar said. “One must have a refuge when surrounded by enemies.”

Thomas caught on immediately. “You already know about Taggart's rebellion?”

“Has it advanced so far as to be called a rebellion? I learned this morning that he was spreading the seeds of mutiny. I have some experience in this area.”

“That guy ... Jack?”

“Yes,” Somar said. He looked pained somehow. Sad.

“This could be much worse. I don't know exactly what Taggart has in mind, but he's corralling the Blue Collars, getting them churned up.”

“He is attempting to turn them against the others,” he said.

“I think it's just you and the White Collars, actually,” Thomas replied. “Something tells me he's not going to risk his collection of wealthy elite.”

“The results are the same,” Somar said, a foul expression on his face. “Taggart will destroy this community if he cannot be stopped.”

Thomas thought for a moment. “Do you think that's his goal?” he asked.

Somar frowned. "You do not?"

"No. Taggart ... he's a leader. Maybe a selfish one and a self-preservationist to boot. But he knows people, and he knows he needs them. How could a class war help him?"

Somar thought about this for a moment. He leaned against the makeshift desk, contemplating. "The value of war is in its ending," Somar quoted.

Thomas had never heard the expression. "Who said that?"

"It is from the Book of Nolad. He was a great philosopher among my people. In this case, he was referring to the end of wars between members of my race. For so long, war was believed to be good for our people. When one of the Esool fell, his body added nourishment to the soil of our world. He fed the soil, and other Esool could take strength from him. His blood mingled with the water and his bones became the dust. And the silent plants, those that did not evolve with us, could feed and feel what it was like to be free of the soil. In this time, war was considered both necessary and a great honor."

"What turned you around?" Thomas asked, fascinated.

"Travel to the stars," Somar said, a gleam lighting his eyes. "When we learned that we could live on new worlds, that we were not rooted as the silent plants were, we discovered that it was no great thing for men to die. It was much greater, much nobler for them to live."

"And so this Nolad ... he was talking about your freedom? The value he was talking about was that you continued on, to colonize other worlds?"

"Exactly so," Somar said. "But as in all sayings of wisdom, one can find truth of which the author himself might not have been aware. And so now, here on this world, I see a new meaning in Nolad's words. A meaning that Mr. Taggart seems already to know."

Thomas thought for a moment. "By setting up the war, he's giving everyone a common purpose. And when he steps in to stop it, he comes off as the hero."

"The great peacemaker," Somar said. "But how many will die in his effort to assert control over the colony?"

Thomas had no answer. He had only a sickening, dropping feeling in his stomach. "Do we think Taggart could be such a bastard," Thomas asked, "as to sacrifice a bunch of innocent lives for his own purposes?"

"You have any doubt of it, Mr. Paris?"

Thomas inhaled sharply and paused for a moment. He hadn't been called that name much lately. "I ..."

Somar waved. "I am making a point. Taggart knew who you were from the outset and had plans to use you in some game of his own design. He obviously has no qualms about using the lives of others as paving stones for his path."

Thomas nodded. "You're right." Something occurred to him then. Something he'd been too afraid to ask before. "Somar ... what do you think of me? I mean, now that you know who I am?"

Somar studied him for a moment. "I did not know who you were before, and yet I trusted you. I mingled my blood with yours, a sacred act among my people. In that moment, I bound myself to you in life and in death. There is not one doubt in my mind that I made a wise choice. You are worthy of respect, honor, and trust."

Thomas hadn't known just how badly he needed to hear these words. He hadn't known how hard they would hit him. He suddenly felt his eyes burn as tears formed in them. He wiped them away with his shirtsleeve. "Thank you," he said. He managed to say it without choking. "What ... what do we do about Taggart?" he asked.

Somar shook his head. "I do not know. Mr. Thomas. I am afraid I'm out of my element when it comes to dealing with men like Taggart. No Esool would sacrifice others for his own purpose."

"Well, unfortunately humans seem to have no trouble with it. Never have," Thomas sneered. "But we have to do something. *Say* something. Somehow we have to put a stop to this before people get killed."

Just then there was a spike from the communicators on their shoulders. "Captain Somar," came Billy Sans's voice. "Please report to the Command Center."

Somar reached up and pressed the comm. "I'll be right there," he said. He looked at Thomas. "Mr. Thomas, I trust you to come up with a solution. I apologize for placing this responsibility on your shoulders, but I'm afraid I am stretched far too thin at the moment. I need someone I can trust to deal with this situation, and the number of humans on that list is exactly three."

Thomas laughed. "ok," he said. "No pressure. Mind if I tag along to the Command Center, though?"

"Of course not," Somar said. And with that they exited the makeshift secret headquarters of the Captain.

The command center was alive with activity. Billy Sans had recruited several other Blue Collar and White Collar workers. There were even a couple of the wealthy colonists present, performing tasks that Thomas felt sure they must have had some part in during their previous lives. These were good men, he felt. Confident and competent. How had they fallen in with Taggart?

He caught himself. How did he know they had? He couldn't assume that every wealthy colonist was on Taggart's list of allies. Maybe they'd had their own legitimate reasons for coming on this trip. Maybe they were looking for

opportunities on a new world. It was entirely possible that these men were the kind of self-made entrepreneurs that Thomas found honorable. They may have come by their fortunes honestly and earnestly.

“What is it, Mr. Sans?” Somar asked, as soon as they had entered.

“We have communication with the orbital platform, sir. It’s Mitch Garrison. And he has Captain Alonzo with him.

Somar nodded and stood before the computer.

Thomas looked at the screen just as Mitch’s image materialized there.

“Captain Somar. We’ve made contact with Captain Alonzo, sir. But we’ve got a problem. He says that Alan Angelou is the saboteur.”

Thomas could not hide his shock. “What!”

“Thomas,” Mitch said. “I know you and Alan are close, and believe me, I felt the same way. But the Captain has shown me vid footage of Alan doing something to the ship’s navigation computers.”

“But ... why?” Thomas asked.

“I don’t know,” Mitch replied.

“Mr. Garrison,” Somar said, “Captain Alonzo is with you?”

Mitch hesitated. “Yes, sir.”

“Please put him on screen,” Somar said.

Mitch turned and looked to his left. “Sir?” he said to whomever was off-screen.

In a moment, he moved from where he was seated, and Thomas watched as a man’s torso came into view. After a moment, Captain Alonzo lowered himself within view.

Thomas nearly gasped. Alonzo’s face was horribly mutilated, and it looked as if he’d lost an eye. He was obviously in bad shape, possibly dying, but his bearing was that of a strong and confident man.

“Captain Alonzo,” Somar said quietly, “You have been injured.”

“Yes,” the Captain replied. “I’m afraid I won’t hold out much longer. But Mr. Garrison has convinced me that I need to speak with you.”

“Indeed,” Somar replied. “I am alarmed by this news. I do not know Mr. Angelou well, but he seems to be an honorable man. I’ve seen no evidence of treachery.”

Thomas spoke up, “He’s risked his life for this colony, Captain. He’s a good guy.”

“I wasn’t aware of this either,” Alonzo said on screen. “In fact, I had suspected ... someone else. You should know that Taggart is the head of Earth First, Captain Somar.”

“I do know it,” Somar said.

“Good. Keep a close eye on him. But he is not your primary concern. I don’t know what Angelou’s agenda is, but he is clearly responsible for everything that’s happened since we left the Hub.”

“But how?” Thomas asked. “Wouldn’t the security systems at the Hub have detected changes to the navigation system?”

“He did his work after we left the Hub,” Alonzo said.

It took a moment for Thomas to realize what this meant. “He was able to reprogram the computer systems while we were on the lightrail?”

“It’s true, Thomas,” Mitch said off screen.

“How?” Somar asked.

“I believe he took advantage of the lag between leaving the Hub and reaching full light speed,” Alonzo replied. “It’s the only way he could have done what he did. He also disengaged several security and safety systems, which allowed him to lock down the platform crew, keeping them in stasis. I’m not sure why yet.”

“But what happened to *you*, Captain?” Somar asked.

“Our maneuver just outside of orbit sent the platform careening out into space. The propulsion system malfunctioned. When I attempted to manually override it, I met with a surprise. There was an explosive device in the access panel.”

“My God,” Thomas said. “I just ... I can’t believe this. Alan ... it just can’t be true.”

“Mr. Thomas,” Alonzo said, “Mitch tells me that you befriended Alan when he aided in your rescue on the surface. Had you met him before the crash?”

“No,” Thomas said. “That would have been ... it would have been extremely unlikely that he and I would have met each other before we boarded the ship.”

“Why is that?” Mitch asked.

Thomas glanced at Somar, who was regarding him calmly. “It’s a long story,” he said. “I can’t go into it now. But trust me, I never met Alan Angelou before that day.”

Alonzo nodded, accepting the evasion and the assurances, but Mitch seemed vaguely wary. Thomas was sure he’d have to work hard to explain things later. He hoped he wouldn’t lose Mitch’s trust and friendship. But he couldn’t explain now, in front of dozens of witnesses, that he was the most hated man in history. “I was framed” wouldn’t be enough to prevent his lynching.

“Captain Alonzo,” Somar said. “You must accompany Mr. Garrison to the surface. You need medical attention.”

“It’s too late,” Alonzo said.

“Captain, I insist. I ... we have a way to heal you.”

Thomas looked at Somar, realizing what he meant. He could use his blood to heal Alonzo.

Alonzo laughed. "Blood brothers, Captain?" he said.

Thomas glanced around at the room, but no one seemed to understand what this meant. Alonzo had said it cryptic enough to keep Somar's secret. Of everyone in the room, only Billy Sans met Thomas's gaze. Did he know about Somar's abilities as well? It hit him that, yes, Billy had seen Somar heal himself from massive injuries.

"Yes," Somar said in reply, with no hint that he was hiding anything.

"Too late even for miracles," Alonzo said. "Besides, someone has to keep things going here until the crew can be awakened. You'll need the platform's satellite capabilities to track Alan. And I've been unable to launch any of the orbitals since we got here. Until I can get the crew out of those pods, I'm afraid this is just the way it has to be."

"We can send some of the crew up," Somar suggested.

"You will do no such thing. Every man is needed on the surface right now. And you can't afford to send the shuttle back up once Mitch and Reilly get it back to you. You'll need it. The shuttles are also on the list of things we have no access to. Whatever Alan's plan is, he's screwed us pretty good. I don't think he intended for anyone to ever leave that world."

"What could he possibly have in mind?" Thomas asked.

"I don't know," Alonzo said. "But one thing is clear. He's looking for something in the pods."

Sixteen

Penny wasn't entirely sure of anything these days. The chaos that her life had become was starting to wear her out, and it was becoming more difficult to drag any sense out of the events of her life. Her father was heavily injured and resting back at their makeshift camp. Her mother was still missing. And Taggart was at the heart of it all, somehow responsible for shaking up her life and stranding her here.

So no, she wasn't entirely sure of anything right now, except for one fact: Alan Angelou was *looking* for something.

Not the pods. More like something *in* the pods. It had occurred to her slowly, but now she was sure about it. He was just going through the motions. When he found a pod, he would rescue the person inside, call in the crew to escort the colonist back to base camp, have the pod's equipment and provisions prepared for salvage, and then continue on. He would also attempt to get Penny to return to the camp with the rest, leaving him to explore alone.

But it was the systems check that was really unusual.

With every pod, Alan would immediately access the computer systems. He said he was checking the health stats and other information regarding each colonist. But Penny couldn't see how that would make much difference. The health readings would be from the moments before stasis, largely. The only reading that was taken while the person slept was a life sign check. That was for spot-checking in a colony bay, but on the surface it would be enough to open the pod and let the person out. They had to salvage parts and materials from the pod anyway, regardless of whether the colonist had survived.

Penny had thought about asking Alan what he was looking for, but stopped herself. She really didn't know Alan that well. If he was hiding something, it was his business, wasn't it?

He seemed to like her and even took care of her if she needed help. And he seemed to be very caring toward the colonists. But he also seemed somehow ... distant. Unlike Taggart, who put himself in the middle of any group of people and dominated them through his personality, Alan stayed at the fringes, led with quiet authority, and kept his agenda to himself. There was more to him than he let on, Penny was certain, but she wasn't sure what it meant, that he had a secret.

“There’s one,” Alan said. The two of them were standing at the top of a small ridge, looking over a wooded area ahead. There were mostly small trees and brush within walking distance. Further on was what looked like a large, lush forest. Penny was used to hiking and being outdoors. She spotted the signs of a river, even though none was visible. But she saw no indication of a pod nearby.

“I don’t see it,” Penny admitted.

“There,” Alan said, leaning in close to her and pointing.

Penny felt a bit uncomfortable but was shocked to find that she also felt a little thrilled. Most of the guys she had dated, back on Earth or even out in the colonies, were showboats. They were extremely good-looking with faces and bodies crafted by the best services fame and money could buy. But they were vacant. Empty. She dated them because, as the rich party girl, it was expected of her. It was part of her “cover.” But she secretly felt disgusted by most of them.

Alan, though, was *real*. He was handsome, but not in that artificial way. He didn’t wear any product in his hair or dress in the latest fashions. He had a strong and lean body that came from real work, not a gym. He was also smart and deep and mysterious.

Penny caught herself glancing sideways at him and immediately forced herself to follow the line of his arm and finger, out onto the terrain ahead. She saw it then. There was the tiniest reflection as the sun glinting off of metal. “How did you see that?” she whispered, awed.

“I’m pretty good with details,” he said, then hesitated. “Most of the time.”

He stepped away from her then, and the two of them marched on toward the pod.

“What does that mean, ‘most of the time?’ Did you overlook something?” She was probing for information about what he was looking for. Maybe if he’d just trust her with it, she could help him find it.

“I recently overlooked something, and things went a little crazy. But I’m working on repairing the damage.”

“What was it?” Penny asked. Then, before he could answer, she stopped and waited. He also stopped, and then turned around. “What are you looking for in the pods?” Penny asked bluntly.

The effect was immediate. Alan’s eyes widened just slightly, then the calm and stoicism settled back into place. “What makes you think I’m looking for something in the pods?” he asked.

“It’s a program or something,” Penny said. “You have something hidden in one of the computers, is that it? A file maybe?”

Alan stood, silent.

“I’m right, aren’t I?” she asked.

Alan stood for a bit longer, then said, "Yes."

Penny blinked. She had been sure, but now it was confirmed. "So ... what is it? Can I help you find it?"

For the first time, Alan actually smiled. "Well, I can't really go into what it is. And no, I don't think you can help me find it. I hid it very well."

Penny regarded him for a moment. "What is it, Alan? What could you possibly have hidden in the pod computer systems? Aren't those protected by all kinds of security?"

Alan nodded. "Yes. Lots of security. But a lot less than the ship's systems. And it was the only way to hide them."

"Them?" Penny asked. "More than one program?"

He looked at her for a long moment. "Penny, it's hard to explain. But what I'm trying to do ... I'm trying to save my parents, for one thing. And I'm trying to give someone a second chance. I can't tell you what's happening. I just need you to trust that I know what I'm doing."

She studied him for a while. "ok," she said.

He blinked. "Just like that?"

She waved in the direction of the camp, some distance behind them. "You've saved all those people. You saved my dad. You saved me. And you're helping me save my mom. I think there's something a little ... weird ... about you. But whatever you're looking for, it doesn't keep you from helping people. I know something about trying to rescue your parents. So I'll help you. Anyway I can, I guess."

Alan watched her for a moment, and in an instant was back to his normal, stoic self. He turned and started toward the glint of metal in the distance.

Taggart was never unsure. All of his life, he had been certain of every decision, every choice. And when something went wrong, he was always confident that he could fix things, put things back on track. Right now, staring out at a crowd of Blue Collars, White Collars, and colonists, he felt secure enough in his plan. He knew what he was about to do, and he knew the potential risks. He was prepared to deal with those risks, even if it meant his own death.

His plan was simple: Bring them all to the brink of war. Make them want each other dead. Make them thirst for the blood of their enemy. And then shame them into uniting under his leadership.

It wasn't without its risks, but Taggart had spent a lifetime taking calculated risks, the consequences of which could have ended him at any time. While pushing through all of the processes of Taggart Industries, there were numerous times when his decisions could have maimed or killed him, and possibly others.

But his risks led to new innovations, new technologies, new discoveries, and, ultimately, new ambitions.

He watched as the Blue Collars began to cluster together in a tight group. They were forming their own tribe, right in the middle of the rest of humanity here. They were becoming a unique organism, with its own mind and its own agenda. They had no idea that the mind and agenda belonged to Taggart and not to the group itself.

The White Collars and colonists had no such unity. They were dispersed. Awkward. The colonists especially had no clue what was happening around them. Many of them continued to behave as if they were in control. They issued commands, leveled their gaze on the workers, and generally fouled the air of the camp with their self-importance. Taggart couldn't stand most of them. They had always been a necessary part of his plan, but their value was starting to diminish. Here, isolated from the rest of the colonies, the power they had represented to him was no more. He would require something more substantial. Something more ... *basic*. He needed the truly productive hands and minds of this world to follow him.

It would be tricky.

One of the colonists—a man named Carter whom Taggart had recruited into Earth First personally because of his contacts and clout in the colonies—was bullying a Blue Collar.

“How long do we have to live in a filthy tent? I can see the shelters are being built, but what's the timeline? Who is the foreman of this operation?”

The Blue Collar, a young man with grease and dirt on his face and hands, tensed his shoulders. Taggart watched as he visibly controlled himself, apparently refusing to make what would be a devastating punch to this soft, useless colonist. “Right now, Billy Sans is directing the construction under the alien's orders.”

There. It was happening. The emphasis on “alien,” the tightness of the Blue Collar's voice, the tension in his shoulders and neck—Taggart was able to learn all he needed to know. He was able to see the soup boil. It was time to start adding the final ingredients.

“Son, do you know who I am? I am the CEO of Carter Colony Reserve. I know the timeframe of building a shelter. We have been on this planet for more than a week and not one structure has been completed!”

“Yes, sir,” the Blue Collar clenched. “But we don't have the resources that a typical colony has right now. We're doing the best we can.”

“It's a sight too little,” Carter sniffed. “I'll speak with the Captain. If you people can't get your act together ...”

Taggart stepped into the conversation at this point. “Carter, I’ll thank you to shut your mouth,” he said in a kindly tone.

Carter stopped in mid-sentence, his jaw hanging slack and his eyes wide. “*Wha-* what did you just say to me?”

“What did I say? Carter, you know I do not like to repeat myself. I suggest you go back to your filthy tent and prepare to stay there for quite a while. I will have a work assignment drawn up for you and your family soon.”

“Work ... what are you talking about, Taggart? I am the CEO ...”

“Now.” Taggart said. He locked eyes with the man and held an expression that said in no uncertain terms that this was the last Taggart was willing to say or hear on the subject.

Carter, no fool and very familiar with Taggart’s ability to be brutal when necessary, closed his mouth, turned with a huff, and fairly sprinted to one of the “filthy tents” that stood along the tree line.

Taggart turned back to the Blue Collar, keeping the stern expression on his face just long enough for a message to register, even if subconsciously, with his new “friend.” It would be heard, he knew. The message would spread among the Blue Collars. “Taggart is our friend. He can’t stand the colonists. He’s one of us.”

“I’m sorry you were treated so poorly, son,” Taggart said. He smiled now and clasped the young man’s shoulder. “The system ... well, it’s quite broken, isn’t it?”

“Y-yes, sir,” the boy answered.

“But us ... those of us who put our hands to things, who know how to build ... we know how to fix a broken system, don’t we?” Without waiting for the boy to answer, he supplied the reply himself. “When a system is broken bad enough, you tear it down and build a new one. That’s how you create a new order, isn’t it? That’s how you put things back to rights?”

Taggart saw the light come on in the boy’s eyes. He knew it by heart. It was the same light he had seen when he had approached each of the colonists about this trip with the details (some, at least) of his plan. It was the light of understanding, but more. It was the light of love and loyalty.

Taggart had just won this young man’s heart.

“Yes, sir,” the boy said, now much more sure of himself.

“You and I, we’re the same, you know. Did you know that I have worked in every level of Taggart Industries? I had to. My father, a good and honest man, insisted that I learn the business from the ground up. He insisted that I could not have the comforts of wealth unless I earned them, unless I’d had the grease of every machine under my nails at some point. If I had failed to be successful,

even at the lowest level of Taggart Industries, I would not rise. I could, even now, still be working as a tank scrubber, if I had not managed to learn everything there was to know about the job. Have you ever been a tank scrubber, son?"

"No, sir," the boy answered.

"Filthiest, lowest job in the universe. I once was solely responsible for cleaning the sewage tanks of three Taggart Industries starships. This is work that can't be done by automation, son. It has to be done by hand. You have to crawl into this confined space, the only light coming from your hand-cranked helmet lamp, and scrub every centimeter of the tank with brushes and rags and your own, barely gloved hands. And before you're done, you are covered from head to toe in human excrement and waste. You are indistinguishable from the filth that humanity produces. Not pleasant."

Taggart could see the hint of revulsion in the young man's eyes. It was working. He was showing the boy that he was one of them. That he had started from the very lowest position and had worked his way up to power. And if Taggart could do it, *any* Blue Collar could. That was the message that Taggart knew would eventually reach the ears of every Blue Collar. That was the last cog that Taggart needed to start the wheels turning on his new, slightly adjusted plan.

"Son, I've been to the bottom, but I've also been to the top. And I know a secret. Any man can do it. *You* can do it. All it takes is dedication, perseverance, and strength of heart. It takes knowing who your friends are and trusting in the right leader. I came to this colony hoping to help these soft, entitled, upper-crust rich colonists to experience life in a new way. But now I see ... I was wasting my time with them. They won't do what needs to be done. They won't learn the lessons that need to be learned. But then, there's you and your friends. The Blue Collars. You are good people. 'Salt of the Earth,' as they used to say. You are people I respect. If only I could have led you, instead. What wonders could we build, do you think?"

He saw that the light had now bloomed into a flame, and he knew that his message was being received. He knew that this boy would be the spark and that he would set the rest of the Blue Collars ablaze as well. Taggart knew that it only took one, and that youth was often the catalyst for change in any group.

"Go back to your good friends. Tell them that I respect and admire them," Taggart said with genuine feeling. Just because he was working from a plan didn't mean he was devoid of emotion for these people. After all, he really did work with them and among them. He had risen to power under his own initiative, just as he'd described. He was not lying. He was merely controlling which truths the boy heard. This young Blue Collar need never hear that Taggart left his tank scrubbing job each day and returned to his private estate. He need

never know that Taggart's leisure time was filled with high society banquets, the grandest adventures money could buy, and expensive wines and gourmet foods. Life away from the drudgery was much different for Taggart than what the Blue Collars had to endure. But those were details best left unsaid. It only mattered that Taggart was, in at least some small way, one of them. He had worked hard, just as they did. And he understood their plight.

It only mattered that Taggart was their leader.

Thomas was having a very hard time with it.

Alan, the quiet but friendly young man who had been part of the group that had rescued Thomas and Lissa after the crash, was somehow responsible for *all* of this? Alan Angelou ... the smart, quirky kid who seemed to be just as clueless about the world around them as Thomas was. If it weren't for the boy's amazing engineering abilities, Thomas would have thought Alan was as out of place in this time as Thomas himself. He'd been a Blue Collar all his life though. He had been born and raised among these people, in this culture. So why had he betrayed them?

Thomas was once again going over the footage from the sabotage when he paused. The frame onscreen showed a figure reaching into one of the panels that housed relays and ports for accessing the ship's navigational systems. Thomas was new here, but he knew enough about the lightrail system to realize how dangerous this move was. Any miscalculation might have thrown the ship out of light speed and into the surface of a planet or the heart of a star. And yet Alan had risked it. Why?

He thought back on their conversations. Alan had said that his parents had died when a colony ship was destroyed. Thomas had made a brief study of the history of the colonies since First Colony had blown up on launch. He had obsessed, for a bit, over every major problem with a colony launch. In all of the confusion and chaos of the past week or so, it had never occurred to him to question Alan's story closely.

In his research, he had certainly uncovered several colony ships that had been destroyed. A few had burned the way First Colony had. Terrible explosions. But those had been in the early days of the colonization effort. In the past fifty years, only a few colony ships had been destroyed, and all of them had been due to problems such as collisions or other more "mundane" causes. The war with the Esool had destroyed many ships, but none were colony vessels, and all of that had ended over fifty years ago.

Thomas had felt the truth of Alan's story, when the young man had explained how his parents had died. He'd seen the care with which Alan had dressed his

burned hands. He'd sensed the reverence in the actions. Alan wasn't lying about how his parents died.

He was lying about *when*.

Thomas left the terminal he'd been using and went to the tent that was now being referred to as Command Central. Somar and Billy Sans were alone in the tent. Sans was showing something onscreen, the progress of the shelters, which had been given to him as a responsibility by the Captain. Billy was clearly honored by the task and took it very seriously, organizing the workers and allocating the materials as they became available. It was something of a losing battle for now, at least until Mitch and Reilly returned with a load of pod materials and colonists.

"Captain Somar," Thomas said as he turned to close the flap of the tent behind him. It would be useless as a sound barrier, really, but it felt more secure. "I think there's more going on here than we realized."

Somar, for the first time since Thomas had known him, had an expression of rueful surprise. "It is almost certain that there is, Mr. Thomas. If I've learned anything in our brief time here, it's that there is much more below the surface than we can determine with the facts at hand."

Thomas nodded. "Well, I don't know what good this information will do, but I think I just uncovered another fact about Alan Angelou. I think he's from my time."

Somar had no visible reaction, but Billy Sans quickly looked around to make sure no one was in the tent with them. It was good to see the boy being discrete. It made Thomas feel better about his secret being in the young man's hands. He was starting to like the kid a lot.

"What do you mean, from your time?" Billy asked. "Aren't you like a hundred years old or something?"

"Thanks, Billy. I think I'm ready for my walker and hip replacement now."

Billy shook his head. "Sorry. I mean, you had to have gone into stasis a hundred years ago or something, right?"

"And I think Alan did the same. I don't know how or why. But I think ..." Thomas stopped in mid-sentence, a sudden connection burning in his brain. All of a sudden, it seemed so obvious. Why hadn't he noticed it before? But that wasn't quite fair, was it? So much had changed. So many things were different. There was so much weirdness in the world now. Aliens and lightrails and throwback technology and a million, million other things that Thomas had been forced to adjust to. Why *wouldn't* he have missed it?

"You've thought of something?" Somar asked.

"I just put it together. I'm an idiot."

“Far from that,” Somar replied. “You have obviously solved something that has eluded us all until now.”

“Yeah, but I should have seen it before. Maybe. Damn it.”

Billy was practically vibrating as he spoke up. “What? What is it? What do you know?”

Thomas looked from one to the other. “His name. Alan Angelou. He’s been telling me who he is all this time, and I completely missed it.

“When I was an engineer on First Colony, I had a husband and wife team working with me. They were brilliant, wonderful people. My best friends, actually. And they had a son. We were so close, such good friends, that they named him after me. I was honored.”

“Wait ... I thought your real name was John?”

“John Thomas Paris. But the boy’s name was John Thomas *Alan*. Son of Angela and Louis Alan. We all called him Johnny.”

It was Somar who put it together. “Alan Angelou. He chose a name that honored his parents.”

Billy Sans whistled. “Wow. This whole thing ... it’s like one of those mystery vids.”

Somar moved to the end of the table, staring outward into the fluttering tent wall. The greenish tint of his skin was slightly amplified by the diffused light issuing from the undulating white cloth. He had his hands clasped behind him and was obviously deep in thought. “His parents died in the destruction of First Colony?” he finally asked.

“Yeah. It was one of the things that hurt me most. I lost my two best friends that day. Losing my freedom ... losing my name and my past since then ... that’s been hard to deal with. But when I saw them die, that was what really destroyed me. We were ... we were family.” He choked out these last words, struggling to control a flood of emotion that he’d managed to suppress for years. Despite himself, Thomas felt the tightness in his throat, the burning in his eyes. He felt the warmth of tears welling, and fell into a bitter silence.

“You were close to Alan ... to Johnny ... as well?”

Thomas could only nod.

“I believe,” Somar said, “that we have some of Mr. Angelou’s motive. What was his age, at the time of the colony’s destruction?”

Thomas swallowed and breathed, calming himself. He thought for a moment. “He was young. Maybe twelve or thirteen. I don’t remember exactly. For the next couple of years, I was locked in a cell. Until they offered me the stasis deal.”

Somar seemed alert. “You’ve never told me of how you entered into stasis. You received some sort of offer? On the part of your government?”

“Yeah. Earth First was going to try to break me out and kill me as a martyr to their cause. The government couldn’t afford that. It could potentially rally people to Earth First and slow down colonization even further. Earth’s resources were getting stretched pretty thin at that point, and any more delays could have been lethal. And frankly, the government couldn’t afford the embarrassment of Earth First getting one over on them in full view of the public.”

Somar nodded. “It is unfortunate, then, that they did.”

Thomas blinked. “Wait, what?”

Somar turned to face him. “Mr. Thomas, I’m sure you were relieved at your good fortune. Your release from imprisonment. Your new beginning, even at the expense of your old life. But did it not occur to you that despite your government’s attempts to hide you from Earth First, your identity was known by its leader?”

Thomas felt his face flush and go warm. “No,” he admitted. “It hadn’t occurred to me until now. Taggart knew about me all along.”

“Maybe he found out about you at some point,” Billy said.

“No,” Somar responded. “Taggart has made it clear that his great-grandfather had plans for Mr. Thomas. That would imply that the secret has been known for some time. Certainly from the beginning. It implies that Earth First was responsible for placing Mr. Thomas in stasis.”

Thomas was shaking his head. “That can’t be. The agent who put me under ... he said that Earth First had an agent on the inside, but they knew who it was. He said that the order to put me under was from somewhere high in the chain of command. A security clearance so high that he had to ...” Thomas paused. Another piece of the puzzle clicked into place.

“Had to what?” Billy Sans asked.

“He had to destroy his computer. The computer he had read the message on.”

“So?” Billy blinked. “What does that mean?”

“It means,” Thomas replied, “that there was no evidence. There was nothing that could have indicated who sent the message or that the message even existed. If it came from a high enough security level, it would be completely untraceable. And these agents, they were trained not to ask questions. They wouldn’t have bothered following up on this. They would have followed orders and put me under without a second thought.”

“So, what does that mean?” Billy asked.

It was Somar who answered. “It means that there was a vulnerability in the chain of command. There was a gap in which someone could insert their own

agenda, without the fear of it being traced.”

“Earth First did it!” Billy exclaimed. “Wow. They could do that? They could fake a security clearance like that?”

“No,” Thomas said.

The two men both looked at him, uncertain.

“No, it wasn’t Earth First. They may have wanted to get their hands on me, and they may have nabbed me from stasis. But they didn’t have the clout or the power to pull this off, not at that time. But Johnny ... *Alan* ... did.”

“I ... don’t follow,” Billy said.

“He was smart. *Very* smart. His parents were both child prodigies, and he was following in their footsteps. He was already at MIT when First Colony exploded.”

“MIT?” Billy asked.

“A school. A university for technology. People who got in were very, very smart. Kids who got in were beyond brilliant. And some ended up working on government projects. John Thomas ... Alan ... was about to graduate when I was sent to prison.”

“He infiltrated your government’s computer systems?” Somar asked.

“Yeah. I think he did. And he arranged for me to be put in stasis and cared for by Earth First. I don’t know why, exactly. Maybe he thought it would give me a fair chance to start over. Maybe he felt he owed it to his parents. I just don’t know. But it doesn’t matter. I know now that it was him. It had to be. I’m certain.”

“As am I,” Somar replied.

“But why?” Billy asked. “I know you said it doesn’t matter, but I think it does. He put you in stasis, and then he went under himself. Why would he do it? He had to know something, right? He wouldn’t just go under for no good reason. Maybe he was trying to give you another chance, but why did he go with you?”

Thomas had no answer for that. It was true ... there was no reason for Alan to go into stasis. Had he been caught tinkering with the government computers? Was he in trouble? Or did he just want to leave behind the world in which his parents had died?

There would be no way of knowing until they confronted him. And until Mitch arrived with the shuttle, there was no way to reach Alan. Which meant there was no way to learn of or stop whatever he was planning.

“Mitch is picking up supplies from Alan’s camp before coming back here, right?”

“Yes,” Somar said. “We felt it best to keep the schedule as planned. We did not want to alert Alan to what we know. He may be aware already, however. He

knew that Mr. Garrison and Ms. Reilly were going to the orbital platform. He would certainly assume that they would discover something.”

“It’s like he doesn’t care,” Thomas said. “And maybe he doesn’t. Maybe he’s so sure of his plan that he doesn’t think we can stop him.”

“That could very well be.”

“Which means that finding the pods is part of his plan,” Thomas said. “He’s after something in the pods.”

They all stared at each other for a moment. “And there ain’t a damned thing we can do about it,” Billy Sans said.

Thomas suddenly felt every minute of the hundred years he’d been in stasis. He suddenly wished he could take a long nap.

Seventeen

Alan wasn't surprised.

In fact, throughout most of his life there were only a handful of things that had ever truly surprised him. The first had been when he was six years old, and he realized that not every child could read physics books with 100 percent comprehension. The next big surprise had come when he discovered that his parents wanted to go to a colony world, leaving him behind to finish college. But the biggest surprise of his life came when First Colony had exploded.

He had been surprised by how much anguish he had felt.

Almost in the instant that he heard the news, he made a decision. He formulated a plan. Or rather, he decided on a general outcome, since he had no way of knowing what life would be like twenty, fifty, or a hundred years down the road. He could speculate, and his speculations were always very close to reality if not dead on. But he could never be positive, and so the best he could do, in the instant that he discovered his parents were dead, was create a generic plan.

And that had led to the next big surprise in his life. It had *worked*. Or, more accurately, it was *working*.

Uncle John—John Thomas Paris—had been framed. There had been no doubt in young Johnny's mind. And there was no doubt that his parents, along with 20,000 other colonists, had been murdered in the name of some insane cause. And finally, there was no doubt that he would find a way to avenge the deaths of his parents and save his Uncle John from the false imprisonment that was being forced on him.

Now, on a planet light years from Earth and outside of the colony circuit, Alan was about to accomplish both goals. He had only to find the right pod.

The young woman beside him, Penny, was a big help. But she also made him nervous. She was an unknown in all of this. He had read plenty about her, once he had awoken from stasis and started studying to fill in the gaps of his historical knowledge. Here is where his eidetic memory came in handy. He had always been able to see information once and retain it forever, with instant recall. Now he would use that ability to catch up with the rest of the world—or universe, as it turned out—and blend in seamlessly in this society.

He had awoken a full year before Thomas. He had programmed the stasis computers to awaken him early, setting up a protocol that would allow him to be there when Thomas awoke, so he could explain what was going on. Meanwhile, as they both lay in stasis, Alan's life became intimately tied to his Uncle John—now known as Thomas. In order to hide his presence from those who were monitoring Thomas in stasis, Alan had piggybacked on all of the systems in his pod. The computers all showed one pod, one occupant, but in reality there were always two—Thomas above, in the visible pod, and Alan below, in the specially-designed hidden compartment, built into the base of his uncle's stasis pod. Their systems were intimately linked. If Thomas had died in stasis, Alan would have died as well.

When Earth First had initiated a wake-up protocol, the worm Alan had written went into action. It was programmed to give Alan a head start by waking him up well before Thomas. The program was set to give him the maximum time possible, which had turned out to have a strange but useful result. Alan had not figured on Earth First setting the wake-up time a year in advance. And so he found himself awake in a Taggart Industries compound in Colorado, with 365 days to kill until Thomas was awake himself.

Alan didn't know exactly what he should do at that moment. But as he made his way out of the compound, learning what he could about their computer and security systems as he went, a new plan began to form—or rather, an improvisation on the old plan.

"There it is," Penny said beside him, breaking him out of his reverie. He knew what the others all thought of him. He was odd. He was an anachronism, a man who traded tools for paper books and then actually *read* them. He was analytical, and maybe even a little cold. But with Penny ...

"Yeah, I see it."

Penny was different. Or rather, *he* was different when he was around her. He felt something. Appreciated her. He had liked what he'd read about her, following her very public life from childhood to adulthood, watching as she became a top-notch athlete. He had cringed to see the things that she said and did for the tabloids, but had come to understand that she was putting on a show. He saw through her mask. He was intrigued.

"Well," she said as they reached the pod. "Do your scanny thing."

He did the scanny thing. He knew in seconds that this wasn't the right pod, but he went through the whole scan anyway, just as he had with the others. He checked vitals. He checked brainwave patterns. He checked for the Trojan.

Everything was fine.

He awakened the man inside and called in the team. He, Penny, and the man made camp, and the recovery team arrived the next morning. Alan saw to it that they prepared the pod to be taken for parts, and made sure the colonist had plenty of food and water from the pod's stores, allowing him to make the journey back to camp.

"We've reached the point of no return," he said to Penny, as they pushed through the thick underbrush they had entered into and eventually came to a river. "This river is on my map. It's the point I have marked as the furthest viable range for getting the recovery team here and back. At this point, we have to find the closest pods and set up a new camp we'll call Beta. We'll have to wait for Mitch and Reilly to come back with the shuttle before we can move beyond this area."

Penny considered this and nodded. "What if we set up Beta, get the colonists lined up with food and water, and then called the rescue team to send someone here to help them. They could wait for the shuttle, and we could keep going to find more pods."

Alan considered this. Penny was a sharp girl, and she was great to have by his side here in the wilds of this world. But he knew her real motivation was to find her mother. She didn't want to stop looking. She intended to keep going. "What if we find your mother?" Alan asked. "Will you keep looking after that? Or is that the end for you?"

He regretted asking as soon as the words left his mouth. Even to him, it sounded oddly cold and detached. Penny had every right to be concerned about her parents. Wasn't that part of what was driving him on? If she found her mother, she would have every right to wait out the shuttle and go back to Citadel with both of her parents in tow. He would expect no less, and he would do the same.

"I'll keep going," Penny said, to his surprise.

"Why?" he asked.

She shrugged. "You said you were trying to save your parents. I don't know what you have in mind, but I want to help if I can. It's the least I can do."

Alan considered this, then nodded. "Fair enough," he said.

They trudged on, and Alan thought about everything that had happened since he had awoken from that stasis pod. He had spent weeks and months absorbing as much of human history as he could. He had fairly accounted for the hundred plus years that he'd been in stasis. He had caught up on the whole of advancements in science and physics and engineering. He had learned as much as there was to know about the Esool, the lightrail system, and the colonies themselves. To help him learn more and become more familiar with this strange

new world, he took a job with a transport crew, choosing to stay awake while most others slept. He would do his work during his on hours, and read, watch vids, and converse with the rest of the waking crew during his off hours. By the time Thomas awoke from his century-long slumber, Alan was an expert on the most important aspects of this new world.

And his plan now had a definite shape and goal.

More shape than when he'd first started this, at least, a century ago. Back then it had taken quite a bit of effort to crack into the government's high-security systems. And he hadn't done it without being noticed. Once he got in, he had needed to use his newly acquired security clearance to send the message he had prepared in advance. The message itself was a work of art. It had the seal of the United Earth government, a security watermark that was "impossible to duplicate" (in fact, he'd had to fake it with a fractal code generator he had programmed from scratch), a nine-digit, randomly generated character set that would be the security ident, and an embedded language code, hidden in every sixth, nineteenth, and thirty-seventh word. There were numerous other security measures involved in the real thing, but his target wouldn't have the security clearance to verify them. So Alan had faked them, and when the message went through the agent reacted as expected. Less than two hours after Alan had pushed "send," he watched the agent pulse the computer with EMF, douse it, and burn it, then drop the charred and twisted remains into an acidic solution that devoured even the aluminum casing in less than an hour. Only the tiniest charred bits of metal remained.

Meanwhile, Alan had to make his exit. Agents were immediately alerted that he had breached the system, and in a couple of minutes, they would be on him. He left everything in the room he'd been using. He had taken precautions against leaving prints, DNA, or even a heat signature. But he knew they'd figure out who he was in time.

He didn't intend to be here when they did.

He made the arrangements for the storage and maintenance of the stasis pod he and Thomas would share. It would be tricky, keeping the pod safe for the years ahead. He would have to turn to the only organization in existence that would be able to maintain the pod indefinitely.

He turned to Earth First.

Taggart Industries, then a much smaller but still very powerful firm, held numerous companies that operated as covers for its less-than-legal activities. By tapping into their computer system, much less sophisticated than the world government system but almost as secure, Alan was able to put the pod on a list of high-priority systems. He then called it to the attention of the Taggart family.

This “leak” was meant to provide an extra layer of protection and was perhaps the trickiest part to pull off. He had to get them to keep Thomas safe and to secretly store him, for an incredible amount of time. Alan hinted that he was part of the Earth First operation at a high level and that he had been contacted by the Taggart family itself to retrieve Thomas and store him for later use. A hundred years or so might be best.

Ironically, the Taggarts were such a secretive group that no one questioned the story. Each Taggart sibling assumed that the order came from their father, who was in charge of Earth First. Taggart senior assumed that one of his sons had followed through on his order to secure John Thomas Paris, and he was actually pleased with the martyr plan.

And so, Alan hid himself in the concealed compartment of the pod, and when Thomas was put under, they both slept for a century.

As Alan and Penny trudged through the rough terrain, he felt that his plan had gone extremely well, despite some unforeseen complications. Some people had been hurt. Some had been killed. It was tragic, and he regretted it. But compared to the loss of First Colony and to what he had in mind, the loss of a handful of lives here was all but insignificant.

As they stopped for water and a rest, Alan looked over the alien landscape and realigned his thinking, as he had so many times before. He was not standing on alien soil after all. He was standing on First Colony.

He would create it here as it was meant to be.

Eighteen

Mitch barely had the patience to wait for the shuttle to be unloaded, so he could get back in the air. They had touched down at Alan's base camp over an hour ago, loaded the shuttle with materials and as many colonists as they could, and then sailed over the horizon to Citadel. As they settled onto what was shaping up to be a well-marked landing pad, Mitch slammed the button to open the cargo bay doors and grabbed everyone within sight to help him unload. He fully intended to get back in the air and track down Alan out in the wild.

And then he was going to kill him.

Captain Somar came to the shuttle with Billy Sans and Thomas in tow. "Mr. Garrison," Somar said.

"Hmph," Mitch grunted, pulling on one of the heavy pods to drag it out of the door.

"It is good to see you again," Somar said.

Mitch only nodded and went straight back into the bay. He helped a woman make the step down to the ground from the side of the platform, which was bustling with activity.

"Mitch," Thomas said. "You ok?"

For the first time, Mitch stopped and turned to them. His face was a red fury, burning and pinched and nearly glowing with his anger. "He was one of *my* crew," Mitch said.

"I understand," Thomas said, "but ..."

"No. You don't. You don't understand, because you've never been on a Blue Collar crew. We depend on each other every second of every day. We have to. And we become ... family. Tight. For him to do what he's done, to kill Marcos and injure the Captain, and to strand us *here* ..." He paused, breathing heavily, turning to kick one of the support struts for the cargo door. When he turned to face them again, he said simply, "I'm going to kill him."

"No," Somar said. "You are not."

Mitch's temper flared, but when he turned to the Captain, he was cold and quiet. "Sir?" he asked, his jaw so tight he could chew through steel.

"You will not kill Mr. Angelou. You will arrest him, and he will stand trial. That is the way of your laws. It is the way we will deal with Mr. Angelou."

“Our laws?” Mitch asked, incredulous. “Are you serious? He’s a murder and a saboteur! If we were in space, we’d pack him into a barrel and eject him!”

“But we are not in space, Mr. Garrison. We are on a colony world. It may not have been the world we were attempting to reach, but it is now our colony. And as such, it is governed by the laws of the Earth Colony Fleet, as recognized by the treaty between your people and the Esool.”

“I ... I can’t believe ...”

“To do any less, Mr. Garrison, would be to invite anyone present to break the treaty and ignore the law. At present, that would be as fatal as any other danger we have encountered thus far. Mr. Angelou does not represent an immediate threat, and thus our recourse is to arrest him and hold him for trial.”

Mitch choked on what he was going to say, made a sort of guttural noise, and then turned and walked back into the shuttle. He was hoping to find something to break.

Thomas entered the shuttle behind him, and he spoke quietly now. “Mitch, listen, it’s going to be ok. Justice will be served. But not your way. It has to be the right way. Taggart ...”

Mitch turned in a fury. “I don’t give a *damn* about Taggart, or what he thinks he can do to us! What I care about right now is that someone I cared about, someone I trusted with my life, has been lying to me all along! Who else is lying to me? Who else is breaking my trust?”

Thomas suddenly looked sick and pale. His mouth opened, and then clamped shut again. He swallowed and rubbed his eyes with the forefinger and thumb of his left hand. Mitch watched, his anger fading slightly as he wondered what was wrong. “You ok?” he asked. His voice was still tight, but it did have a note of concern.

“Me, Mitch.”

“You? You what?”

“Me. I’ve been lying to you. I’ve betrayed your trust. Me.”

Mitch blinked. “Wha– what do you mean? You ...”

“I’m not who I claim to be. Or ... well, I’m exactly who I claim to be, I’ve just never claimed to be anyone really. I’m ... well ...” he looked around, verifying that they were alone. He stepped closer, took a deep breath, and whispered, “I’m John Thomas Paris.”

Mitch blinked again, then looked seriously at Thomas, who was stepping back and casting his gaze to the floor, rubbing his eyes again.

And then he burst out laughing. “John Thomas Paris!” he barked. “C’mon, that’s a little over the top, man.”

Thomas blinked, then glanced around again to make sure no one was watching. He waved his hands in front of Mitch to try to get him to keep it down. “No, I’m serious! I ...”

“Oh man,” Mitch laughed. He started coughing and doubled over slightly. “Oh man! Heh. That’s good. Damn. ok, Thomas. I get it. Alan ... we don’t know why he did what he did. He has his reasons. So we have to find them out before we judge him. Heh. John Thomas Paris,” Mitch said. “Damn that’s funny.”

“But ...” Thomas began.

“ok, ok. Let’s get going, already! Reilly kept the engines going. I’m ready to track Alan down and ... bring him to justice.” There was a wistful pause, but Mitch genuinely had resolved to do what he was ordered to do. “You going with us?”

Before Thomas could answer, a quiet voice came from the ramp. “He is,” Captain Somar said. “But before you leave, I feel you should fully understand what Mr. Thomas has revealed to you.”

Mitch, still smiling, with tears of mirth in his eyes, looked from Somar to Thomas, then back again. Suddenly the smile faded, and he looked at Thomas with wide, unbelieving eyes.

“Hi,” Thomas said. “My name is John Thomas Paris, and I’m the man who destroyed a world.”

Mitch blinked. “Hi ... John,” he said quietly.

ok, Thomas thought. *That ... wasn’t so bad.*

He was strapped into the command chair near Reilly’s station. Somar had made it clear that Thomas was to be in charge of the mission to arrest Alan Angelou and bring him into custody. There were four armed guards accompanying them in the flight, each a Blue Collar with security training. There was usually little need for a police force on colony worlds, especially new ones. Many had fallen back to the old tradition of electing a sheriff, who would appoint one or two deputies as needed. There would be a judge, of course ... usually the leader of the colony, until a more formal system was needed.

Thomas looked at the makeshift police force strapped in along the walls of the cargo area, and wondered what they would do if they suddenly discovered who he really was. Would they bother trying to arrest Alan Angelou? Or would they seize him and then turn the shuttle around so they could also arrest Captain Somar, the alien “accomplice?”

It wasn't a far-fetched scenario. Taggart *might* use that very trick to cement his control of the colony, but what worried Thomas more at this moment was Mitch.

He hadn't spoken a word since they'd taken off.

Thomas unbuckled his straps and moved closer to Mitch. The engineer had to notice he was there, but he said nothing. Instead, he continued to pore over the data that was scrolling slowly upward on the terminal in front of him.

"Mitch," Thomas said. "Look, I think we should talk."

"The shuttle is running within all expected parameters, sir," Mitch replied. He was cold, succinct. He was biting his words.

"Mitch, come on. I didn't lie to you, ok? I never lied."

Mitch turned slowly to face him. "No, you didn't."

For some reason, Thomas didn't feel any better about this small victory. "But ... you're still angry with me."

"Thomas ... John ... what do I call you now, anyway?"

"Thomas!" he said, looking around furtively. "Just Thomas, ok?"

"Thomas, you never lied to me. But that doesn't mean I can trust you. This secret of yours, it's big. Bigger than anything Alan might have to hide, I bet. Bigger than Taggart and his plans for the colony. You ... you *destroyed* First Colony. You're ... you're like the most evil man in history!"

"I don't suppose you'd believe me if I said I was framed, would you?"

Mitch looked him over. "Were you?"

"Yeah."

There was a pause. "I believe you. But ... it doesn't change anything."

Thomas sighed. This was going to be tough. Hardly the toughest thing he'd ever dealt with in his life—not even the toughest thing he'd dealt with in the past week. But it was important that Mitch be on his side. It would help the Blue Collars to accept Thomas, when his secret was revealed. But it would also just make him feel better. He liked Mitch, and felt a bond with the man. He needed all the friends he could get.

"Mitch, I wish I could say something to make this better. The truth is, when First Colony was destroyed, it changed everything. Not just for me personally but for the world. We were taking our first steps into the universe at large. The whole world, for the very first time in history, was united under one hope! But the explosion ... that was the end of one good beginning. The next round was tinged with distrust and apprehension. And I think that's led to the state of things as they are now. This ... this *segregation* between Blue Collars and White Collars and Colonists. For the first time in history, Earth had gotten past the boundaries

of racism and class distinction, and one explosion put us on track to creating a whole new division between human beings.”

Mitch was listening, watching Thomas intently. “What does this have to do with anything?”

Thomas laughed. “Maybe nothing. But you see, I got a second chance. I have no idea why or how, not really. Alan had something to do with it. So did Earth First, it seems. I was pulled out of time and put here, now. And when I woke up, I found that things had changed quite a bit, in both wonderful and terrible ways. But I had a second chance. And if I can get one, so can the colonies. So can humanity. But I won’t feel like it’s a second chance if I lose any friends I’ve made as soon as they find out who I really am.”

Mitch was watching him, silently. For a moment he didn’t move. Then he shook his head and leaned back in his chair. He laced his fingers together over his stomach and regarded Thomas with a steady stare. “What happened to First Colony?” he asked.

Thomas sighed. “That is going to be a very long story,” he said.

Mitch leaned back a bit further and pointed at a line of rolling numbers on the display in front of him. “You have forty-five minutes,” he said.

And to Thomas’s great relief, Mitch was smiling.

Alan and Penny saw the pod from nearly half a mile away. It was lying out in the open, like a poorly hidden Easter egg. The sun glinted off of the shiny brass and steel fixtures and the transparent canopy. If they hadn’t known better, they would think someone had gently placed it there.

It took a bit to reach it, since they were forced to cover a patch of rough terrain covered in brush. But when they arrived, they found the pod perfectly preserved, without a scratch. Alan went to the control panel and started working on the pod’s computer and diagnostic systems, polling for biometric data while also scanning for the program he had stored in one of the pods. Penny, meanwhile, was cautiously stepping toward the canopy.

She wasn’t sure if she was more afraid of what she would see, or of what she wouldn’t.

She closed her eyes when she got within sight, counted to ten slowly, and then opened them.

It was her mother.

“It’s her!” she squealed and began to laugh. “I can’t believe it, we found her!”

She glanced at Alan, who was crouched by the pods computer. A smile spread on his face as he stared at the scanner in his hand. Penny suspected it wasn’t because they’d found her mother.

“It’s here,” he said, quietly.

It took a moment for Penny to remember. “It is? The program? You ... it was in my *mother’s* pod?”

Alan looked up at her, and for the first time since she’d known him, he was showing real, genuine emotion. He looked as if he might burst with tears of joy. He looked ... *happy*. And somehow, that was unsettling to her.

“What do you think the odds of that would be?” he asked. “I’m calculating about two-hundred-thousand to one. That’s a rough estimate, based on the number of colonists, the distance between the pods, the—“

“Alright, already, I get it!” Penny said, and then despite herself began to laugh. “So we were both looking for the same pod all along!”

“I guess so!” Alan said, and he sprang up and hugged her.

It caught her off-guard. She hugged him back, more out of reflex than anything else. But what surprised her was how much she *liked* it. How much she wanted to keep *doing* it.

Alan pulled back, and his expression had changed. They were still tentatively embracing each other. Alan looked as if he were feeling some kind of anguish, as if he didn’t know what to do and wasn’t sure if he should do anything at all.

Penny felt like the breath was going out of her. “I ... I guess we’d better ... let my mom out?”

Alan stared into her eyes for a moment, blinked, then turned his head slightly toward the pod as he said, “Yes. I think that’s the best idea.”

The embrace broke, and Penny found herself feeling a tinge of regret. She had told Alan that she’d continue on with him, even after they rescued her mother. But there was no way to know what her mother would say to her when she awoke or how it would affect Penny. She would be able to rejoin her parents, and the three of them could be together, back at Citadel. But she’d made a promise, and suddenly it seemed vital to keep it. Suddenly she just wanted more time, out here, alone with Alan.

That was new.

Alan went to the controls, and in moments the canopy slid open, and Elizabeth Daunder awoke.

“Mom?” Penny asked.

“Mrs. Daunder,” Alan said, helping her to sit up, “let me help you.”

“Oh,” she said in a voice weak from the grogginess of stasis, “thank you, dear.”

She blinked and looked into Alan’s eyes. “You are not my husband,” she said.

“No, ma’am.”

“Where is my husband?” she asked.

Penny answered. “Dad is back at camp, mom. He’s fine. There was an accident, and we crash-landed.”

“Oh,” Mrs. Daunder said, as if this were the simplest explanation she’d ever heard.

“She’s still a bit groggy,” Alan said. “Give her some water.”

Penny opened the canteen she was carrying and gave her mother a drink.

“Thank you, Penelope,” she said.

“Penny, Mom. I’ve told you a million times, call me *Penny!*”

“Yes, yes. I’m sorry. Thank you. Where are we?”

“We’re kind of in the middle of nowhere, Mom. Literally. But there’s a camp close by, and a shuttle will come to pick you up soon.”

Mrs. Daunder nodded and allowed Alan to help her climb out of the pod. For the first time, Penny noticed how frail her mother seemed. She had never been sickly or weak in Penny’s life, but at that moment, she seemed as if she might break in half at any moment. “Are you ok, Mom?” Penny asked. She was becoming worried for her mother.

“I’m a bit queasy, actually. I could use something for my stomach.”

Alan again came to the rescue. He handed her a small pack of crackers, and Mrs. Daunder opened them and ate one in small, nibbling bites.

They spent the next hour preparing the pod for transport. Alan called the rescue crew and told them their location, and that they had someone for retrieval.

“They’ll be here to pick you up shortly,” Alan assured her.

“But,” Mrs. Daunder said, “what about you, Penelope? You are going with me, of course.”

“No, Mom. I’m helping with the rescue effort. The team will take you back to our base camp, and when the shuttle arrives, they’ll take you to Citadel where you can be with Dad.”

Mrs. Daunder scoffed. “Nonsense. You will come with me, and that’s final.”

Penny felt herself getting angry and knew that if she didn’t get a handle on it, she would fall into one of their old habits. She would be in a screaming match with her mother, here in the middle of an alien landscape, in front of the man Penny ... *knew*.

What had she almost thought?

“Mrs. Daunder,” Alan spoke up. “Penny has been a huge help to me in finding the pods, including yours. She’s very good at tracking and getting through rough terrain. I need her help if I’m going to save the rest of the colonists.”

Mrs. Daunder looked at him for a moment, then looked at her daughter. Penny, for her part, stayed silent for once.

“Ah,” Mrs. Daunder said. “I see. Well, what kind of person would I be if I took you out of the rescue effort? Go ahead, dear. I’ll be fine.”

Penny fought the urge to grin. She shouldn’t feel like she needed her mother’s permission to do this. But despite being an adult, despite having her own life, and despite her antics in the tabloids, she was still the daughter of Elizabeth and Miguel Daunder. She would always be their little girl.

Alan was on the comm with the rescue team, asking for a pick-up. They weren’t prepared for the response.

“Mitch and the crew are coming straight to you,” one of the Blue Collars on the other end informed them. “They should be there in the next few minutes.”

“Why would they come straight to us?” Penny asked.

“Oh don’t be silly, dear. They obviously want to reunite me with your father as quickly as possible.”

“I don’t think that’s it, Mom.”

“I need to prepare,” Alan said, and he ducked back down to the control panel of the pod. He pulled a line of cable from his scanner and plugged it directly into the pod’s interface port. There was a slight spark, and the air filled with the smell of ozone for a moment.

“What do you mean?” Penny asked.

Alan said nothing.

“Alan, what’s happening? What do you need to prepare for?”

Alan looked up at her. “I’m sorry,” he said.

Penny was about to ask for more information when she heard the rumble and whine of the shuttle’s engines. She and her mother turned to see it dive in, then pull up slightly, nose to the sky, as it drifted toward the ground. “They’re here!” she said.

She turned back to Alan, who was standing next to the pod with the scanner in his hand. The cable tethered him to the pod’s computer interface. He looked rigid and determined.

“Alan, what ...”

“Penny, I want you to know that I never planned for this. Not this. And I ... I’m sorry it has to be this way. But it’s the only way to save them.”

“Save who?” she asked. “Oh ... your parents? But I don’t understand, what are you going to do?”

“Not just my parents, Penny. I’m going to save them all.”

“All who?” She asked.

“First Colony,” he said. “I’m going to save them all”

The shuttle touched down in a cloud of dust, and before Penny could ask Alan any further questions, he pushed a button on the scanner, and she suddenly wasn't Penny anymore.

Somar knew that Taggart was making his move, but with everything else that was happening, he was unsure of what to do about it. Captain Alonzo, now in full contact but slowly dying in the orbital platform miles above, was filling him in on just how dire their situation was.

"The crew here is still in stasis, and I have no way to wake them. Without them, I can't repair the launch systems, or any other system for that matter. The orbitals will remain stuck in their launch bays. But the worse news is that the platform isn't in a stable orbit."

"You were unable to reach geosynchronous orbit?"

"I got close, but guidance and navigation were among the worst sys—" he broke into a wet, hacking cough. The wounds on his face leaked blood again, and flecks of it fell onto the display. Alonzo wiped them off with one hand, leaving slight smears on the screen. "The worst systems damage," he continued. "I wasn't able to get in sync, and we're slowly falling into the atmosphere."

"Captain Alonzo, I do wish you would allow me to help you. Mr. Thomas should return with the shuttle and Mr. Angelou in a short time, and I could come up to the orbital platform and ... perform the procedure."

"You'll do no such thing, Somar. As one Captain to another, one *warrior* to another, I'm asking you to give me my dignified death, do you understand? I know all about the ... *procedure* ... your people use. I'm too far gone for it to help. At best, it would delay the inevitable."

Somar nodded. "As you wish."

"Now, to continue ... if we can't get systems repaired, this ship is going to be a brick the size of a city, and it's going to fall in. Even if I drop the atmospheric shielding, the heat of re-entry won't be enough to destroy all the bigger pieces. That means we're going to make a hell of an impact. We need to make sure that impact isn't anywhere near Citadel."

"I will have Mr. Sans begin projections immediately. If we know in advance, we can take precautions."

"Agreed. Meanwhile, I'm going to get back to trying to wake up my little bunch of sleepy heads. Hopefully Angelou didn't plant any more surprises in the ship's systems."

"Very well. I will contact you when I have more information, Captain."

"Same here, Captain. Alonzo out."

The screen dimmed, and Somar stood. He looked around at the command center. Personnel were buzzing and moving about. Billy Sans was nowhere to be

seen.

“Where is Mr. Sans?” he asked the room.

Several Blue Collars and White Collars looked his way, but none could answer. One White Collar spoke up, “The last time I saw him was when the shuttle landed. I think he was helping with the pods.”

Somar nodded. “He will be with the construction crews then. I will go to him. You are in command in my absence,” he said. The White Collar nodded, and Somar left the tent.

The air outside was crisp and cool, even in the afternoon sun. The humidity was lower than it had been on previous days, which seemed to suit the humans fine. Somar, whose people could take moisture from the air, felt that it was a bit dry. But still he appreciated the atmosphere. There was a kind of electricity here, a tingling that made him feel hopeful.

It was unfortunate the mood had not spread to everyone.

He walked to the area where the homes were being built. The outer shell of Citadel, meant to supply building materials for the colony, had been stripped down, and now the towering craft was a gleaming spire of brass and steel. Fixtures curled and bent along its surface—the exposed inner plumbing and wiring conduits of the vessel. These, too would be salvaged, until all that remained was a sleek, smooth tower that housed the sophisticated computer and defense systems of the colony. Bit by bit, Citadel shed its layers and revealed its true nature within. Bit by bit, the colony grew from Citadel’s flesh.

Somar saw, in the symmetry of the colony’s development, a process very much like the birth of an Esool. From the mother’s flesh, the infant grew, covered in a bark-like skin that protected it and nourished it. And then, when the budding time had arrived, the infant separated from the mother, the remaining bark fell away, and a new Esool stood on two tiny, unsteady legs. Somar had seen it hundreds of times as his own children had been born. It was a moment of pure joy.

As he rounded the base of Citadel, he stopped short. Before him, in what had become a sort of Town Square for the colony, a mob of people had gathered. In the middle of the square was a group of colonists. They were huddled together, and looked very frightened. Among them were numerous White Collars, who also looked as if they were afraid.

Surrounding them was a horde of Blue Collars, who jeered and prodded and cursed at the group, which was hopelessly outnumbered.

And there was Taggart, standing on the platform that had become the center of public address in the colony. He was flanked by several Blue Collars, who

wielded heavy branches and stones. They were obviously there to guard their leader.

“Somar!” Taggart shouted, and the whole group seemed to stop its motion and turn to the Captain. “So good of you to come. You saved us the trouble of tracking you down. Thank you.”

Somar looked at the crowd, and then glanced around to determine his options. They were few.

To his right was the base of Citadel. On the opposing side, there was a door to the interior stairwell. If he could make it there, he could lock himself safely inside. The alloy used to make Citadel’s hull wasn’t quite indestructible, but to humans wielding rocks and clubs it may as well be.

The problem, however, was that he was not at all sure he would make it to that door. And if he did, what then? He would be trapped there, with no real hope of escape. He would have no way to warn Mr. Thomas or Mr. Garrison, and no way to call for help.

His other options, however, were just as bleak. There was simply nowhere he could safely run.

“You have coerced the Blue Collars into helping you,” Somar said. He was stalling for time, hoping a solution would present itself.

“Oh, yes,” Taggart said. The Blue Collars laughed and sneered. Many of them were brandishing crude weapons made from rocks and wood and torn metal. They were primitive, but they would be effective.

“They recognize a kindred spirit, Somar. Like attracts like, after all.”

“You are nothing like them,” Somar said calmly.

“Oh? I disagree. And so do my friends, isn’t that right?”

“Taggart!” some shouted. “That’s right!” others cried.

“You are nothing like them,” Somar repeated.

“Please,” Taggart said, stepping down from the stage. The bodyguards fell in behind him, and some of the Blue Collar crowd gathered in his wake. “Enlighten us. How are we different? I worked in the same pits and tanks.” There were murmurs of appreciation from the crowd. “I scrubbed the same filth and grime.” More nods and sounds of agreement. “I sweated as they sweated and bled as they bled. So, my alien friend, how different am I from them? Is it because I rose in position and power, while they have been kept down, held down by their throats, in a world that sees them only as labor? As servants?”

Taggart was close now. His voice was powerful, and Somar knew that he had moved these people. As he had spoken, the crowd had calmed. They were rapt. They were watching their leader, one of their own who had risen to power.

“You are nothing like them,” Somar said again, “because these noble men and women would never betray their own for the sake of power.”

The crowd has already been quiet, but now they had gone positively silent. The only sound was the rustling of leaves, the gurgling of water in the pipes that led back to the river.

Taggart stared at Somar for a moment, his face tight and controlled. Then he smiled, “In what way, Somar, have I betrayed anyone? Far from betrayal, I have set my brothers free! They are no longer slaves to the tyranny of the ...”

“Of the colonists?” Somar asked, letting his own voice grow louder and more forceful. “Of the White Collars? Then why, Mr. Taggart, are they being held prisoner in a circle of armed men and women? Weren’t you one of them, when you arrived here? Weren’t you their leader when you first set foot on this soil?”

Taggart’s control slipped. His anger showed for the first time. “I have betrayed no one!” he said.

“You have betrayed us all!” Somar shouted. No one had ever heard the Esool captain raise his voice before. He had always been soft, quiet, commanding with his presence instead of the force of his will. And now, with his voice still ringing in the ears of the crowd, some of the Blue Collars lost heart. They dropped their stones and clubs and shards of metal and walked away from the crowd.

“No one!” Taggart yelled. “I have betrayed no one! These men and women, they are with me! They are family!”

“Family does not ask its members to doom themselves, Taggart. If you go through with this, if you harm these colonists, then all will be lost.”

Taggart laughed. “Oh, Somar. You have no idea. I have no intention of harming anyone! That is, as long as they accept their new role.”

“And what role is that?” Somar asked.

“As the workforce. It is time that my brothers and sisters were freed from the toil of daily life and allowed a chance to enjoy the finer trappings that these colonists have experienced. They will become the new ruling class, and their former masters will be the cogs for once. The rich elite have had it too easy for too long, and now it’s time they got their own hands dirty.”

Somar looked at the group of colonists, who were still surrounded and still fearful. “I must agree.”

Once again, the crowd fell silent, but this time, Taggart himself looked dumbfounded. His mouth opened slightly, and his eyes almost imperceptibly widened. “I ... I don’t ...”

“We find ourselves in a new situation. One we neither intended nor planned for. The old class distinctions, the division between men of wealth and men of

service, are now gone. It is now time for all of us to work and toil. It is time for us to unify, not disperse into this ... division. This evil.”

Everyone present began murmuring then, even the prisoners at the center of the circle. Taggart’s expression had changed once again, but this time there was no joy in his eyes. His plan was finished. He had lost their hearts, and he would not have them again.

Somar still felt the situation was precarious. He would have to do something to ensure that the tension was released and that the prisoners were freed, never to be bothered again. The fear they would feel now would become the new dividing line. There would be no trust and, thus, no cooperation. And so, at this moment, Somar would have to do or say exactly the right words to make the colonists—all of the colonists of Citadel—into one unit again. Unfortunately, he had not the slightest notion of what he should say.

As it turned out, he wouldn’t have to say anything.

Suddenly, as if a button had been pushed, Taggart and all of the colonists cried out and dropped to the ground, as if they had each suffered a great pain in their heads. The Blue Collars and White Collars watched, along with Somar, as all of those who had been rescued from the stasis pods writhed for an instant, and then slowly began to collect themselves. They began to rise, and the commotion was loud and incomprehensible.

Taggart, who lay at Somar’s feet, had managed to get to his knees.

“Taggart, are you ill?” Somar asked.

Taggart said nothing.

Somar knelt beside him. The bodyguards stood back, unsure of what they should do. They were watching, bewildered, as the strangeness unfolded around them.

“Can I help you?” Somar asked. “Are you injured?”

Taggart looked up and met Somar’s gaze. The Esool Captain saw immediately that something was very wrong. The eyes before him belonged to Taggart, but the essence behind them did not. “Please,” the new man said. “I don’t know what has happened. I feel ... strange.”

Somar helped him to his feet. The man thanked him. “Where ... where is my wife?” he asked.

“Your wife? As far as I recall, you are not married.”

Taggart shook his head. “No, my wife’s name is Angela. Angela Alan. She was with me. She went into stasis at the same time I did.”

Somar looked into Taggart’s eyes and saw there that he was telling the truth. Which could mean only one thing. “Louis? Louis Alan?”

The man looked at him. There was a brief instant, a quick electric expression, that Somar thought might be Taggart, struggling to return. But it faded as quickly as it appeared, and the man before him stood a bit straighter. “Yes. I’m Louis Alan. I’m the Chief Science Officer of First Colony, from Earth. Please ... take me to my wife.”

Nineteen

The shuttle's cargo door opened, but before it had even finished lowering to the ground, the armed Blue Collars rushed out over the edge and took aim at Alan with their molecular disruption guns. Mitch, Thomas, and Reilly exited shortly after.

Penny and her mother had fallen to the ground and were clasping their heads. Alan stood next to the pod, holding a small scanner that was tethered by a cable to the pod's computer. Thomas felt a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach and was certain that whatever Alan had done was not good. *Very not good.*

"Step away from the pod, Alan," Thomas said.

"I'm sorry, Uncle John. But you're too late."

The Blue Collars didn't budge, but Mitch shot Thomas a glance, and Reilly crinkled her brow in confusion. "Why did he just call you 'Uncle John?'" she asked.

Thomas looked at her for a moment. "It's ... a long story."

"He's John Thomas Paris," Alan said.

Thomas shot him a glare. "ok, maybe not so long."

The armed guards loosened their grips and turned to look at the three of them, particularly staring at Thomas.

"Hi," Thomas waved. "How's it going?"

"I don't think this is the time to joke with them," Mitch said.

"I don't think I'm going to get many more opportunities," Thomas smiled.

"Hold up," Reilly said. "Wait. You ... you're *John Thomas Paris*? *The* John Thomas Paris? Aren't you and Hitler supposed to be playing poker in hell right now?"

Thomas looked at her and lost hope. "It's complicated. But I'm sure Alan will cut right through it all and make it simple for us. Right, Alan?"

"You know who I am. You figured it out," Alan replied. "You were always smart, Uncle John. Maybe not as smart as me, but smarter than my parents. And they loved you. I loved you."

Thomas stepped forward, and suddenly one of the guards turned and raised his gun, pointing it directly at him. "Stay where you are!" he shouted.

Thomas stopped and put his hands up. “Whoa ... it’s ok. We’re here to arrest Alan, remember? You know I’m unarmed.”

“I said stay where you are!” the man shouted again.

“Rogers!” Mitch said, “Lower your weapon and stand down!”

Rogers turned first and pointed his gun at Mitch. Reilly squeaked and moved to stand in front of him. Mitch took her by the shoulders and moved her out of the way. “You’re not going to shoot me, Rogers. Because if you do, I’d have to kick your ass.” And with that he smiled.

Rogers, who a moment ago had been tense and freaked out, paused for a second and then laughed nervously. He lowered the gun. “I’m sorry, sir. It’s just ... John Thomas Paris!”

“I get that reaction a lot,” Thomas said. “But believe me, it’s fine. I’m not a monster. I don’t have claws. I don’t spit acid. And right now, the bigger threat is the guy your buddies still have their guns trained on.”

All eyes turned back to Alan, who was still holding the scanner. He looked ... *scared*. It was weird, seeing him so shaken, but Thomas supposed that this was a bit stressful for anyone. Even a stoic genius from another time.

“Is that a bomb?” Reilly whispered, though in the stone quiet it was easy to hear her.

“No,” Alan said, and he let the scanner drop to the ground.

The guards rushed forward then, and in seconds, had him pinned. Mitch and Reilly moved to help the two women on the ground. Thomas, still unsure just what was going on or why, moved closer to talk to Alan. The guards had lashed hold-cord—super-durable and near-indestructible twine—around Alan’s wrists. There was a man holding each arm, and the remaining guards stood at the ready, guns in hand.

“What is this, Alan?” Thomas asked. “What did you do?”

“It was for you, Uncle John. And for them. They ... they took *everything*.” For the first time, Alan’s eyes filled with tears, and his voice was filled with sorrow. “They took it all. My parents. You. Even the colony. They took our hope, Uncle John. I had to do something!”

“You’ve killed people,” Thomas said. “You’ve hurt people. And you’ve stranded us here on the wrong planet. None of the colonies know where we are, Alan. Why?”

“It’s not the wrong planet, Uncle John.”

Thomas blinked. “What do you mean?”

“It’s the first planet. *The* planet. Don’t you know by now? This is it!”

“What’s he talking about?” one of the guards asked.

“We’re here!” Alan exclaimed. “We’re finally here! This is First Colony!”

Thomas heard it, but he wasn't sure at first what it meant. "What are you saying?"

"This is the planet my parents and the rest of First Colony were headed for when they died. While you were in prison, I hacked into the Earth government computers and removed it from the database. I replaced its coordinates with another planet. That was the only way to keep anyone else from coming here!"

"But ..." Thomas started.

Before he could finish, Mitch spoke up. "Um, Thomas. We have a problem."

Thomas turned around and saw the two women rising shakily to their feet. Penny was talking to Reilly in hushed tones. Reilly looked up, completely confused. "I think they have amnesia or something," she said.

"No," Alan said. "They remember everything now. They're back."

"Who?" Thomas asked him. "Who is back?"

"First Colony, Uncle John. I just replaced the minds all of the colonists with the minds of First Colony."

At first, Somar thought that this was some ruse on Taggart's part. But the longer he spoke with him, the more Somar became convinced that the man before him was, in fact, Louis Alan—Alan's father. How this could be possible, Somar was yet to determine.

Taggart ... Louis ... sat on one of the examining tables in what had become the camp hospital. It was a large triage of tents, tables, and racks of equipment. Dr. Michaels, a gray-haired man whose arm was still in a cast and sling, was shaking his head as the data poured in. "I've never seen anything like this. Not in thirty years of medicine."

Somar was also looking over the data, but it meant nothing to him. "What do you see, Doctor?"

Dr. Michaels held up the small display and pointed to the color patterns that shifted and undulated there. "This is a scan of Taggart's brain. I pulled it from the pod data. But this," he said, tapping the screen and bringing up a new swirl of colors. The screen went into a near-solid shade of angry-looking reds and purples. "This is the scan we just took. Actually, it's the fourth scan I took from three different scanners. All of them are the same. There's activity all over the place, especially in the prefrontal cortex. That part of the brain is largely responsible for complex cognitive behaviors in humans." He looked back at his patient then, "It's also responsible for personality expression and decision-making."

Taggart looked up at them. "I'm sorry, but are you saying that my mind has been placed in someone else's body?"

Dr. Michaels nodded. "Essentially, yes."

Taggart shook his head. “Remarkable,” he said. “I thought ... well, it was always a possibility, but ...” He trailed off as if in deep thought.

“Mr. Alan,” Somar said, “are you saying that you were aware of this possibility?”

Taggart looked at the alien Captain, and again there was that strange expression of fascination mingled with excitement. Somar knew that the man was surprised and impressed to discover that mankind was not the only intelligent life in the universe. There would be many questions later, he assumed.

“Captain, I was the Chief Science Officer for First Colony. Before that, I worked in engineering and physics for the colonization effort. I helped develop stasis for long-term space travel.”

Somar nodded. “Impressive,” he said. “I was unaware.”

Taggart laughed. “I’m not surprised. At the time, there were hundreds of us working around the clock on various projects. We were trying to beat the clock, as it were. Discoveries and advances were credited to the team, and individual team members were sort of anonymous.”

Dr. Michaels said, “You were saying something about implanting personalities?”

“Yes,” Taggart said. “The early efforts to develop stasis didn’t go well. We had ... problems. I suppose I’m no longer under security restrictions?”

“You were placed in stasis many years ago,” Somar said, evasively.

“Yes. I suspected that. ok, in that case I see no reason to keep it a secret. In the first attempts at stasis, we ran into issues with dreaming.”

Dr. Michaels snorted. “You don’t dream in stasis. All brain and cellular activity is stopped.”

“Right,” Taggart smiled. “But at first, that wasn’t the case. And we had problems with long-term stasis because eventually the person would enter a lucid dream state—they would realize they were in a dream and unable to wake up. It had ... detrimental effects.”

Taggart looked at each of them to see that they understood. “Obviously we overcame the issue. The answer was to set up a kind of feedback loop. Essentially, we copied the mind pattern of the person going into stasis and played it back to them. This created a kind of ‘white noise,’ a cancellation wave that disrupted mental activity. We found that we only had to do it once, when the person was entering stasis. The cancellation wave shut them down entirely, and the stasis systems prevented new mental activity from starting.”

Somar thought about this. “When stasis stops, the mental activity begins again?”

Taggart nodded. "Right where it left off. It's as if nothing happened. We were excited when we discovered this, because it was practically the last barrier to long-term space flight. But my wife, Angela, had some concerns. When she brought them to me, we explored a few possibilities."

"What were her concerns?" Somar asked.

"She discovered that if you played another waveform, after the cancellation wave, you could ... well, you could essentially re-program someone. You could insert thoughts into their head.

"The implications of this went way beyond space travel, and we were ordered to close off the research and bury all of our findings. The Colony Fleet reported directly to the world government, and if we pursued any further research, we'd have to turn over all results. We'd be opening a Pandora's box. Mind control."

Dr. Michaels grunted. "Surprised they didn't force you to look into it further."

Taggart grinned. "Well, luckily my best friend was my boss. He saw how dangerous this could be, and he ordered us to destroy our research."

Somar peered at him. "Your friend ... was John Thomas Paris?"

Taggart smiled, "Yes! How did you know that? Did he ... did he become famous?"

Dr. Michaels answered, "I'll say. He ..."

"He is a notable historic figure," Somar interrupted. Dr. Michaels understood, or seemed to, and said nothing further.

Taggart laughed. "That's great. He should be. He was a genius. I just wish he'd been able to come with us on the trip. He was heartbroken when they told him he'd have to stay behind."

"I'm sure he was," Dr. Michaels said. Somar worried that he was about to reveal Mr. Paris as the alleged destroyer of a world. It had been such a deep part of Earth's history, after all, that none questioned it. But Somar did not wish to distress Mr. Alan any further. And beyond that, he knew the truth.

But Dr. Michaels said nothing further on the subject. "I need to review the data from the other patients and see what I can determine."

Somar nodded, and the doctor left.

"Captain," Taggart said. "I ... I have to tell you, I'm a little concerned. If I'm not me ... if none of these colonists are who they're supposed to be ... what happens to us now?"

Somar studied the man for a moment. Just hours ago, the face before him was an enemy, someone who could not be trusted. The Esool were not prone to distrust, but when dealing with the humans, Somar had found it to be, at times, a

necessary trait. Could he trust that this man, who was once Taggart, was really so different now? Taggart had made an attempt at a coup. He had willfully fostered mutiny. But the man sitting before him now was not Taggart. Not really.

“I do not know, Mr. Alan. I wish that I did.”

Taggart smiled, but it was a smile without joy. A bitter smile. “I have a feeling things are going to get a whole lot worse,” he said. “In the meantime, why don’t you fill me in on the history I’ve missed?”

Alan made no move, no struggle, as the guards secured his hands in front of him and led him into the cargo bay of the shuttle. The two women, Penny and her mother—Alan was not yet certain which personalities they had been given—were gently guided into the front of the craft. As Penny passed him, she gave him a strange look.

“I ... do I know you?” she asked. It came as a mumble, and Alan felt an overwhelming sadness as he realized that something was wrong with the transfer, in Penny’s case. She should be fully integrated with the new personality, but instead she seemed in a half –state, somehow teetering between being Penny and being the colonist that had replaced her.

Alan shook his head. “No,” he said, and then he was shoved roughly through the cargo bay doorway, away from Penny but somehow deeper into his growing sense of dismay.

He was having a new experience. It was something he’d never felt before, and it didn’t feel good. He wasn’t sure, at first, what to call it. But as the shuttle doors clanged shut and the cabin pressurized, Alan began to comprehend what he was feeling.

Regret.

There was no time for regret, or shame, or dismay. There was no place for it in his life. He had worked too hard and for too long to regret decisions he had made over a hundred years ago. When his parents had died, he had been torn free from humanity, and all of its emotional trappings. He had been set to spinning, unsure of what to do, until the day he found his mother’s laptop.

It was a huge oversight. Something she would have been punished for, if it had ever been discovered at the time. She had probably just forgotten to run the security wipe on it, in all of the excitement of the journey. She wouldn’t need it in the colony, of course, where all of their equipment would have traveled with them, customized and tailored for compact storage in the ship’s cargo hold.

The files were there for anyone to see, as long as they had the technical acumen it took to decrypt them.

Alan had that.

He had been looking for answers. He had been searching for any scrap of information that might fill the void he felt at the loss of his parents. And, as he had dug through the deleted sectors of his mother's hard drive, he found ... not answers. Something else. A new hope.

She had discovered something frightening. The cancellation wave used to shut down the mind of someone in stasis could be *altered*, and thus the mind *itself* could be altered. Through his digging, Alan discovered that his parents had taken this discovery to Uncle John and had been told to bury it.

Smart. This kind of technology, in the hands of the world government, was too much power. It could be used for awful, evil things. It could be used to enslave the population. Burying it deep was the only way to ensure it wouldn't be used against humanity.

But for Alan, it had another use.

It took a while, but he managed to get his hands on the core program used to generate the cancellation wave, tediously uncovering it and reconstructing it from the research notes and scrapped bits of programming he found on his mother's laptop and in the databases of their lab. He then spent weeks meticulously hacking into the Colony Fleet's database and downloading the brain scans for each of the colonists. These he was able to compress into a single file. A large file, to be sure, but not so large as to be noticed once it was placed into the memory buffer of a modified stasis pod.

He had his plan, he had the tools, and eventually he had his uncle. A bit of modification to Uncle John's cancellation wave, and Alan was able to erase his knowledge of the implant technology. It was a precaution ... Alan couldn't risk anyone guessing what he might be up to.

And now, in a distant future where he stood with his back against one of the walls of the cargo bay, Alan was wondered about his success as the guards watched him warily. Each had his gun drawn and ready to fire. The slightest provocation would result in Alan being shredded to pieces by molecular disruption discs.

Maybe he should let them. He had, after all, killed quite a few people. He hadn't meant to. Not really. First Commander Marcos had been an accident, a case of bad timing. The others ... well, they were the casualties of the plan. But far fewer had died here than had died on First Colony. And in fact, Alan was bringing back those lives. True, it was at the expense of the wealthy colonists.

And at the expense of Penny.

Alan felt the pang again. He tried to force it down, but it kept nagging him. Penny ... she was innocent. She wasn't like Taggart or the others. She had been ... pure. And now she was gone. Alan hadn't expected that he would feel this way, but if his parents were alive again, somewhere among these colonists, then he would have to find a way to cope. Eventually, the regret would fade. He had to believe that. He might spend the rest of his life in a cell, but it would be worth it to know that his mother and father were walking on the surface of the world they had risked ... and lost ... everything for.

Mitch and Thomas came into the cargo bay. Thomas looked grim, and Alan felt another pang of regret. Didn't he realize that this was, at least in part, for him? This was as much about redeeming Uncle John as it was about bringing Alan's parents back.

"Alan," Thomas said.

"Uncle John."

Thomas winced. "Don't call me that. My name is Thomas. Now, anyway."

Alan saw the guards glance at each other. It would be a while before the people here would accept Thomas and forgive him for the crime they believed he had committed."

"Alan, I need to know what you did. I need to know exactly how you did it."

Alan shook his head. "It can't be reversed. It would kill them."

Mitch stepped forward. "The colonists? The people you ... infected?"

"First Colony," Alan said. "They'd die."

"They're already dead," Thomas said gently.

"No! They're not Uncle ... Thomas. They're *alive*. As alive as you and me, in the bodies of the colonists."

Thomas shook his head. "It's an illusion, Alan. These people aren't the First Colony crew. They just think they are."

"What's the difference?" Alan asked. "I think, therefore I am. They believe they are someone else. That's all it takes."

"You son of a bitch!" Mitch shouted and grabbed Alan by the front of his jumpsuit, lifting him slightly and smashing him hard into the metal wall.

"Mitch!" Thomas shouted, pulling at the man's arm. "We need him! If you kill him, we lose the only link we have to restoring these people!"

Mitch tensed, then relaxed, and lowered Alan back to the floor.

Alan was seeing spots and stars. His head hurt where it had smashed into the bulkhead. And somehow, this pleased Alan. It made him feel better. He deserved it, he thought.

"How do we reverse it?" Thomas asked.

Alan shook his head, more to clear his vision than to say "no."

“I’m sorry, Thomas. I can’t tell you that. I don’t even know if it’s possible. I wouldn’t tell you if it was.”

Thomas looked at the boy, and for the first time, Alan felt ashamed. He saw the look of disappointment on his uncle’s face and wanted so badly to make things right. For such a long time, Thomas had been Alan’s only link to his parents. He still thought of him that way.

Out of the corner of Alan’s eye, he saw movement toward the front of the cargo bay. An EVA suit had been hanging in one of the alcoves, and suddenly it moved. Alan turned to look at it, and the figure raised an MD gun, pointing it straight at the boy.

Alan sprang forward, knocking Mitch and Thomas out of the way. The guards shouted and raised their guns, but it was too late.

Billy Sans was on top of Alan before anyone could stop him.

He held the barrel of the gun against Alan’s throat.

“You killed First Commander Marcos!” he shouted. “And a whole lot of people who were my friends! You’re a *murderer!*”

“Billy!” Mitch shouted. “Let him go! We’re taking him back for trial now, and we need him alive!”

“Alive?” Billy asked. He shoved the barrel deeper into Alan’s throat, putting pressure on his larynx. “He deserves to *die!*”

It was Thomas who stepped forward, hands slightly raised. “Maybe,” he said. “But that’s not up to us to decide. He needs to be tried. He needs to face justice.”

Billy turned his head slightly, “Like you? Didn’t you go to trial? Didn’t you face justice? And what happened? They convicted you! And you ... you didn’t even do it!”

“No,” Thomas said. “I didn’t do it. The system ... well, sometimes it doesn’t work. But it will work this time, Billy. Because this time it will be a jury of your friends. Alan will have to stand trial in front of the people of the colony. You trust them, don’t you? And the judge ... you know who the judge will be. The rules of the colony have already dictated it.”

“Captain Somar,” Billy whispered.

“That’s right. You trust Captain Somar, don’t you?” Mitch asked.

Billy’s grip loosened a bit and Alan could breathe again.

“Yes,” he said. Then in a flash, the fury returned to his face, and he raised the gun, intending to use it to bludgeon Alan.

Thomas and Mitch rushed forward, tackling the boy, and the gun fired. A searing MD disc clipped through the control panel for the cargo bay door as if it were something insubstantial. The door activated and began to creak open.

Pressurized air gushed outward, and everyone was knocked off of their feet as the shuttlecraft rumbled and shook. The rushing air pulled at them, and one of the guards was flung out into the open air. Billy and Alan were dragged to the very lip of the door, while the remaining guards, Mitch, and Thomas managed handholds.

The two boys flipped over the edge.

“No!” Thomas shouted.

As the pressure balanced out, Reilly’s voice came over the comms. “What the hell happened back there? We’re bouncing all over the place!”

“Keep it steady, Reilly!” Mitch shouted. “The cargo bay door is open. How’s the pressure?”

“Stabilizing. I’ve taken us down a bit, and we’re leveling off in the lower atmosphere.”

Thomas rushed to the edge of the cargo bay door and peered over. Below, he saw Alan’s face peering up. His restraints were caught on a jutting piece of metal.

“Thomas!” Alan shouted. “Billy is below me. He’s holding on to the landing strut. You have to save him!”

Mitch and the guards reached the edge.

“What do we do?” Thomas asked.

Mitch was shaking his head. “I can have Reilly try to bring us down, but we’re pretty high up. It will be a while.” He shouted to Alan, “Can Billy hold on until we get to the ground?”

“I don’t think so!” Alan said. “He’s hurt! I’m trying to press against him with my foot, to try to hold him in place, but I don’t have any leverage!”

Thomas peered around for something that might help. He spotted a roll of cargo netting and rushed to grab it. Mitch helped him tie it off and lower it over the side, but it came up just short of Alan’s hands.

“No good!” Alan shouted.

Mitch looked at Thomas, “Someone needs to go down. You stay here, and I’ll make the climb.”

“I’ll do it,” came a female voice from behind them.

It was Penny. Or, at least, the girl who was once Penny.

“Ma’am,” Thomas said, unsure of who he might be talking to, “you need to go back up front where it’s safe. We’ll ... we’ll take care of this.” He glanced at Mitch, and it was clear that neither of them was sure if their plan would work.

“I’m a climber,” Penny said in a voice that sounded somewhat distant. “I’m trained. I can get to them and bring them up.”

Thomas peered at her. “Penny?” he asked.

Penny looked at him, uncomprehending for a moment, then nodded. "Yes. I think so. I'm ... I'm not sure."

"We can't let you go out there," Mitch said.

"I'm the only one trained to do it," Penny said quietly. "I can do it."

Thomas and Mitch exchanged glances. "ok," Mitch said. "You'll need a ..."

Before he could finish, Penny held up a climbing harness. She shimmied into it, buckled it, and walked to the edge of the door. She clipped the trailing safety cord to a handhold and quickly started climbing down.

Below, Alan was trying his best to hold on to something and get the leverage he needed to save Billy Sans. Billy was barely hanging on, really just balanced on the strut. His head was bleeding, and he seemed to be struggling to remain conscious.

"Don't move, Billy!" Alan said. "Just lay still. Someone is coming to help. They ..."

He looked up to see Penny climbing down the cargo netting.

"Penny?" he asked.

The girl didn't stop. She reached the point where Alan was hanging on and grabbed his wrist. With an expert move she tugged, freeing him, then slung him out and upward so that he connected with the net. He grabbed with both hands, which were still bound together, and scrambled to get his feet into it.

"Penny," he said.

She looked at him dully. He wasn't sure how, but he knew that she was still in there, but fading. He hadn't ... she wasn't entirely gone after all.

Penny looked down. "I have to climb," she said. Her voice was flat, with no emotion. And Alan watched as she mechanically scaled down to the landing strut.

He couldn't let her do it alone.

Glancing around, he saw the rough edge of the opening for the cargo bay door. He began frantically rubbing the restraints against it. Finally, the strands began to fray, and the restraints broke free. Alan let them fall and gripped the cargo net with both hands. He reached out to the supports that Penny had used in her descent and climbed down to follow her.

"Alan!" Thomas cried from above. "Come up!"

"I have to help!" he shouted back. And with that he dropped out of sight.

Penny was cautiously moving toward Billy, who lay motionless on the strut. Alan put a foot down, gripped the strut with one hand, and then managed to get both feet under him. He edged along just behind Penny, until he caught up with her.

"What do we do?" he asked.

Penny looked at him, and her expression changed.

“Wha—“ She looked around, then screamed. “Where am I? How did I get here?”

She clutched the strut, hugging it. There was a brief shudder as the shuttle hit turbulence, and Billy began to slide.

Alan moved past Penny and fell to his stomach, reaching out just in time to grab Billy’s hand as the young man slid off of the strut and dangled in mid-air.

“Penny, help me!” Alan shouted.

The girl, no longer Penny, screamed again. “I don’t want to die!”

“Penny, please! I need your help!”

The girl buried her face against the vertical strut, and Alan was on his own.

He pulled with all of his strength, but he couldn’t get Billy up. The effort was immense, and Alan felt trickles of sweat roll down his arm and drip from his face. His hands were becoming slippery. Billy’s fingers began to pull free.

“No!” Alan said.

Billy looked up at him, wide-eyed, then said, “Captain Somar ... tell him ...”

Before he could finish, Alan’s grip slipped, and Billy tumbled out into the open air, falling away so fast that Alan soon lost track of him.

The girl screamed and toppled backwards.

Alan’s heart was thudding as he reached for her and missed. “No!” he shouted. And then, he lifted himself up, amazed. Penny was dangling by a safety line.

Her situation was still dangerous, but Alan was able to reach out and snag the line and hoist her up. Soon he had her on the strut. Safe.

From above, he heard Mitch’s voice. “Alan!” he shouted. “Is everyone ok?”

Mitch had obviously climbed down and was hanging from the cargo netting, out of sight above them. “Penny and I are fine. Billy ... he’s gone.”

There was silence. “Hang tight. We’re going to bring the shuttle down. Get a solid handhold.”

Alan only nodded in response, too tired and too filled with regret to say anything. He hugged Penny between himself and the landing strut’s vertical support and waited for the ground to come.

Twenty

The colony was quiet as Thomas finished up his rounds. The funeral services were scheduled to begin in an hour, and he didn't want to be late. He moved through the near-silent streets toward what would be the William Sans Memorial Cemetery. In the past 24 hours, since they had arrived back at Citadel and told the story of what had happened (minus only a few key details that Thomas was certain would spread soon enough), they had picked a spot, decided on a name, and planned a ceremony.

The Blue Collars, mostly ashamed of what they had almost done, were pleased that one of their own was being honored. It went a long way toward smoothing relations. Of course, it helped that the colonists, the biggest targets for Blue Collar ire, had been in some way "killed." No one in the colony could remain angry after so much loss. It seemed, at least to Thomas and Somar, that the colony was finally starting to bond. Only time would tell.

Thomas had been studying the scans and data that Dr. Michaels had put together, and he now compared it with what traces he could find of the computer program Alan had used. It was an unbelievable accomplishment. Alan had discovered a way to re-program the human mind just as he would a computer. The question was, could it be undone?

After seeing what had happened to Penny, Thomas was hopeful.

And so, apparently, was Alan, who had shown a sudden change of heart. He was confined to a cell and given only restricted access to data on printouts—no technology allowed. But Thomas felt the boy's repentance was sincere. He was diligently trying to unravel the knot he had tied. He was trying to find a way to restore the colonists while somehow saving the First Colony crew, if such a thing were possible.

Somar was waiting for Thomas as he stepped into the command center.

"Anything?" Somar asked.

Thomas shook his head. "I'm hopeful. But so far, I have no idea what to do."

Somar nodded. "Alan wiped all knowledge of the process from your memory. I was hopeful that you would somehow be able to retrieve it. Perhaps with time."

Thomas nodded. "So, the funeral is coming up. How are you?"

Somar nodded deeply. "I honor my fallen brother by placing him in this new soil, so that he may grow as part of this world."

"Nice," Thomas said. "Is that a saying on your world?"

Somar smiled. "Yes. One that was heard frequently once we began colonizing other worlds. I find it fitting. For all of the differences between humans and the Esool, we do share this one common trait. Curious, is it not?"

"Burying the dead? Yeah. We have our own saying, or at least we used to. 'Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.' It means that we commit our fallen back to the soil. Sort of like giving him back to the universe, as part of the whole of creation."

"Very touching," Somar said.

Thomas leaned forward, propping himself on one of the tables. He was looking at the data streaming in from the orbital platform above. "It's going to come crashing down, isn't it?" he asked. Though he wasn't sure if he meant the orbital platform or the colony itself.

"Perhaps. Or perhaps not. We will do all we can. The pods that have been rescued so far have been brought back, along with the colonists. There are still a few out there, and some are difficult to locate. The good news is that for those still in stasis when Alan activated on his program, they should have been protected from the collision wave. They should still be themselves."

"That's good news," Thomas agreed.

"Yet you appear worried," Somar said.

"Well, let's see ... our only link to civilization may come crashing to the planet before we are able to repair it or even retrieve some of what we need from it. The colonists we brought with us have been re-programmed to believe they are someone else. And I think it's only a matter of time before the two guards who know my secret tell the whole colony who I am and I get to have the once-in-a-lifetime experience of being torn to shreds."

"They have been ordered not to," Somar said.

"Yeah," Thomas smiled. "Well, we'll see."

"You should not worry, Thomas. The people here know what you have done for this colony. They may be shocked by what they hear, but they will come to trust you. They will understand who you truly are."

Thomas said nothing for a while. Then, "You know, I talked to Alan about the sabotage. He says he altered the navigation systems, but had nothing to do with sabotaging the module releases."

Somar considered this. "Do you believe him?"

Thomas thought for a moment, then shook his head. "I just don't know. I think I might, but I can't say why. It scares me if it wasn't him."

“It would mean there is a second saboteur.”

“Right,” Thomas said.

“I fear this as well.”

Thomas considered, wondering what it could mean for the colony if another among them turned out to have betrayed them all. How many blows could this colony take? How much more trust was there to be lost. *Maybe we’ll get lucky,* Thomas thought. *Maybe the saboteur is back on Earth.*

“I was supposed to be in the colony module, but I was woken up instead. Some kind of mix-up. My pod was placed with the landing module crew. Alan says that when he saw me, it really surprised him. He knew something was wrong. He had made careful arrangements for me to be on that colony module, and he wanted me to survive. That makes it seem a little less likely that he was the one who welded those links.”

Somar nodded, considering. “What of the explosive device? The one that injured Captain Alonzo as he attempted to access the platform’s controls?”

Thomas shook his head, “Alan said he had nothing to do with that.”

Somar absorbed this. “Then ... who placed it there?”

“I have no idea. It’s a hell of a coincidence, though. We had two saboteurs?”

“Was it, perhaps, Mr. Taggart?” Somar asked.

“Could be,” Thomas shrugged. “But who can really say? We don’t have enough evidence. And if that platform comes down ...”

“We will just have to make sure that doesn’t happen. Tomorrow morning, you, Mr. Garrison, Ms. Reilly, and a crew of engineers and security personnel are going to the platform to repair it. And regardless of Captain Alonzo’s protests, I want him brought to the surface for medical care.”

“Agreed,” Thomas said. “But in the meantime ...”

“Yes,” Somar said. “In the meantime, we mourn our dead.” He stood then beside Thomas and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Mr. Thomas, I wanted to say that it has truly been an honor to serve with you. Our journey is far from over, but I am relieved to be taking it with a man of honor.”

Thomas felt emotion well up within and choked it back. His eyes burned as he replied, “The feeling is mutual, Captain.”

They had decided on one funeral service for all of their fallen. The name of each of the fallen was read from a list, and one person was allowed to speak for a few minutes about the person named. Somar spoke for Billy, and his speech was a celebration of the young man’s bravery.

When Jack's name was read, Mitch volunteered to speak on the man's behalf. "He was one of us, and we can learn a lot from him. He made a poor choice and paid for it with his life. But he was a good friend and well respected. And his mistakes do not define him. No man's mistakes define him."

As Mitch walked away from the platform to join Reilly at the outer fringe of the crowd, there was not a word spoken. Mitch and Somar had discussed what he would say ahead of time, calculating it to reach the Blue Collars. Your mistakes, he was saying, are forgiven. And they do not define who you are in this colony.

"Nice," Reilly said, with tears ringing her eyes. "He would have liked that."

Mitch nodded. He wasn't so sure he cared whether Jack would have liked his memorial. He had been the leader of a mutiny, which was one of the highest crimes a Blue Collar could commit. But Mitch agreed with Somar's position. If the colony was going to survive, forgiveness would have to be the first step.

He looked around the crowd, and there, huddled together on one side, were all of the colonists. They were quiet and somber, saying nothing but listening intently. They had never known any of these men or women, but they respected them.

"What a strange situation," Reilly said, shuddering.

"Yeah," Mitch replied. "To be you, but not you. I can't even imagine it."

"What about the people they ... replaced? What would you even call that?"

"Replaced is a good enough word. And I don't know. Thomas says that they may still be in there. Penny seems to be. We're hopeful."

"So we bring them back some day. What then? What about the First Colony people? They die all over again? No one cares about them?"

Mitch had nothing to say to that. He had thought of it himself but couldn't quite get his head around the implications of it. He thought of himself as *himself*. And to imagine that he could be copied, like software, and put in a new body ... it was a nightmare. It was frightening.

He and Reilly walked together after the ceremony. "Tomorrow we go up to the platform and bring down Captain Alonzo. And hopefully, we can get the platform repaired. Maybe we can reach the colonies."

Reilly nodded, then laughed.

"What is it?" Mitch asked.

"Well, it's just ... for the whole time I've been here, I've thought of the platform as home and this place as ... away. I couldn't wait to get back. But just now, you said we had to bring the Captain back here, and I thought, 'Yeah, we need to bring him home.' Weird, huh?"

Mitch smiled. "Yeah, that's a little weird."

She laughed and then punched him in the shoulder. And just then, not quite knowing why he was doing it, Mitch grabbed her, pulled her in close, and kissed her. It was a long kiss, and he felt the warmth of her against him. He had never let himself feel as he was feeling now, but after everything they'd been through, he didn't want to chance losing the opportunity.

The kiss ended, but the embrace continued. Reilly leaned her head against his chest. "We're going to be ok," she said.

"Yeah," he told her. "It's not over yet, but I think we're going to be just fine."

And with that, Mitch watched as the last rays of the sun dipped below the tree line. A few sparkling glints reflected from the surface of Citadel until those, too, faded. And finally, as Mitch and Reilly watched the fading light, a peaceful night washed over the small colony.

Epilogue

The communications efforts had failed. The girl, Reilly, had not known them. She was unable. Even cloaking themselves in the memories of her father, they had been unable to truly reach her.

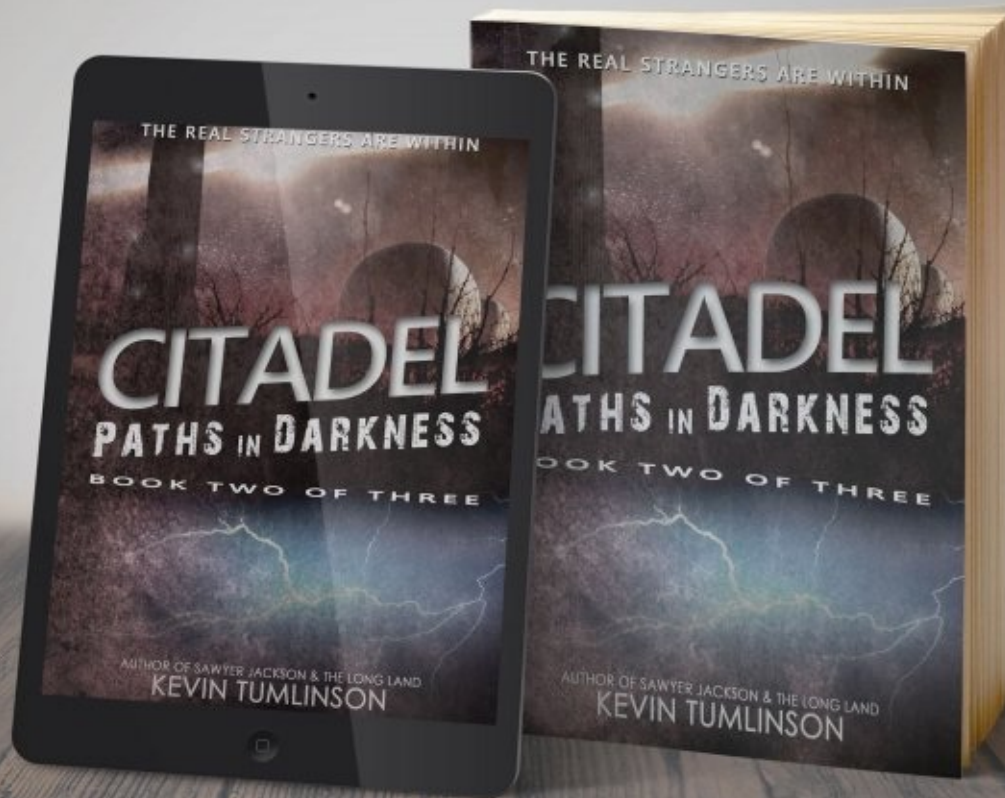
The sleeping ones, though, were easier. They were without thought. They only dreamed. The other humans, they thought that the dreaming was impossible. It was not. It was merely hidden. Very finely hidden, deep within, but there.

The Current. That's what they would call themselves. It fit. With all that they had learned of the humans, they knew that their new name would be important. Humans need names. They need to name things. Better to choose your own name.

The Current watched as the visitors settled into their homes and lives. It was invisible to them. It could be seen and heard when it chose, but right now it remained silent. The sleeping ones had taught it a great deal about these people and about their lives. It would use what it had learned and ... well, it hadn't decided yet. But one thing was clear: The Current now had a new way of looking at the world, thanks to these humans. It had never understood things the way it did now. It liked its new knowledge and the new source of energy that the humans had brought with them. And it now knew that it could have everything it wanted.

All it had to do was take it.

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Kevin Tumlinson was born in Wild Peach, Texas, during the early 70s. Which means he had practically nothing to do for the first 18 years of his life.

That meant he was free from outside stimulus, which gave him a creative edge. He spent his days roaming the back woods and open pastures and abandoned junk piles of Wild Peach, getting into a lot of trouble and building a rich inner world that comes in real handy today.

Kevin is the author of dozens of novels and novellas, including his popular *Citadel* science fiction trilogy and his ongoing *Sawyer Jackson* contemporary fantasy series.

Kevin was the winner of the Veterans of Foreign Wars Voice of Democracy award, as well as a two-time winner of the Danny Lee Lawrence Award for Fiction.

In addition to writing and publishing, Kevin is the host of the Wordslinger Podcast (wordslingerpodcast.com)—a weekly interview-format show in which Kevin talks to some of the most interesting and upwardly mobile entrepreneurs around. Kevin makes a regular habit of coaching and helping other authors, entrepreneurs and would-be authors improve their craft, build or grow their business, and generally just make their lives better through writing.

Kevin lives with his wife, Kara, in the Greater Houston area, but has a grand master plan to chuck it all and live as an RV nomad, exploring the world, chasing his travel muse, and creating stories from the grist he finds out there.

Visit Kevin at kevintumlinson.com for more information about his work, and to connect with him and become one of his Slingers. You can also follow him on Facebook (/kevintumlinson) and Twitter (@kevintumlinson). He is no longer responding to smoke signals, and apologizes for the inconvenience.

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