

TITANS PLAGUE

THE TRIAL

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1 An Unfair Advantage

Pati McLear felt the sting of her husband's slap across her face. She did not collapse from the blow, or even look away from his stare. She wiped her cheek with her left hand. "You should know better than to hit me," she said.

Richard McLear stood back a step and exhaled. He put his hand on his hips. "I know. But you shouldn't have provoked me," he said. Richard was just under two meters tall, had a mass of ninety kilos, was thirty-five years old, and other than his brown hair balding, seemed a young man.

Pati stood a head shorter than Richard and weighed half as much. With black hair, and tearing blue eyes, she looked her twenty-four years. Her preference for wool clothes, along with her height, marked her as an Earth immigrant. "You can't stop me from talking about the problem," she said. "We've been through this a hundred times and I'm not getting anywhere with you. You promised six months ago that we'd be leaving to visit Earth, today, and not only are we not going, you've done nothing to prepare so we can leave six months from now."

"I've been busy at work. With the new line of freighters, I have to attend every launch ceremony. My brother can't do it all from up there," he said, pointing to a ceiling five meters above the floor. They stood in the great room of their mansion in the city of Karakorum, on Titan, the primary moon of Saturn. The great room was larger than ten meters square, floored with real hardwood and surrounded by beige walls. The furniture, which could seat a double-digit audience, was a brownish-red, synthetic fabric. A style popular on Earth.

"And your brother's been to Earth in the last six months, missing no work that I can see."

"Who do you think was left in charge while he traveled? This business is the only reason people exist on Titan. If anything happens to McLear Industries, we can book trips back to the inner system and live off relief funds."

"Why can't it be his turn to stay here and we go back to Earth?"

"I'm working on it, but there are too many commitments for the both of us."

"Did you talk with him about it?"

His face tightened and he gritted his teeth. "You leave that to me. I'll decide when we go back, and we'll go as soon as I think it's possible."

Pati stepped back into his space. "You're scared of the gravity treatments, is that it? You can't take the pain anymore."

His face turned red. Because he was born and raised on Titan, and its human-

positioned satellite of Picus, his complexion remained light and European-based. The red increased with his breathing.

“Are you just going to stand there? Answer me.”

He shook his head. “You stupid little bitch. How dare you talk to me that way. You would still be back in that peasant village if it wasn’t for me.”

“Great, you’re back to that superiority of wealth you like to throw in my face. You know, you never used to do that, Richard. You used to treat me equally, even when you were pissed off. In the last year, it seems you never want to even associate with me unless it’s an occasion where you need a wife.”

“Because you haven’t shown yourself to be good for anything else.”

“And just when have you given me the chance to do that?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know how many times we let you work with—”

“Work with you! You drag me up to Picus, have me sit at a desk all day with nothing to do, and then take me back here. Just because you pay me doesn’t make it work.”

“You’re not good for anything else!”

Pati felt her blood boil. She tried so often to help out, but it didn’t help that she hadn’t received an advanced education in business, physics, or engineering, areas Richard and his brother excelled in due to their upbringing. A situation Pati didn’t have available to her, or at least hadn’t known would be important if she married a McLearn.

“Now, you say something,” Richard said. “Tell me where I can employ you. And no, you’re not working in the shipyard or factory.”

Pati wouldn’t leave his space. She purposely stayed within arm’s reach. “Insulting me won’t get me to back down,” she said. “You brought me to Titan, you asked me to marry you, and you followed through with it when I said yes.” She backed away a little, still staying within his reach. “I can be productive; I just need your help to go in the right direction.”

His facial expression hadn’t changed. “All you’re good for is siring the next McLearn heir.” He then smiled in an evil way. “And, I’m not sure you’ll be good for that either.”

Pati felt her own face tighten, and heat rush into it. “I doubt you’d be able to manage the task, anyway,” she said.

In a quick movement, he reached across with his right hand and threw a backhand across her face. She felt the knuckles contact her right eye socket and even saw stars as he struck her.

Pati didn’t think. She clenched her right fist and hit him with an uppercut to the chin. Pati watched him lift up, and then fall back to the ground. She regretted the punch immediately, even more so as his head struck one of the steel supports.

The resulting clang told her the situation was not good.

“Oh, no!” Pati said. She rushed to his side, where his body lay crumpled on the hardwood floor. He was unconscious, with blood flowing through his brown hair.

“Medical bot, now!” she screamed.

A tracked metallic robot moved in from the kitchen. Shorter than Pati, it could reach up to Richard’s height if needed for treatment. Since he lay on the floor, it lowered itself slightly. It held a scanning monitor over his head, then moved it down the rest of his body.

“Massive head trauma,” the machine voice said. “Calling emergency medical services, which should arrive in the next three minutes.”

“Will he be okay?”

The machine waited. “Indeterminable, at this time.”

“You have to do something.”

“Will comply,” it said. It reached down with another of its two limbs and touched Richard’s head where the blood was. Pati couldn’t see exactly what was happening due to the blood, and after a few seconds, the robot retracted the limb.

“Bleeding is stopped,” it reported.

“Oh, good.”

“So, has his heartbeat,” it added.

“No, what—”

“Will attempt to restart heart,” it said. The limb that fixed the bleeding changed the apparatus it held and placed the new device over Richard’s chest. Richard shook. “Shock delivered.”

“Is his heart beating?”

“No, will deliver second shock.”

Pati saw Richard shake again. She didn’t ask the question.

“Will deliver third shock,” the robot said.

Pati couldn’t ask any more questions. She waited to see what the robot would tell her.

“Emergency services are arriving,” the robot said.

Pati took the cue to let them in the door. She hurried, hoping real people could help Richard where this robot had failed. She also, not for the first time, asked herself. “Why did I ever leave Earth?”



* * *

Pati sat on the couch in the McLear House great room. She waited while the emergency services rolled Richard's body out the door. They had to bag his body in front of her and couldn't wait for the hospital to do it. Why couldn't they have just put him on the stretcher and covered his face respectfully?

She stood to follow them out. When she got to the door, a man and a lady were waiting to enter. They both looked at Pati and waited for Richard's body to go by them. The male stepped in front of Pati.

"Ms. McLear, I'm Detective Germain Bennett and this is Detective Esra Haldi. We'd like to speak with you." The man was of African descent, at least that's what Pati thought, and the lady of maybe Semitic origins. They both were taller than her, a situation she came to expect on Titan, and neither looked overweight in their brown, but not uniform suits.

"My husband. I need to go with him."

"There's nothing you can do for him now, Ms. McLear, and we need to find out what happened as soon as possible."

Pati wasn't in a fighting mood. She stepped back and let them enter. They stopped in the center of the room.

"Can I see where your husband was when you struck him?" Detective Bennett asked.

Pati hadn't expected the question. She had to think for a moment and realized what she'd told the emergency technicians must have been communicated to this detective. "He was standing right there," she said. She pointed to a spot equidistant from the front door to the rear of the room. Where Richard stood was slightly more than two meters from the pillar he'd struck. So, he didn't fly as far as she remembered, he just fell over.

The detective stood in the same spot. "Right here?" he asked.

"Yes, that's where my husband was standing."

He removed a handheld communicator from his coat pocket, a model Pati had never seen before. He ran a red laser along the floor and to the pillar. The pillar still had a bloodstain where Richard had hit it, and the detective focused on that point for a moment.

"Did you do anything to Mr. McLear after he hit this pillar?" he asked.

"No, I called for the medical robot. I never touched him after that."

The detective nodded and studied his handheld. The other detective moved closer to Pati, and stood within arm's distance.

"Do I need legal assistance?" Pati asked.

"Not at this time," Detective Bennett said. "However, we appreciate you giving us permission to evaluate the scene. Everything you told the medical technicians about the conflict was documented, although that is not considered

evidence at this time. As long as the physical evidence matches up with your story, we will not be questioning you here today.”

Pati stepped toward Detective Bennett, and Detective Haldi followed, staying within arm's reach. “I thought you said you just needed to talk with me,” Pati said.

“Well, yes, in a manner of speaking, that is what we meant. However, in this situation, it’s important for us to have access to the crime scene, and we needed you to allow that.” He shook his head and walked past her.

What did he mean by crime scene? Pati thought. What happened to Richard was an accident. Would she be better off asking them to leave? Because she got the feeling their interests did not necessarily agree with hers.

Detective Bennett manipulated his handheld, staring down at the device. Pati waited for at least five minutes before he returned his attention to her. “This is where you live? Correct?”

“When we’re not traveling or staying on Picus.”

He nodded and returned his attention to the handheld communicator. Pati waited, and then walked over to a couch and sat. Detective Haldi moved as well, except this time, she took a place between Pati and the front door.

It was another few minutes when he looked up. “Detective Haldi, please remove the sample on the post.” He glanced at Pati, “With your permission.”

Pati exhaled in frustration. “Sure, go ahead. What else do you want?”

“We’re almost finished, Ms. McLear,” he said.

Detective Haldi pulled a wipe from a packet she carried around her shoulder. She stepped to the pillar where Richard had struck his head, and removed the bloodstain left on it, leaving a brighter surface. She returned to her position between Pati and the door.

“Detectives, I’m really tired right now, you can imagine my day has been difficult, and there’s no end of people I need to talk to at this moment. So, if you don’t mind, please finish what you came to do.”

Detective Bennett looked up from his handheld, and then at Detective Haldi. She nodded, and stepped toward Pati. “Okay, maybe it’s time we get to it. Ms. McLear, we’ll need you to come with us,” he said.

“Wait, you said before—”

“We’re trying to do our job here and you want to interfere. Since it seems you wish to deny our entry, then we’ll need to take you into custody and wait until the proper paperwork is filed so we can come back and finish our job.”

“I never—”

“I didn’t want to do it this way, but you’ve forced our hand. Detective Haldi.”

She held a tranquilizer gun in her hand. Pati had not experienced being shot by one before, and she'd rarely seen the weapon, except when Richard had security personnel around. The weapon meant that she was in their power, right now, and cooperation would be in her best interest.

"Ms. McLear," Detective Haldi said. She had a higher voice than her size suggested. "I'm not an Earth-born like yourself, so I'm not confident I can overcome you physically. That said, I'm going to keep this weapon trained on you until you're in the back of our groundcar. If you move in any way that suggests violence or flight, I'll disable you with this weapon. Do you understand?"

Pati nodded.

"Okay, please lead us out of the door."

Pati obeyed, stepping out of the great room onto the street. The two detectives followed, and then Detective Bennett turned to shut the door. He tapped a button on his handheld. "I'm securing this door, and you'll be able to enter when you return. No one else will be able to, so your possessions will be safe."

Detective Bennett took the lead and marched to the groundcar parked in the cul-de-sac. Pati could see busy traffic at the intersection with the main road. Nobody on the street was staring, at least not yet.

"You can enter the car," Detective Haldi said. The right-rear door opened up, and Pati climbed in. The door shut behind her. She didn't bother seeing if she could open it from her side.

The pair slid into the front seats with Detective Bennett on the left. He tapped buttons on the dash, and the car turned and rolled toward Main Street.

Pati recalled her question about needing legal representation, to which Detective Bennett replied in the negative. She would not trust him or the other detectives again.



* * *

Pati took a groundcar on her way to an office building near the center of Karakorum. Karakorum was the only large settlement on Titan, and like most everything else on Titan, it was constructed by McLear Industries. A fact that reinforced her decision not to cooperate with the detectives, who were forced to

release her. It also reinforced her decision to get help.

She stopped at an office building that housed most of the lawyers on Titan, leaving the groundcar to park itself and wait for her return. It was 9 a.m. on Monday, four days after Richard's death. Pati tried on Friday to contact his brother on Picus. He didn't accept the call, and she decided she might need legal help. She found the service for assigning attorneys and sent in a request. A response was received within a few hours, setting a meeting for this morning in this location.

This section of Karakorum was primarily office structures, and the business feel was unmistakable. Most of the buildings were three to four stories high and built like boxes with a variable number of rooms on each floor. And like her home here, they were set in a cul-de-sac intersecting the main street.

Pati's destination was on the right side of the street, near the end. She entered the building down a walkway that bisected it in the center. Inside, she saw a receptionist speaking into a headset. Pati approached, and the receptionist noticed her, but she didn't stop her conversation. A second later, the receptionist connected the person to their destination and turned to Pati.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"I need to see Nancy Tate."

"She's on this floor. Use the left hallway from the atrium, middle door on the right side of that hallway."

"Thanks," Pati said and stepped around her desk. She entered an atrium with a ceiling window to the outside of Karakorum. She could imagine on clearer days when the sun was in the right position, there would be natural light streaming in, almost like on Earth. It was the same for the deck above her house's shuttle hangar, and it was a wonderful luxury. The only problem was that such days rarely happened, only a few times a year. Another reason for her to return to the real thing.

Pati turned into the left hallway and strode across the white, polished stone, another luxury item. There were three wooden doors on each side of the hallway and one at the end. She expected the wood was false, a synthetic built from the organics on Titan, because the real stuff would cost a year's salary, even for these lawyers.

The middle door on the right side had a nameplate for "Nancy Tate" to the left of the door. Pati didn't see a button, so she knocked, finding the door to be metal.

"Come in," she heard a female voice say.

Pati turned the metallic lever down and pushed open the door. She stepped in to find an office with blue walls, a white tile ceiling, and lighter-blue floors. The

desk looked like wood, and a lady stood on the other side, holding out her hand.

“You must be Pati McLear,” she said, shaking Pati’s hand. Nancy Tate had blonde hair tied back and blue eyes. She also stood at least a decimeter taller than Pati, suggesting she was a second-generation, or secgen for short. Her parents would have immigrated to Titan, or somewhere in the solar system other than Earth, and growing up in lower gravity made her taller than Earth-borns.

Nancy wore a beige business suit while Pati was in gray, wearing a suit more casual than Nancy’s. This year had been hell between Richard and her, and she couldn’t quite feel the part of a grieving widow, so wearing black every day would not happen.

“Thanks for meeting with me on such short notice,” Pati said.

“I volunteered for your case as soon as you sent it into the pool last Friday,” Nancy said. “No one else with my experience and credentials was interested, and I got the case. Within minutes of the assignment, the lawyers for McLear Industries deluged me with information.” She took a deep breath. “We have a busy morning ahead of us.”

“Why did the company get involved? I thought this was about protecting me from prosecution.”

She took another deep breath. “It will be more than that, and right now, I can handle both ends for you. The first thing to know is McLear is paying your bills and not just my fees for the time being.”

Pati understood. It’d been a tense and busy weekend, and she hadn’t bothered to consider how she’d pay her bills. She never needed to worry about expenses since she left Earth; everything was taken care of by Richard and his family. She was only twenty-two then, and only a few days from turning twenty-four today. Living on her own was not a lifestyle she was used to. Having Kerry McLear continue to pay her bills was a nice gesture, but what was the catch? “So, what does that all mean, then?” she asked.

“Please, sit down,” Nancy said.

Pati took the chair on the right in front of Nancy’s desk. Nancy sat down in her chair.

“Let’s start with what the McLear lawyers provided me.”

“Is it anyone in particular you’re working with?” Pati asked. “I’ve met their chief counsel before, although it was just an introduction and nothing more.”

“It wasn’t her. It came from one of their paralegals. Their position is that you, Pati McLear, will no longer be part of their organization.”

“They didn’t say family.”

“No, although it’s implied. The indications are that they will support you through this time, financially. After your legal issues are cleaned up, you’re on

your own.”

Pati didn't fret. Had this been a year ago, when she had some love for this place, it might have caused her some concern. But after Richard became an abusive, violent spouse, she wanted to get back to Earth and leave it all behind. This was probably that time.

On the other hand, she was a legal member of that family, even if she wasn't treated like it. “I'm not surprised they're taking that attitude. They had Richard's body transported to Picus within hours, and I wasn't allowed to go there for the service they held yesterday. His brother wouldn't take my calls, either.”

Nancy looked down at her desk. “Kerry McLear wouldn't even let you attend the funeral for your husband.”

“He knew we'd been fighting, and I could tell they didn't get along either, at least not in the last year. They seemed distant even before then, so I don't know why he's suddenly become the loving and hurt family member.”

“How bad did you want to be there?” Nancy asked.

Pati had to think. After failing to get passage up to Picus on Saturday for the Sunday funeral, she tried again to contact Kerry. When that failed, she felt relieved that she'd done all she could to do as a wife. The fight with Richard, the detectives taking her into custody, and the last three nightmares had all taken a toll. Having to deal with Kerry McLear would have added to the cost. She wasn't sad to have had a free Sunday. “Okay, it wasn't the worst thing that could happen to me.” Pati thought for a second. “What is, then?”

“Well, that depends on how we resolve the case filed by the state against you.”

“The detectives said they would not hold me after they searched my house.”

“You weren't exactly a flight risk, Pati,” Nancy said. She sat back in her chair. “The state hasn't assigned a prosecutor because they're not as agile as the McLear lawyers. I expect sometime tomorrow we'll find out who gets your case. However, despite their glacial pace, I was able to obtain the investigator's records and recommendations.”

“They're finished?”

“The detectives are. They've documented that the physical evidence matches perfectly with your statements. They also found it odd there were no recordings of the event.”

“Richard would not have recorders in the house, even for security. At least not during regular days. If we had people over, he'd do it. It just wasn't a normal thing for us.”

“They did not allege it was an action on your part, so it's not a problem we need to deal with. The case, from what I can see, will not be about what

happened.”

“Okay.”

“It’ll be about what happens to you.”

“Oh.”

“Yes, and unfortunately, the detectives recommended a human-slaughter charge.”

Pati’s stomach fell. “That doesn’t sound good.”

“It’s not a murder charge, but you’re right, it’s not good. Let me ask you a question, did you have your eye looked at?”

“No, I haven’t had problems with my vision.”

“That’s not what I meant. In your statement to the detectives at the station, you said Richard McLear struck you across the face, using the back of his right hand. That contact with your orbital bone caused you to lose your temper and strike back. Did anyone check for a bruise on you?”

Pati reached up to her eye. She felt a slight amount of pain pushing where Richard struck her. “I didn’t think to have it checked.”

“Do you still feel some pain?”

“It’s slight.”

“There’s a physician I know nearby who we’ll visit as soon as we’re done here. I know the detectives took your word for it. However, if the state assigns one of their better attorneys, they’ll call into question whether or not Richard McLear struck you.”

“Why would they do that?”

“To weaken your defense. Make us happy to accept a human-slaughter charge because it’s possible your action was premeditated, and there’s no evidence to prove otherwise.”

“Other than my bruise.”

“Correct, and if you’re still feeling pain, he must have hit you good.”

Pati shrugged. “Not that bad, he just hit a soft spot and I felt more pain than normal. If he’d hit my cheek, well, I wouldn’t have hit him as I did. Maybe just pushed him over like I’d done before, making sure he didn’t go toward that stupid pillar in the house.”

“That’s another issue.”

“Me being an Earth-born.”

“Yes, fortunately, it’s not a law that Earth-borns have to receive greater punishments for physical violence here. It’s just implied that you have to be more careful when dealing with your anger than secgens.”

“Yeah, well, how many times do I have to get hit before I respond?” Pati asked.

“Which is a point I’ll make in the negotiations. There’s no reason why we should go to trial since all the evidence demonstrates self-defense during a fight. If the state’s attorney tries to impose a severe sentence, we’ll prevail.”

“What happens to me? I mean, what kind of sentence do you think I’ll wind up serving?”

Nancy thought for a second. “I don’t like to predict, but I think we can get the charges dropped in exchange for you leaving Karakorum and returning to Earth.”

Pati tried to see the negatives in her proposal. “That’s it?”

“That’s just the result of the criminal charges. There will be additional negotiations with the McLears.”

“I thought you said I’m cut off after we resolve my legal issues.”

“If the charges are dropped, that makes you Richard McLear’s widow and legal heir. Then, you’ll have a new set of legal issues to deal with, which are better than the criminal ones. It won’t be about them supporting you. It’ll be about how much of that company you own.”

Pati had to wrap her brain around the revelation. Part owner of McLear Industries, one of the wealthiest and most powerful companies in the solar system. “That’s nice,” she said, “except I’d rather get back to Earth.”

“You’ll be on your way back to Earth while I handle the negotiations. After we finish with the criminal charges, we can sit down and discuss what you want from a settlement.” Nancy sat forward and looked Pati in the eyes. “Although I have to advise you now if you want half of that corporation, it will take a very long time.”

“No, nothing like that,” Pati said. “I just want to get home and maybe have enough to live on for a while.”

“I think we can exceed your expectations, then,” Nancy said. She sat back again. “Where are you from on Earth?”

“It’s an island in Western Europe called Ireland. We’re about as far west as you can get there, a place called Dingle.”

“I’ve heard of Ireland, that’s about it, though. What’s it like?”

“We live on the ocean.”

“Oh, you have beaches there?”

“Not like the ones you’re thinking of. The weather isn’t always so warm, and it’s cloudy like here on Titan. My family has a fishing boat, and we catch fish the ancient ways instead of manufacturing food from raw materials.”

“Wow, how was it?”

“It’s nasty doing the work, although the fish tastes better to me, even though I know most people can’t tell the difference. My father has been using robots the

last few years because none of my brothers or sister wants to take on the family business.”

“That’s too bad.”

“Well, as I said, it’s nasty work. Deal with odors that you never have up here. Everywhere I go here seems so clean.”

“That’s what I’m used to.”

“Oh, so what’s your, ah, where you from?”

“I grew up in Karakorum. My parents emigrated from Earth’s moon, and they got jobs drilling in the oil fields.”

“Drilling, I thought—” Pati said.

“No, they just called it that because it’s like drilling for oil on Earth. They’d ride out on helicopters and assist ships that landed to fill up with the methane and ethane liquids. The locals here called it oil, because, well, it’s close to the same thing. At least that’s what my parents told me. They also told me I would not be doing the same work when I grew up. My education was one of their priorities in life.”

“Is that why you became a lawyer, because they wanted you to?”

“They wanted me to go into chemistry. When I told them I was interested in law, they loved it, until they found out the expense. God love them, though, they took it in stride and helped me finish early.”

“Finished early,” Pati said, “that’s impressive. How old are you now, if you don’t mind me asking?”

Nancy smiled. “Thirty-five.”

“You look younger than me, and I’m twenty-four.” Pati held up her hand to stop Nancy from commenting. “I know, it’s the low gravity. All of you look so young I can’t ever tell how old you are.”

“It’s a little different, I’m sure,” Nancy said. She had a timepiece on her left wrist, which she checked. “I think my physician friend arrives at his office in a few minutes. Let’s walk over and see him before he can take any patients. Then we can come back and finish our work.”

“Okay,” Pati said and stood up. She followed Nancy out of her office door and into the hallway. She couldn’t help feeling confident about her future.



* * *

Pati heard the front doorbell ring. It was late in the afternoon, and she'd spent most of the day working with Nancy Tate. She'd gone home when they were finished, heading straight to the kitchen to get a meal after arriving. The bell rang before she made it to the dining room.

She returned to the door and activated the exterior camera. A small screen displayed the visitor: a short lady, not so young, and not yet middle age.

"Can I help you?" Pati asked, through the intercommunications circuit.

"Yes," came the reply. "I'm Connie Pearson, with the Titan News Network. I am looking for Pati McLearn. Would you be her?"

Unsure of what to say, while not worried either, she responded. "Yes, that's me."

"Do you have a few minutes to answer some questions?"

"I was getting ready to eat."

"I could come back in an hour."

"I'm not sure I'll be done eating."

"Two hours, then."

Pati didn't want to see her then, either. However, she decided it would be better to let her in now, just to see what she wanted. Pati opened the door manually and noticed the lady was shorter than she was. "Yes, I'm Pati McLearn."

"I'm Connie Pearson. Can I come in?"

"Sure, this way." Pati led her into the great room toward a chair for them to sit on.

Connie stopped along the way. "This is where Richard McLearn died."

Pati didn't think her statement was tactful, especially when the widow was in the room. "Yes, he died here." Pati walked back to her instead of offering her a seat. "I'm not sure I can speak about this without consulting my attorney."

"Who's your attorney?"

"Nancy Tate."

"She's been around a while, even before I got here."

"You're from Earth," Pati guessed. She was a decimeter shorter than Pati, and Pati decided she could not have grown that short in low gravity. She also had medium-brown hair, pulled back in a business look, and wore simple casual blue slacks and a matching shirt with a subdued pattern. Not quite business dress at Karakorum, yet not down to the casual level either.

"Yes, I'm from the east coast of North America."

"I'm from Ireland in West Europe."

"I know, your wedding was big news here on Titan, and I reviewed your bio back then. And we usually know what the McLeans are doing, since their actions can affect everyone on Titan."

“I see.”

“So, it’s really important I get to talk to you, hear what happened from your mouth, because I can’t always trust city hall to give me the correct story.”

“There’s not much to tell, at least nothing I didn’t tell the medical technicians. There has to be a public record you have access to.”

“Then, you’re saying you killed Richard McLear in self-defense.”

Pati wouldn’t be caught. “No, just that I don’t think I can help you with any new information. Especially since I haven’t talked to my lawyer about it.”

Connie smiled. “How long before you can do that?”

“I’ll talk to her tomorrow, or at least try to contact her.”

“I’ve been told you’ll be tried for Richard McLear’s death, is this true?”

Pati shook her head. “I can’t say one way or the other.” Nancy was still waiting on the word from the state attorney’s office on what they planned to do. She said they moved at a glacial pace, so it wasn’t concerning that when they finished for the day, she’d not been notified of any action on their part.

“They don’t plan to try you.”

“No, I just don’t know yet, so you’ll need to speak with the prosecutors if they’ve made that decision by now.”

Connie nodded. “I’ll talk with them tomorrow. They’re not usually working this late, at least most of them. I’d think if you have Jack Reagan assigned to the case, he’d have spoken to your lawyer by now.”

“Who?”

“One of the assistant prosecutors. He should be the chief prosecutor in that office soon, but that won’t be your concern.” Connie pulled out a handheld and reviewed the screen. She put it back. “Okay, would you mind if I contact you tomorrow, and maybe we can meet in the afternoon?”

“I guess so, but I can’t promise we’ll be able to meet. As I said, I want to clear it with Nancy Tate before I give you a statement.”

“Understood, thanks for your time.” Connie stepped to the door and waited for Pati to let her out.

Pati did not hesitate to comply, and she leaned against the door after she shut it manually. “I really can’t wait to get back to Earth,” she said.

2 Cutting a Deal

Pati rarely entered Richard's office. Even though he spent most of his time working on Picus, taking the shuttle from their private dock up and back every day, it was his space. Today, however, the space could be useful for Pati.

The room was small, maybe three meters square and just over two meters tall. High enough for a secgen to stand comfortably. It had a desk facing a large viewscreen, with two monitors on the desk. A few pictures were attached to the walls that showed Pati in happier times.

It had been a stormy six months since the beginning of the year. Whatever happened to change Richard, happened around that time. Before then, he was the perfect definition of a prince. She shook her head, wondering how it could have all gone so wrong.

She remembered how her old boyfriend, Jerry, decided he wanted to go in a different direction with his life. Given that today he still lived in her hometown of Dingle, Ireland, he didn't change his direction too much. To a twenty-one-year-old girl, though, the world had just ended.

It surprisingly didn't, and a week later, she changed her profile to "available." Pati received numerous inquiries the next week, most of whom should not have made it through the filters. When she got to Richard's, he seemed like a good guy.

He only listed his last name, age, and a few interests with the required pictures and proof of authenticity. His last name was McLear, without mentioning that he was one of the "McLears."

They exchanged messages the following week. Despite not talking in realtime, she had a better feeling about him than she did with the local guys. Then he said he'd be on Earth's moon in a few weeks and asked if she could meet him. When he didn't hesitate to cover her trip costs, she suspected his last name stood for more than identification. And when they met, there was too much about him to deny he was from that rich and powerful family.

What struck her the most, though, was their chemistry. They spent a day together, and she continually lost herself in their conversation. The day went by like an hour, and on her way back to Earth, she could only think of how just being with him felt. It was so wonderful that she thought his wealth would be a hindrance to their relationship. She wanted to be with him every day, and the day after their date felt like being weaned from pain killers.

The wealth actually facilitated their relationship. He brought her back to the moon for another date before he returned to Titan. It was better than the first, and Pati knew he took the slower ship back just so they could talk in realtime longer. The only misfortune was that when he proposed, she couldn't answer him immediately and hug him as she wanted. She had to be content that if she didn't get the proposal of her dreams, she at least got the guy she dreamed of.

The only problem had been moving to Titan where they'd have the wedding. Richard offered to transport her whole family on a fast cruise to Titan and return them as soon as possible. That would be massively expensive yet pocket change to his family. The one thing they couldn't purchase was the time away, at least six months. Her father couldn't leave the fishing business, nor could the rest leave their jobs for that time. Her mom and sister made it, and it killed her when they had to return. The room they stayed in was across the hall, and Pati cried for an hour there after they returned to Earth.

She got over it and couldn't complain about her new rich and famous lifestyle. The new world was always interesting, even if it was confining. Last year was a wonderful time in her life.

She shook her head and looked back at the wall to the picture of Richard and his family. Pati barely knew his parents. After the wedding, they traveled to Earth's moon and stayed there until their deaths later in the year. It shocked her. Richard, however, seemed less affected. It was maybe a few months after that his moods and actions changed for the worse, and she assumed his parent's deaths were the reasons for his abusiveness. When he didn't change back, she no longer thought about root causes, only about her survival.

The only other family member was his brother, Kerry. He was a few years older and became the primary executive in McLear Industries when his parents left. When she first met Kerry, he seemed cold, and he wasn't much better to Richard. After Richard changed, Pati never saw them together outside of business. When she grew up, she wished her family could be wealthy in a way like the McLears. The downside to such life was all too apparent now.

Pati took a seat at the desk. She activated the large viewscreen and tapped the controls to find Richard's account. It was no longer available. Pati surmised the McLear Industries personnel had erased Richard's information from this control. They were always efficient.

She didn't need his account though; she wanted more information on McLear Industries, since she might be asking for some of that business. She announced that fact to the controls, and an article from Titan News Network appeared from five years ago.

The story began in 2055 with the invention of fusion-drive for space

vehicles. Spacecraft holding dozens of people then traveled to Mars and the moons of Jupiter to land and explore. Settlements were established on Earth's moon and on satellites just outside Earth's atmosphere. Earth supplied these settlements, and the settlements returned valuable materials like Titanium, Helium-3, and stuff you had to make in zero/low gravity.

The McLears owned steel manufacturing factories around the Great Lakes in North America. John McLear was the chief executive, and he sank money into developing a space probe that had nothing to do with making steel. Stockholders voiced their displeasure, but as he had a majority stake in his company, he got what he wanted.

The investment showed no signs of return when they launched in 2075. Within a few years, the probe landed on a picked asteroid and gave it a push. It hadn't moved very far when the probe ran out of propellant, but it was enough. It was then that John McLear revealed his plans. The mission was to move the iron-nickel asteroid, which rivaled a small moon in mass, into a new orbit so it would rendezvous with Saturn in thirty-two years and seven months.

John McLear was ninety-one-years old. His son, Bill, took over after the stockholders revolted. Bill McLear sunk more money into their space program, sending equipment and material to the asteroid on its way to Saturn. He was in his sixties at the time, and in his mid-nineties when the asteroid reached Saturn. He remained in charge of McLear Industries, while his daughter, Jamie McLear, traveled to the asteroid to assume control there. When she arrived, the equipment and personnel were in place, and she had the orbit manipulated so Saturn's moon, Titan, caught the asteroid in its gravitational hold and made it a satellite of the satellite.

That was when the real work began. Jamie McLear held a press conference and announced she had assumed control of McLear Industries. The factories on Earth would be sold, and the new company headquarters would move to the asteroid, which she named "Picus."

The facilities on Picus were zero-gravity steel factories and a shipyard. The asteroid provided iron and nickel, while carbon was available on Titan. The shipyard built space-tankers with the manufactured steel, and the tankers landed on Titan to fill their holds with liquid methane and other organics. Soon after, chemical plants were built on Titan to include the equally valuable ammonia in the shipments.

Carbon and nitrogen were now available to all the settlements outside of Earth, at a fraction of the cost it took to launch from the massive Terran gravity well. Those elements were necessary to supply what were now hundreds of millions of people living outside of Earth for their foodstuff processes. Jamie

McLear quickly cornered that market with her burgeoning space fleet. It took another five years for the money to roll in, but she was the most powerful merchant in the solar system by then.

Pati stopped reading. She'd never met Richard's grandmother; she'd died when he was in his twenties. Pati had heard the stories, though, and a more impressive lady she couldn't imagine. When she retired, she could not return to Earth because gravity treatments for bone loss and other zero-gravity maladies had been developed too late in her life. She lived the rest of her hundred plus years on Picus. When she died, Richard's father sent her body back to Earth.

Pati resumed her research. In time, her body would also go back to Earth. Except, Pati would still be living in it.



* * *

They'd slept in separate rooms for most of the last year. The first time he hit her, she kept her temper and told him to get out. He must have had remorse that time because he walked out of the bedroom and took his shuttle up to Picus.

Pati didn't think he suffered, since the home the McLears lived in on Picus dwarfed this place. When he came home the next day, he apologized. He never apologized again after that.

It'd been a long Monday for Pati. After feeding herself, she walked upstairs to her bedroom. She used the low-gravity toilet, which was nowhere near as difficult as zero-gravity toilets, and dressed for bed.

Her bedroom was done in bright colors, greens and oranges primarily. It reminded her of home. The emperor-size bed took up the center of the room, with another two meters around each side. She had a dressing table, which she only used when she needed to dress up.

"Turn down the bed," she said.

The blankets were folded down by machinery under the mattress. Dressed in a brown nightshirt, she got in and pulled a single sheet over her body. The blankets were her favorite wool, except tonight she felt warm and needed to dissipate some heat from her body.

"Low lights," she said. The lighting diminished to a level she had preset long ago.

It wasn't long, and she could tell she would be asleep. Her thoughts drifted

and made less sense. She rolled on to her left side and faced the wall. Someone was there.

Except, she wasn't here, or she wasn't in her bedroom anymore. She stood, downstairs in the great room, and Richard stood facing her, out of reach.

Pati thought nothing of seeing Richard. She was married to him, and he lived in this house too. Except, he was all gray, and his clothes were black. What did that mean? He stood in front of her, not moving. She wanted to walk to him, and yet, could not. She stayed in her position, somewhere in the great room.

"You should not have hit me," he said.

She didn't know what he meant, although she had a slight memory of a fight. Still, she couldn't remember what happened, and why he would say that.

"You would have been able to join us," Richard added. "Except, now, you've ruined everything."

Pati wanted to tell him she didn't care what he wanted. She stayed silent as if her body was detached from her mind. Then she saw herself standing next to Richard.

She wore all black, just like Richard. And she looked so short next to him, like all their pictures together. Unlike him, her hair was black and straight to her shoulders. Her cheekbones betrayed a Nordic ancestry that invaded Western Ireland many hundreds of years ago. Her frame seemed athletic, even though she never played sports. Her reflection did not move or show expression.

"We will exact payment for your intrusion," Richard said. He put his hand on her shoulder, and she collapsed. Pati saw herself on the ground, next to a pillar and bleeding gray blood from her head.

She felt as if about to lose her breath. Pati ran to the door and opened it, seeing the expanse of space, including Saturn, Titan, and Picus. A sun that resembled a large star stood out.

Pati tried to stop, but she fell into a vortex sucking her down. She fought against the current without result. Around she went. She finally focused on the center of the vortex and saw a golden-red glow.

Her eyes opened, and she saw the ceiling of her bedroom. The time projected showed she'd been asleep less than forty-five minutes.

"Damn," she said. Pati wanted to go back to sleep, except her breathing had yet to slow, and sweat filled her nightshirt. She pushed down the sheets and sat up. Her eyes adjusted to the low light, and she could see everything that was there and nothing that wasn't supposed to be there. The colors were gone in the dim light, and it reminded her of the dream.

"Turn the lights up halfway," she said. The lights responded, and she could see colors in her room again. Pati walked to the dressing table, then stared in the

mirror.

She didn't look different from the corpse she'd seen in the dream. What did it mean to see yourself dead in a dream? Was this her brain chastising her for not feeling more pain at Richard's death?

Pati felt the bruise on her right eye that hadn't yet healed. He hit her, and she hit him back. The steel pillar killed him, not her. She would do it differently if she had the chance; she just couldn't feel hatred for herself for what happened. Richard took her from her family and became abusive when the honeymoon period of their life had ended. She'd lost her love for him months ago. There was nothing missing in her life with him gone. Maybe because he had already left months before she punched him.



* * *

Pati arrived at Nancy's office at 9 a.m. on Wednesday. This was the earliest Nancy could get on the prosecuting attorney's calendar for a settlement conference. They took Pati's groundcar to the municipal buildings just past Grand Center. It was a large, metallic building with several smaller buildings attached. Even less extravagant in design than Nancy's building, the construction crews had built identical floors. Like Nancy's building, they walked in through the center, past a constable working security for the public facility.

Nancy didn't ask for directions. She marched to the rear set of elevators. She activated the elevator, and the next car took them to the top floor.

"You know where you're going?" Pati asked.

"All too well," Nancy replied.

They turned right off the elevator and proceeded down the hallway. At least eight doors lined each side, and Nancy continued to the door at the end. She stopped.

"Nancy Tate and client," she said.

The door slid open to the right. Nancy led Pati into a normal if well-furnished reception area. A young lady with blond hair like Nancy's sat to their front, wearing a headset for communications.

"We've an appointment with Gavin Keebler," Nancy said to her.

The receptionist nodded and held up a finger for patience. She did not match Nancy's eye contact.

“Yes, I’ll take a message,” the receptionist said, “thank you, goodbye.” The receptionist looked at Nancy. “Ms. Tate?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know where his office is?”

“Been there a few times, so you need not get up.”

The receptionist nodded again, returning to the work on her desk. Nancy walked to the left and down a short hallway. She stopped on the first door to their left and knocked. The door opened.

Nancy strode in. Pati followed.

“Thanks for meeting on such short notice,” a man sitting at his desk said.

The office was longer than wide, and not much more room than could seat the occupant and two visitors. The seating matched the floorplan assessment, and Nancy took one of the two chairs across from the man.

“Hello, Gavin,” Nancy said to him while extending her hand across the desk.

He stood and shook her hand. “Thanks for being here on such short notice.”

Pati noticed he was serious about the short notice statement. She also noticed he was slightly taller than her and much older. He had the same European black hair and skin, with a bit more weight. She would have guessed him as an Earth-born, except he had no wrinkles in his face. Maybe he was a secgen who didn’t grow as tall as most. She could imagine how tiny he’d be on Earth.

“And this is Ms. McLear,” Gavin said. He went to shake her hand, which Pati reciprocated.

“Pati, this is Gavin Keebler, the state’s attorney for your case,” Nancy said.

“Please to meet you,” Pati said. Pati went to sit in the chair next to Nancy.

“No, please, let’s not discuss your case in here,” Gavin said. “Let’s go to the conference room.” He walked around his desk, led them out of the door, across the hallway, and through the door opposite his.

The conference room was blander than Gavin’s office. A metallic table, that had twelve, black, fabric-covered chairs surrounding. A large viewscreen covered the wall to the left, and a taller chair sat at the head of the table.

Gavin walked to the head chair and sat down. Nancy took the chair on his right and beckoned Pati to sit next to her. There was a smaller viewscreen before each seat in the table. Nancy didn’t touch hers, and Pati wasn’t sure what she’d find if she touched hers. Gavin immediately tapped his, stared at it for a few moments, and looked to Nancy. “Shall I go through the charges?”

“I know what the state has in mind, so condense it for my client.”

Gavin shrugged. “Okay, in simple talk, we’re looking at human slaughter, first degree.”

“Which is a bit overkill,” Nancy said.

“Except, she’s an Earth-born, and they have an added responsibility when physical violence is an issue.”

“Without a law to support it. You can’t make that a condition of your charges.” Nancy leaned back in her chair. “I rarely do this, but I’ll start with a proposal. If the state drops the charges, my client will return to Earth on the first ship out of here. It won’t have to be the first ship that gets her back to Earth, either. Whichever one leaves next, she’ll be on it.”

Pati loved the sound of it. Fortunately, through her research yesterday, she knew the next ship would have her home in about a year. The one after that would take five years. And four months from now, there was a fast ship that would get her home in three months. That would have her there the quickest, although she didn’t want to go into debt paying that fare. The first ship would have her home six months later, and she could live with that.

Gavin sat back. “I would never get that past the provost,” he said.

“She hasn’t retired yet?” Nancy said. “I thought she was done with that job.”

“She scheduled her retirement two months from now. Between now and then, I don’t think she wants a significant case to deal with.”

“Fine, then my client will do community service before she leaves.”

“It’s not that easy. Since one of the McLears is dead, we have to worry about how they may take it.”

“The law is supposed to be blind to the wealth and social status of the citizens,” Nancy said. “You cannot make decisions on that basis.”

“And, I am not,” Gavin replied. “Except, if we’re choosing a sentence, I have to ensure I satisfy all interested parties to the extent possible. Even if the deceased wasn’t a McLear, the next-of-kin must be considered.”

“The feelings of the next-of-kin do not trump the rights of the accused.”

“That’s true, however, my bosses and I don’t fare well when the next-kin’s feelings are neglected. Sometimes it’s better to try the case and let the Judge and Jury decide.”

“Judge and jury?” Pati asked. She’d seen two courthouses in Karakorum, one near here, and another next to the spaceport. She’d never heard of any judges or juries in the media, let alone spoken of as a singular.

“Pati, I can explain. It’s a computer that does justice calculations. In small human settlements, it can be impossible to find enough people who have no relations to an accused or accuser. We consider these computers an acceptable alternative, and most settlements off of Earth use them.”

“Oh.”

“I imagine your client is not familiar with our Long-Term Repatriation program, either.”

Pati couldn't see Nancy's face, because she'd turned to see Mr. Keebler when he addressed her. Pati could see she had tightened up and didn't respond immediately.

"I didn't feel the need, because if we go before the JJ, she'll walk away free since the charges you bring are unsustainable."

"May I, then?"

Nancy paused once more. "Feel free. It's not my breath being wasted."

Gavin almost sneered, then he turned his attention to Pati. "Ms. McLear, Karakorum has never had the facilities for housing offenders sentenced to multi-year incarcerations. So, similar to using a JJ for judgments and sentence determinations, we adopted the plan of Long-Term Repatriation for those people." He paused.

"Okay," Pati said.

"The Long-Term Repatriation involves sending offenders back to Earth to complete their sentences. Most shipping does not have facilities to house offenders, so special spacecraft have been manufactured to transport them. This allows the offender to serve most of their service aboard the craft while being transported."

"The Long and Short Boats we sometimes call them," Nancy said.

Pati had only briefly heard those terms in conversations on Titan. She never asked for clarification because they used the terms in passing, and the people using quickly went on to other subjects. Somehow, she believed, finding the definitions before today would have been in her best interest.

"Correct, that's the given name of the craft. One is designed for a fifteen-year trip back to Earth. The other is designed for a thirty-year trip. Karakorum has built a judicial building next to the spaceport that docks with these ships. We have two of each parked at Karakorum, and unfortunately, five are in use traveling back to Earth."

"Who is that?" Pati asked.

"We have three—"

"You don't need to go into any details for my client," Nancy interrupted.

"She asked the question, counselor."

"It's okay, Nancy," Pati said.

Nancy shook her head.

Gavin waited a second and then continued. "We have three people on the thirty-year ships and have been gone eight, fourteen, and twenty-three years, respectively. There are two on the fifteen-year ships, six and thirteen years for them. They travel individually, without physical human contact for that time. They're capable of interacting electronically with most people and have access

to entertainment. That might end when they get to Earth and finish the rest of their sentence. Although, they'll no longer be alone on a ship."

Pati's next question was to be what those people did to receive such harsh conditions. She then decided she might not want to know. Mr. Keebler seemed to wait for her to ask that question. Pati let him wait.

"I will not say that's a possibility in your case, Ms. McLear. What I will say is if we go to trial, the charges the state has laid out can, theoretically, result in a Long-Term Repatriation."

"Are you done now?" Nancy asked.

"Certainly. What would you like to add, Ms. Tate?"

"I'd say it's your turn to suggest what my client might do since I've already given a reasonable offer."

"I won't get into our differing definitions of the term, 'reasonable.' I'll just tell you what I'm thinking, and that's a year working a municipal ice-miner with monthly turnarounds."

"Nonsense," Nancy said.

"What's the ice-miner?" Pati asked.

"Karakorum has small cargo ships dedicated to flying out to the ring and pulling in ice for the city's water. There are four ships, and only two have dedicated personnel. The other two are worked by citizens, basically an enhanced community service, but you're out for a whole month before you can return, and you only get a day off before you're back mining again."

Pati didn't say, "That sucks," which was her first impression. Although, if city workers do it, how bad could it be?

Nancy returned her attention to Mr. Keebler. "A month of actual community service and return to Earth for ten years." Nancy pointed her thumb at Pati. "This lady could own part of McLear Industries in the near future. You really want to play hardball with her now, when she could have that much power?"

Mr. Keebler smiled. "I agree, that might be the case, except I'll probably be retired before that happens." He looked at Pati and back to Nancy. "Six months on the ice-mining ship."

Nancy turned to Pati. "Do you know when the next ship back to Earth arrives?"

"Two months, and it's on a bi-yearly round trip."

"Gavin, she'll do two months community service, with restrictions from Karakorum for three years. One of my associates or I will negotiate with the McLear lawyers on her behalf, and we might need her to return."

"Then you can do the paperwork to get an exemption," he said. He turned to Pati. "Ms. McLear, how long till the next ship back to Earth, after the one you

just specified?”

“There’s a five-year ship the next month which I’m not interested in. Four months from now is a fast ship which is too expensive. It does get back to Earth sooner than the bi-yearly ship.”

“Ah,” he said. He seemed to think for a second and then shook his head. “I can’t believe I’m doing this, and there might be hell to pay for even trying, but...” He took a deep breath. “I’ll go four months on the ice-miner, and then have Ms. McLear booked on the fast ship as an undesirable, which means she’ll have basic accommodations at cost. That should bridge the differences in expense.” He stared at Pati for a moment. “And, since you’re an Earth-born, we can make you commander of the ice-mining ship, which will cut a month off your sentence if all goes well.”

The primary dread Pati had coming to the state attorney’s office, was that they’d keep her on Titan for the next few years. In no way, shape, or form did she expect to learn she could be on a ship alone traveling back to Earth over fifteen or thirty years. Nancy’s confidence aside, the possibility of that sentence made Pati’s heart stop. Her heart didn’t start again until he talked about a year’s work on the ice-miners, which was better than the worst case she’d imagined when she walked into the building.

Nancy shook her head again and rose from her chair. “You know, Gavin, I don’t think your bosses want this to go to trial. So, I feel comfortable rejecting your offers.”

“Don’t believe that,” he said. “If Ms. McLear walks free, which is not much different from your proposals, then they’ll have hell to pay, which will come down on me next. I will try this case if necessary.”

“No, sorry, I just don’t see it,” Nancy said, after standing and listening to Gavin. “Come on, Pati.”

“Nancy, wait,” Pati said.

Nancy stopped and sat back down. “Gavin, will you please excuse us?”

“Certainly, how long should I wait?”

“Give us five minutes and check. I’ll tell you then if we need more time.”

“Okay,” he said and walked out of the room.

“What do you want to discuss?” Nancy asked after the door shut.

“I’m good with the three months on the ice-miner,” Pati said.

“Pati, you don’t know what working on those ships is like.”

“It can’t be worse than working on my father’s fishing boat. It’s probably far easier.”

“Yeah, but the people on those ice-miners are criminals.”

“Secgen criminals, correct.”

Nancy paused. “That doesn’t mean they’re not dangerous,” she said.

“Apparently, so am I, that’s why we’re here, right?”

“Pati, don’t be flippant about your situation.”

“Okay, you’re right. Just know I won’t take a chance on that long-term thing he said. If people here, who grew up in low gravity, can do a job, I should not have a problem. If you can get more from him, please do so. Otherwise, I’m good with the three months.”

Nancy took a deep breath. “Okay, just let me do some research first. I’ll tell him we’re seriously considering his offer and will get back to him by the end of the day with an answer. He should be good with that, and I’ve never known him to play games when an easy solution is put in front of him.” Nancy stood up. “Let’s go tell him.”



* * *

Pati stood outside the Karakorum Spaceport. She had parked her groundcar in the lot by the south train terminus and Nancy was to meet her before they walked in.

The area was much like the rest of Karakorum that sat inside a pressure hull protecting people from the cold and oxygen-deficient Titan atmosphere. The ceiling, over a hundred meters above the ground, portrayed a daytime sky on Earth. It would change to night sometime later, following the position of a thirty-eight-latitude location. Pati was used to a higher latitude on Earth, but she didn’t split hairs over that inconvenience.

The spaceport exterior used blue coatings and was bare of the windows she saw on the other administrative buildings at Karakorum. A notable exception was the judicial building that had been added on. The architect must not have cared to transition seamlessly between the two. Cheap construction or not, what mattered to her was she didn’t have to visit that judicial building and face the possibility of a Long-Term Repatriation sentence. Gavin Keebler made that point as a negotiation ploy, and Pati had to admit it affected her enough to settle.

Nancy got Pati the three-month deal, with the added caveat that all charges would be expunged from her record after she completed her sentence. This would remove any barriers to negotiating a settlement with Kerry McLear. Also, the fast cruise back to Earth was available at a reduced cost, a price she could

pay with the minimal funds she had immediately available.

Pati heard a trolley approach the south terminus station. The red, two-car train clanged artificially as it approached, and parked next to a platform between the two sets of rails. Pati couldn't see the people exit the train, but she saw several people leaving the platform. Nancy was in that group and walked up to Pati.

"You ready to go?" Nancy asked.

"Yes, I already sent them the personal items I want to have with me. The uniforms they sent me fit, so I can't think of anything else," Pati said.

"Okay, let's go," Nancy said and led her to the double doors of the spaceport entrance. The doors slid open, and other passengers walked out while they entered. They crossed into a terminal, coated blue like the exterior. Maybe ten meters away was a line of transportation desks used to process passengers and their baggage. Three workers were helping about twelve people cued up to move onto their transports.

"They're going to Picus to work this morning," Nancy said.

Pati nodded. With her private space dock on the McLearn house, she never needed to come here after arriving the first time to meet Richard. She stopped walking. That had been a wonderful time when she met him here in this room.

She had another bad dream last night. The guilt and remorse hit her after that first nightmare and had increased since then. Was it something to do with the legal negotiations that instigated the remorse, or was it inevitable? She had eaten little in the last few days, which meant the feelings were bothering her. Having to serve on this ice-mining ship almost felt like a relief.

Nancy prodded her to keep moving. She led her through a door to the right, which also slid open on their approach. They entered the massive hangar for all flights leaving Karakorum.

"I've been in covered football stadiums smaller than this," Pati said.

"View the scenery as we're walking. I have to be back for a meeting in an hour."

"You'll take the groundcar back?" Pati asked.

"I appreciate you letting me use it today. I'll return it to your garage so you can have it when you come back in a month."

"Then I can take the trolley to my house," Pati said. "I'll have to get used to being poor, I guess." Pati meant it as a fact, and a joke. Nancy kept walking.

The door they walked through took them around passenger processing, and directly to the spacecraft. They walked along a designated pathway that led to the support road for the docks. The spacecraft parked nearest to the terminal were small landers meant to travel between Picus and Titan. Next, she saw the

shuttles that traveled to the other moons of Saturn. Then they approached the mining ships like the one Pati would work from. Almost the size of a small building, they were still not the largest ships in this hangar.

Nancy did not plan on providing a tour, and she stopped at the first ship. Maintenance workers exited through a person-size hatch, leaving the door open behind them. Nancy turned to Pati.

“This is mining ship 37-C,” she said. “It’ll be your home for the next three months.”

The black ship towered over them, and she could see at least half the ship was below their feet. She had reviewed the specs and knew it to be fifteen meters in diameter and thirty meters tall. What she could see was the cylindrical shape of the cargo holds topped with a squatted cone holding the command center: her office for the next three months.

The engines were at the bottom, and they weren’t huge or powerful. This was not meant to be a fast ship. It picked up water and came back using some of that water as a propellant. Robots and computers did most of the work; the crew was only necessary for maintenance and immediate decisions. Her research let her know those tasks alone would keep her, and her crew, very busy.

“You ready for this?” Nancy asked.

“I better be,” Pati replied.

“You know that crew you have. I’ve seen their records.”

“I have, too. They’re nothing I can’t handle. They’re not murderers or anything.”

Nancy shook her head. “Yeah, but you have to admit, Bruno Redden can get violent. That’s why he’s here.”

“A secgen, and he’s not much bigger than Richard.” Pati regretted saying that. If she could go back and do it all over, she’d walked out of the house after Richard hit her the first time and find a constable to arrest him. Or, she could have just pushed him over, away from the steel pillar so he wouldn’t get hurt. Or...

“And I researched more about those twins. You’ll need to watch your back with those two.”

“I will. If they don’t do their jobs properly, I’ll report them, and they’ll be facing a trip back to Earth on separate ships.”

“Well, that’s true, you have a big stick to hold over their heads if they don’t act right.”

“And everything is on record. I am going to have to get used to undressing in front of the cameras, though.”

Nancy smiled. “It sounds like you’ve prepared for this mission and can

protect yourself.”

“I haven’t always been the rich girl. I had brothers who could get very physical.”

“And you had to learn to get physical with them?”

“No, it just came naturally. Never had a problem jumping in and taking them on. Sometimes I came out the worst, most times I gave better than I got.”

Nancy shrugged. “All right, then. You need anything else from me?”

“No, I’ll keep you updated, though.”

“Please do. I’ll do the same with respect to your case with McLearn Industries.”

“Absolutely. I can pay you better after we settle with them.”

“Just worry about getting through the next three months, Pati.”

“Okay, I’ll see you then.”

“Right, see ya,” Nancy said and turned to walk away. Pati watched till she was next to the landers, and then turned herself toward the mining ship.

She stepped through the hatch and entered a short hallway that led to a circular common room. There were personnel rooms around the circumference and another hatch across from her. Three men stood in front of that closed hatch. She had read their bios and knew them on sight.

The tall one was Bruno Redden. Born on Karakorum, his family had been on Titan almost from the start. They were drillers like Nancy’s parents; it was a good trade, and they made good money from it. Bruno was twenty-eight, unmarried, like most young men at Karakorum, and enjoyed frequenting the social establishments.

Those same social establishments had been his downfall. He liked to bully people after having his drinks, and the owners didn’t like him doing that to their other customers. The conflicts ended in violence four times, and each time the property owners got a pound of flesh from Bruno. He’d worked ice-miners before and was on figurative thin ice during this trip. If Pati didn’t endorse his work three months from now, he could face years of solitude on the way back to Earth’s moon, where they imprisoned the secgens who could not live on Earth.

The two shorter men were Jeff and Jake Bocelli. They were both born in Karakorum, their parents having emigrated from the Argentinian region of South America. Unfortunately, their parents died when the twins were only ten years old, and the state raised them after that. The state wasn’t up to the challenge of developing young men, and the pair accumulated a long history of minor offenses that led to major ones as they assumed adulthood. Unlike Bruno, their violent offenses were subtle and harder to prove. She would have to keep an eye on them.

She studied the trio's facial expressions and could feel their disdain. She would have to change that.

"I already know who you are," she said. "So, let me introduce myself. My name is Pati Lynch, and I lived all my life on Earth."

The disdain changed to fear.

3 The Next Murder

Pati didn't leave the bridge much during the workday. Or during much of the work night either. When she told Nancy that she'd worked her father's fishing boat as a kid and that ice-mining couldn't be any harder, she hadn't understood there were different kinds of hard. Even though the ship and the machinery did most of the work, getting the humans to do their share was more difficult than talking the fish into giving up before being caught. And, she never had to worry about the fish trying to kill her when she wasn't looking.

Pati sat at her control station on the bridge. The bridge was circular with various shades of white, five meters in diameter, and with four workstations against the wall spaced ninety degrees from each other; she did most of her work here. An exit ladder pierced the center of the deck down to their living space.

At the moment, only Bruno and she were working. The Bocelli twins were in their cabins sleeping or plotting to kill her and take over. From her work station, she could bring up on-screen what their heart and breathing rates were and compare them to their sleeping baseline. The twins hadn't learned to mimic those signals to her, at least not yet.

The twins were amazingly intelligent, and one reason she didn't sleep much, or well, when she had the chance. This was their third time sentenced to ice-mining, and they were somehow always assigned to the same ship. Pati would suggest in her reports they be separated if sentenced again, though if they ran afoul of the law one more time, they'd probably be repatriated on separate ships.

The monthly reports she filed were one of the few weapons she had. The crew understood their sentences could be extended if she didn't rate them highly in cooperation and behavior. Not a fact she held over their heads, just yet, and she hoped she wouldn't have too, but useful just the same.

"Hey, boss-lady, we have a load of water up ahead," Bruno said to her from his workstation across the bridge.

Pati stood up and walked over to Bruno. On this ship, she and the crew wore shoes that magnetically held them secured to the deck. It wasn't the same as one-sixth gravity, just enough to keep them from floating around the ship. The green jumpsuit uniforms they wore also had some ferrous material that could be activated and draw them to the floor if they were floating in the air and could not reach a handhold. She stood behind Bruno and stared at his video screen. "Go ahead and land," she said.

“Engaging,” he replied.

“And shut up with the boss lady comments,” she said. “You’re required to show respect to the mission commander and talking to me like that doesn’t achieve that.”

“Yeah, sure, whatever you want.”

Pati took a few steps back, watching Bruno and his screen. He tapped the controls, and she felt the gentle movement of the ship accelerating. After two minutes, according to the time display on Bruno’s screen, the ship decelerated to match the iceberg’s position.

“Go ahead and land,” Pati said.

“I’ve got this,” he said.

Pati took a deep breath. Dealing with this idiot running his mouth continued to test her patience. She’d have to find other ways of addressing his low-level insubordination, because she didn’t want to use the bad report hammer, just for smarting off. It was also too early in their sentence. If she threw that card now, it might not be available in two months.

Pati went back to her workstation and sat down. Her screen continued to show statistics about the ship and crew, and she changed it to show exterior cameras. They were still approaching the iceberg after deceleration, which seemed odd. “Bruno, check our position,” she said.

The ship lurched down, and the effect bounced Pati from her chair.

“What the hell?!” she screamed.

“The sensors overestimated the distance to the target,” Bruno replied.

Pati rotated in the air and pushed back from the ceiling with her feet. The momentum carried her over to Bruno’s side. She landed on the floor next to him. She could see he had his feet planted while he sat, which kept him secured to the chair.

“What do you mean, it overestimated the distance?” Pati asked. “Those sensors don’t malfunction.”

“Hey, they did it, I mean, I gave it the right orders, so there can be no other explanation for hitting the ice.”

“Check for damage,” she said.

He returned his attention to his work console and tapped the buttons. “Nothing, the force of impact was within the maximum force the landing legs were designed to take.”

“Are you sure?” Pati asked.

Bruno nodded his head. “I’ve never seen the landing legs break or cause any problems.”

“So, now you’re saying the ship doesn’t malfunction.”

Bruno's face turned red. She knew she'd struck a nerve.

"The structure of the ship is different than the control coding. The control coding is why we hit the ice."

Pati shook her head. "I don't see it. We have the same coding on this ship as when we left and we've landed on three icebergs already without incident." She looked Bruno square in the face. "Are you sure you're not the one who screwed up?"

Bruno stood and towered over Pati. "I've had enough of you, lady," he said and swung his open right hand at her face.

Pati expected that. She popped him under the ribcage before his slap could land. It was a punch she studied before taking control of the ship. The move took little force, which was important in zero gravity, where she could not rely on having traction at her feet. Even better was it wouldn't leave a mark. It had the intended effect of knocking the wind out of his lungs, and the look on his face in that instant told her there would also be a psychological effect.

He sat back and tried to catch his breath. "You hit me," he gasped.

"Bruno, you've been on how many of these ice-mining trips? Don't you realize we're being recorded with every breath we take? When we get back, the constables will go through this and see you raised your hand to me, and I had to defend myself. It won't matter what I report, because they have all the information they need to run you out here another month." Pati paused and waited for what she said to get through his thick skull. He was breathing close to normal now, and for once, she had his attention. "Of course, you can balance that negative by having a positive work record."

Bruno took another deep breath, and his face reddened again. He turned from her and focused on his workstation. "The ship is ready to dig for water," he said.

"Then get it started," she said. Pati returned to her workstation and switched the screen to monitor the ice-mining. They'd take in enough water to fill one of the tanks, yet not enough to disfigure the iceberg, which was an environmental requirement. Given that her ship must have looked like a flea on the side of a white dog, she couldn't see the problem if they made ten trips here. However, her sentence was for three months and she would do as told, unlike her crew sometimes.

* * *

* * *

Pati saw the end of the monthly tunnel through bloodshot eyes. She'd worked on the ice-mining ship for two months, and after this load, they'd return to Karakorum for a few days of leave before working their final month. They just needed to load up water from this iceberg, and the ship's tanks would be full.

She stood at her workstation, while Jake sat at his. Jeff attended to his duties down in the maintenance level and, if necessary, Pati could turn the cameras on to watch him at work or just make sure he wasn't up to no good. The twins had been on their best behavior of late, so she didn't worry.

"Pati," Jake said.

"What?"

"We're having difficulties with debris on the landing legs."

"How did you find out?"

"I checked the exterior cameras and told Jeff to go clear it fifteen minutes ago."

"Wait, you authorized an excursion without telling me?" Pati asked. "And he exited the ship without a partner?"

"He's taking a robot with him to help," Jake said. "The robot works in lieu of a partner, according to the regulations."

"Yes, but—"

"I thought you'd rather us show some initiative and get the job done without bothering you," he said. "You know, you've told us that several times."

"Okay, okay," she said. "He's outside already?"

"Yes."

"Then, I'll check on him." Pati changed the display on her screen to the exterior cameras. She could see Jeff in the excursion suit, with a robot about half his height. She couldn't see the debris, though.

"Jeff, this is Pati, come in," she said to the communicator at her workstation.

"Pati, I'm almost done. I'll let you know when in a few minutes," Jeff said.

"Got it," Pati said. She sat back, wishing she could turn in for the night, or day. She hadn't bothered to check the time, although the twins usually worked second shift while Bruno and she took the first. When she took the commander's job, she didn't expect that as a commander for convicts she'd have to work one shift and monitor the other. After two months of occupational insomnia, she would spend her leave time sleeping.

"Pati, Jeff said he needs help," Jake said. "I'm going to suit up, and—"

"No." Pati stood up. "I'll go help him."

"Whatever you say, boss."

Pati had no intention of letting them work outside together without supervision. She stepped over to the open hatch in the center of the bridge and

dove down into the common room using the ladder to guide her. She continued down through another hatch into the maintenance level. The maintenance level kept all the tools and machinery needed to keep the ship running. It also stored their excursion suits, two to a person, in lockers along the wall. She floated over to her locker and opened the metal door.

It took a minute to slide into the excursion suit, which tightened around her green uniform and boots. She carried the helmet to the hatch and donned it. She let the static robot do checks on her suit functions and, after a green light from the robot, she stepped into the airlock. The windowed door slid shut behind her. She waited a few seconds for the air to evacuate and then another green light told her she was ready to exit. She touched the button under the lights to open the exterior hatch.

Pati attached her line to a connecting point next to the door and descended to the iceberg surface. She turned on her light to study minor indentations in the snowy surface, places where a human and robot might have traveled. But she saw no Jeff and no robot.

“Jeff, where did you go?” she said into her helmet communicator. The door shut behind her once she was clear. Pati floated around the landing legs, which fastened the ship to the iceberg. She connected her line to hooks in the legs to keep from floating too far away. While looking for Jeff, she looked for any debris that might have been removed. She found none, nor any sign that debris had been attached.

“Jake, you there?” she asked. She waited for a response and got nothing. “Jake, come in.” Still no response.

Pati didn't wait. She returned to the hatch, collecting her line as she went, and pulled herself back to the top step by the door. The red light to the left was on, showing an airlock full of air. Before she could tap the manual entry button underneath, she felt the ship lurch upward, ready to launch.

The excursion suits had means for separating waste from the human occupant. Sometimes though, the crew would not bother to disrobe and exit the ship for a short while, expecting to be back in the ship before any such emergencies would arise.

The ship's movement, with her on the outside where she might be left to die on the iceberg, caused her to lose her bladder. She gripped her line's connection point and held on, hoping to go with the ship at least. After a few minutes of no movement, she realized the ship wasn't leaving, and she reached over and tapped the code to open the hatch. She watched three minutes tick off on her helmet display, the time it took for the airlock to depressurize to a vacuum: it seemed like thirty minutes. The hatch opened on schedule, and she pulled herself in.

Pati lost no time activating the controls to shut the hatch behind her, pressurize the airlock, and get back into the ship. The maintenance level was as empty as when she came through, so she doffed the excursion suit and removed her jumper to see the damage. The stain was bad enough to return to her cabin and change, which she then did in her underclothes, expecting Jeff and Jake to be there waiting to enjoy the pain their joke had caused her. For their sake, they'd better be somewhere else.

It took her a minute to change her underclothes and into an identical jumper, and a few minutes after that to quietly return to the bridge. She held onto the ladder, looking at the back of Jake, who seemed not to notice she'd returned.

His actions, or lack of, were as big a lie as if he'd sworn he had nothing to do with the ship almost launching. He monitored the cameras that recorded everything on the ship, and the movement of the ship could only be initiated from the bridge. He would know when the airlock was activated, and when any hatches were opened and shut. He could even see her change clothes if he wanted, a fact she long learned to live with.

She'd get her chance, though. Maybe not in a report, and maybe not in a physical manner. They'd pay for this, both of them, before their time was up.



* * *

“Last trip,” Pati said under her breath. She and Bruno had just pulled in a load of water, and the tanks were over half full. They'd identified three more icebergs to land on, and after that, they'd have a full load. Those icebergs were on the way back to Karakorum, back to freedom, and then back to Earth.

She looked up from her console and over to Bruno. He'd learned about controlling his temper in the last three months, at least he did when Pati was around. Whether he'd be a better citizen as a result wasn't her problem. He did what he was told, most of the time, and that was enough for Pati to endorse his parole when they returned. Bruno would not thank her for it, but she didn't expect him to either.

Pati returned her attention to the parameters displayed on her screen. The twins were resting in their rooms, or at least their heartbeats and respiration matched the usual readings when they slept. Pati learned never to trust anything about those two she didn't see with her own eyes.

Doing so caused her to grow a few levels in resourcefulness and ingenuity. The deadly tricks they played forced that growth, and that growth wouldn't have happened to Pati McLear living the good life on Karakorum.

To combat their tricks, at the end of the second month, she stored evidence at Karakorum. Evidence that normally disappeared after one of her near-fatal accidents. Before the last trip out, she showed them how that evidence would be sent straight to the constables should another unfortunate event happen to her. They got the message and had a newfound concern for her wellbeing since any accidents, even if they weren't the cause, would send them on a long trip back to Earth.

"Damn!" Bruno yelled.

Pat swung around. "What is it?"

"Our life support systems just went offline."

"Offline, you mean an electrical issue?"

"I mean we're not getting power to the machinery that makes our air and heat."

"You sure it's not a sensor malfunction?"

"It's not the sensors showing the problem. It's the electrical current going to life support. It's gone down to zero."

"Initiate emergency-retrograde procedures to Titan," she ordered.

"We're twelve hours out and only have a partial load of water," Bruno said.

"And if we run out of air, we won't be getting a full load, either. Do it."

"Engaging," Bruno said. She felt a moment of acceleration toward the floor, and that was it. There would be no rocketing directly back to Titan in this emergency. The best they could accomplish was to change their orbit around Saturn to get there sooner. It should buy them enough time to come up with a plan to stay alive.

"Wake up Jeff and Jake," Pat said.

Bruno used his left hand to tap an on-screen button. "They're on the maintenance floor, looking into the problem."

"I thought they were in their cabin, sleeping."

"Once things started going south with life-support, I hit the alert button."

"That's my call, Bruno," Pati said.

Without turning to face her, Bruno looked up from his console and shrugged his shoulders. "Pati, I don't have time to wait for orders during an emergency."

Pati clenched her fists. She took a step to punch him in the head for insubordination, and then she stopped. This was an emergency; if she clocked him again, he'd go downstairs to his cabin and sulk for a few days. To re-power the life support system, she might need his expert electrical skills, so she had to

have him working. “Fine, Bruno,” she said. “In the future, notify me immediately.”

Bruno didn't reply. He lowered his head and resumed tapping buttons.

Pati returned to her chair and activated the command console. She calculated that without power to the life-support systems, they would survive for eight more hours in the air already generated. That would be plenty of time to rig a secondary source of power to hold them for the return trip to Titan. The twins knew the danger and would work toward that end. Of course, they wouldn't save the whole crew if they didn't have to. She activated her intercom, “Jeff and Jake, I need a status report.”

“This is strange, Pati,” one of the two replied.

“What's wrong down there, Jake?”

“We're trying to find out why life-support power is blocked. It's crazy because each node in the conduit between life-support and the engine shows a full power flux. It's like the life-support systems won't accept the power.”

“You want me to send Bruno down?”

“He'll only get confused,” Jeff said, and she turned for a moment to look at the back of Bruno. His neck phased into a pinkish-red, so he heard the insult. Jeff was right, though. If the problem called for an unusual solution or seemed intractable, Bruno wasn't your man.

“Any other ideas?” Pati asked.

“There's more than one way to skin a cat,” Jeff said.

“Which I'm sure you two had plenty of practice at growing up,” Pati said. She heard the false moans of insult, then added, “Don't use all of your tricks yet. Try for another fifteen minutes, then get your asses up here.”

After a few seconds, Jeff said, “Acknowledged.” Her screen went dark, and then an unusual flash lit it back up. She realized it was a reflection, and she turned.

It was the most beautiful vision she'd experienced since leaving Earth. Like a flame one meter high, it glowed next to the ladder. The yellow reminded her of a sun she no longer experienced. Then she heard that voice.

“Hello, Pati,” the apparition said. If the vision was unmitigated beauty, the voice was dredged from the bowels of Pluto.

“Richard, you're supposed to be dead,” she said. Pati didn't believe in ghosts, so she decided it could be a trick from her crew. She looked at Bruno, obviously scared out of what little wits he possessed, so he wasn't in on it.

“Well, you killed Richard,” the apparition said. “Except Richard agreed to become my host, and while you ended his existence, the people of my species are not so easy to kill.”

Pati didn't respond. What could she say to this—thing? She stared until the apparition continued the conversation. "You see, Pati, my people are the predominant species on Titan, and although we are happy to have you visitors from Earth, we need to have you here on our terms. I was working toward that end when you eliminated Richard, and I must admit, I take offense at disruptions in my plans."

"What do you want?" Pati spat out. The terse reply came out so easy to that voice.

"Oh, I'm sure you're familiar with the phrase, 'to err is human, forgive divine.'"

"Yeah, what of it?"

"Well, those of my species know little about your divinities. What phrases we have are closer to 'an eye for an eye.' So, I'm blocking the energy to your life-support systems. Even though I harbor no hate towards you, I've decided I must kill you."

"What about my crew, are you going to kill them, too?" She didn't lie to herself that she cared about her crew; it was the only straw she had to grab.

"It is regrettable, I agree. I had no other opportunity to eliminate you before you returned to Titan, though."

"Why didn't you do this on our first mining trip to the rings?"

"I had to let the humans punish you for killing Richard. Hopefully, you've learned your lesson, and have been rehabilitated, even if it doesn't matter now." The glowing object faded away.

Damn him, she thought. Until thirty seconds ago, she had no belief in extraterrestrials; except the apparition was definitely the man she killed four months ago. Even if the voice was mimicked, the personality left her no doubt it was her ex-husband. The stupid joke about "to err is human" was too much like Richard.

Even worse, as a human, Richard was very competent. If he said he'd accomplish a task, she knew he'd run through a wall to get it done. If this, thing, had any of Richard in it, she didn't like her chances of getting their life support running again.

Then again, he didn't always succeed. There were multiple means available to the technically proficient to generate air on the ship. Even if Pati was no mechanical genius, Bruno and the twins could do magic when properly motivated. Living to see another day should be sufficient motivation.

"Bitch!" Bruno screamed as he tackled her from behind. Before she could react, he wrapped his left arm around her neck and punched her in the head. "You got us all killed, you bitch," Bruno said. He hit her in the head again.

“Except the ghost won’t kill you. I’ll kill you first.” His left forearm locked around her throat and pulled with more than adequate strength to close her windpipe.

Pati dug fingernails into his forearm and pulled, but his leverage was too much. She gasped for breath and mentally grasped for straws. Even if she threw Bruno off her, would he follow her orders to save his own life?

Pati reached behind with her right hand, feeling for his crotch. He’d pinned his body against hers while leveraging the chokehold, so she couldn’t quite reach his soft spot. Instead, she grabbed the inside of his thigh, right above the knee, and pinched hard.

“Aaaah!” he screamed. “I’m going to kill you!” He reared his right hand back to punch her in the head, and Pati felt his left forearm loosen. Instead of digging fingernails into it, she grabbed his left hand, twisting it forward to break the wrist.

Bruno fell over her left shoulder to prevent his wrist from breaking. He tried to grab her hair as she twisted and then let go altogether to keep his wrist in one piece. Pati struggled to get away. When Bruno tried to keep up with her, she kicked him in the nose.

She bounced up with only her shoes holding her to the floor. Bruno got up, rubbing his nose. Red-faced again, he bore down to attack.

Pati had to force him to stop so she could work on the life support and knew only one trick to disable him fully. When he tried to tackle her from the front, she knuckled her middle finger and punched him in the Adam’s apple. The blow stopped him cold.

He stood there, grabbing his throat, trying to suck a breath. Where he turned red before, he now phased into purple. His body shook, and his eyes grew large as he struggled. Finally, he stopped moving and floated, attached to the floor by his shoes.

Pati checked the pulse in his neck. It confirmed that she’d killed another person in her twenty-four years of life. Unlike Richard, she felt remorse even though Bruno had tried to kill her. He was just an idiot who didn’t know better.

She turned to the ladder and saw two weasel faces above the opening. They immediately slipped down to the next level, closing the hatch tight around the ladder. Pati jumped over to the ladder and pushed down on the hatch with her foot. The hatch would normally open with the application of a slight downward force, but they had locked it shut.

Another bound and she was back at her command station. She pulled a two-inch metal key from her left-sleeve pocket and inserted it in a slot next to her console keyboard. The command menu displayed on-screen, a menu the crew

didn't know about. She touched the on-screen button for crew dispositions; Jake and Jeff were in the common area below, working from the console down there. They had just cut the bridge off from what life-support functions they could access and rerouted the air to the common area. Lights on the bridge dimmed before she could reverse their work. She re-energized the lights and opened the intercom. "Jake and Jeff, Bruno attacked me. I had to disable him. Now we've got to work together or we won't get back to Titan alive."

She waited for an answer. When one didn't come, she said, "Look, we can make it if we work together. If we fight it out, we'll be writing our own death certificates." She hoped they'd see the logic, but if they didn't respond, she'd have no choice but to cut them off from life-support. She'd give them sixty more seconds to reply; after thirty-five, her screen went dead.

Jake or Jeff had cut the communication link from her command station to the ship, and the lights dimmed again. Pati jumped over to Bruno's console and logged on as the ship's commander. She had priority access once again and reestablished her life-support. This time it only took them a few seconds to cut off Bruno's console from the ship.

Pati stood up and floated over to the ladder before everything went dark. She climbed and activated an emergency light separated from the ship's nervous system. The ladder and hatchway were well illuminated, while the periphery was dark. She climbed down and sat on the hatch.

One option stuck in her mind. It might save her life; it might also kill her sooner. This option would kill Jeff and Jake, and yet, if she did nothing, she'd die as they rerouted life-support from the bridge.

Pati stood up and walked to her console. She pulled the command key from the board and used it to open a small door underneath, just large enough to reach into. She slid her hand into the door and pulled a lever.

This was the commander's last resort. If there was a mutiny, he or she could barricade themselves here. Then, once activated, all hatches would open below. The mutineers would not survive, and all life-support would automatically shift to the bridge. At least any life-support functions that were left.

It sounded like a weak toilet flush back on Earth. Air, water, and maybe Jeff and Jake were rushing out the hatchways below the bridge. In the next few minutes, every compartment below her feet would be a vacuum like the space they traveled through. Jake and Jeff would be dead whether or not they remained onboard. Funny thing was, all the water and air leaving the ship would add to the ship's speed. Would it be enough? Would it even be necessary? She would know in less than twelve hours or never at all. The air thinned, causing her to become drowsy. Pati floated back to the hatch and laid down, facing away from Bruno's

body. Was this her last moment of life? She didn't think more about it as the thinning air caused her to sleep.



* * *

When Pati awoke, Nancy Tate stood over her hospital bed. “What happened?” Pati moaned.

“When your ship went to emergency operations, the beacon attracted a local freighter. They arrived two hours later to find you next to dead.”

“The crew, they tried to—”

“The ship's memory was erased. The prosecutor thinks you did it to cover the murder of your crew. I told him to show me his evidence, and as of now, he's not responded. Do you remember what happened?”

“I think so.”

“Good, because without the ship's memory, we only need your account of what happened. Since your command console link was cut, that's good evidence of a mutiny, and we're on solid ground. You just need to finish the last days of your sentence.”

“I have to go back?” Pati felt so weak; tears flowed down her cheeks.

“Don't worry, Pati,” Nancy said. She reached down and gave her an easy hug. “I've taken care of it. You're almost done, and you can go out with a regular mining ship, not a prison ship. You won't be in command, so you'll have far less responsibility.” Nancy released Pati and turned to look at the door. “After this last water-mining trip, you can return to Earth, and Richard will never bother you again.”

Despite her weakness, Pati gradually sat up. “You told me the ship's memory was erased. How did you know about Richard?”

Nancy didn't move. She stared at the door for a few seconds and then turned—slowly. She faced Pati again. “I meant his memory would never bother you again.” Nancy smiled, and despite months of seeing her attorney during the trial, it was a smile Pati had never seen before.

4 Deal or No Deal

“Assholes,” Pati said. Robots were in charge of this jail, and they rolled around politely, telling her what to do. One took her breakfast tray, and then it thanked her as if it was serving her a royal meal. The kind demeanor was another form of cruel and unusual punishment the robots inflicted on Pati while she inhabited the white, four-by-four-meter cell.

She stepped from the door and sat down on the bed, which the bastards even made for her. She’d been stuck in this cell since yesterday when the doctor released her from the hospital. It wasn’t five minutes later that the constables had her cuffed and walking through the hallways of Karakorum. The people pointed and stared, wondering what Pati had done now. Maybe they all knew. Pati had no idea because the only people she’d talked to were doctors, nurses, and Nancy.

Nancy got a message to her through the robots that she would meet her this morning. She apologized for the incarceration but said the prosecutor had ordered it without telling her first. Then, conveniently, the notification arrived after business hours and Nancy hadn’t checked her account in that time.

So, Pati waited. She did not know what time it was, only that they’d just served her breakfast. She’d been able to clean up right before leaving the hospital, and she hoped she’d be released before she’d have to use that disgusting toilet against the far wall.

The thought must have had a telekinetic effect because her jail cell door opened. She watched as it mechanically slid to the right, exposing an actual person standing behind the expanding crack. In a second, she saw it was Nancy Tate, wearing her blue business suit.

Pati immediately thought of how much younger she looked, closer to Pati’s age than the thirty-five she knew her to be, a massive advantage to being born and raised in one-sixth gravity. An advantage Pati would willingly give up just to get back to Earth.

Nancy had her blonde hair tied back, and her blue eyes were highlighted against all the white. She stepped through as soon as she had enough door width.

“Pati, I’m so sorry all this happened,” she said, as she strode over to Pati.

Pati stood up, “Okay, then tell me what happened, and why?”

Nancy looked around, and then back to Pati, “The prosecutor decided yesterday to renege on the deal for what happened on your ship. He wants to try the case now.”

“Can he do that?” Pati asked.

“We only had a verbal agreement, and this is the first time I’ve had them renege on one. But yes, legally, prosecutors can do that.”

“How come?”

“I don’t know. I only know he wanted to meet this morning, which surprised me because this is Saturday and most of the prosecutors disappear until Monday. Anyway, I want you to come with me because I’ll need you to hear everything he says. The meeting is in a half-hour. Can you be ready?”

“First, tell me what time it is, and then define ready,” Pati said.

“It’s 8 a.m. standard right now.” She sized up Pati’s appearance. “I think you’ll be okay.” She looked around the cell. “And I see they didn’t give you equipment to fix your appearance.” Nancy pulled the satchel from behind her back and placed it on Pati’s bed. She pulled out a brush and mirror and sat them next to the satchel. “Were you at least able to brush your teeth?” she asked, pointing to the sink next to the toilet.

“The robots brought me in a toothbrush and paste. They took it back when I finished.”

“Okay, good. Take the brush and mirror and pull your hair back. I’ll find a tie for you in my bag.” Nancy scanned the clothes Pati wore, which were clean versions of a mining ship uniform. “Your clothes will be okay. The meeting room is just down the hall. After the meeting, we’ll see about different clothes.”

Pati stopped brushing her hair. “I’m getting out?” she asked.

“Maybe, we’ll have to see. You’re still technically serving your first sentence since your mining crew would not be released till the day after tomorrow. I’m pretty pissed at the prosecutor for throwing you in here last night, it was totally unnecessary.” Nancy frowned and shook her head, “He didn’t break any laws in doing so, though.” Nancy reached into her pack and pulled out a rubber piece for tying hair back. She handed it to Pati and waited for her to secure her dark hair. “You ready?”

“After you,” Pati said. The door remained open after Nancy entered, and Pati followed her out of the opening into the metallic hallway.

The hallway had whiter cell doors on each side. Pati counted nine, probably enough for a boring place with only twenty-five thousand people like Karakorum. They hit a T-intersection as a waist-high robot rolled past. Nancy turned left into a hallway that was still metal but had faux wood trim and windows into the offices. Constables wearing red uniforms came around the corner down the hall. They walked past Nancy and Pati, not paying attention and discussing a case Pati couldn’t care less about. She followed Nancy around that corner into an open area with more constables. They sat at their desks, either

working with the screens attached or in discussion with other officers.

Nancy ignored all of it and entered an open door straight ahead of them. Inside was a conference table with eight yellow chairs around it. Nancy took the head chair near the door and invited Pati to sit on her right, which she did. Then Nancy moved to the door, shut it, and returned to the table. There were no windows in this room, and the walls were as white as her jail cell.

Nancy pulled a tablet from her bag and sat it on the table. She tapped it a few times and was reviewing the display when the door opened.

In walked a man of African descent. He had short hair, was about thirty by his looks, and carried a tablet like Nancy's. Despite it being Saturday morning, he was professionally dressed in a gray suit.

Pati had seen his pic during her last trial. But this was the first time she'd shared a room with the man, and she couldn't help it: she was in love.

"Nancy," he said to her.

"Jack," she replied.

He focused on Pati. "Ms. Lynch, I'm Jack Reagan, the prosecuting attorney for your case."

Pati nodded in return. She noted how he used her parents' name, and not the married name. She took her own name back before embarking on her three-month ice-mining sentence. Still, after two years of marriage, it didn't seem normal to be called "Pati Lynch" once again.

Jack Reagan took the chair across from Pati and seemed in no way put off by Nancy having the head chair. He put the tablet he carried on the table and tapped it a few times. He reviewed the results and looked at Nancy. "All right," he said, "I'll get to the point. One of the double-E's told me he can restore the mission records for the Ice-Miner 37-charlie. There's a good chance we can establish a hard record of all that happened during the unfortunate event. Then, we'll know the details that Ms. Lynch doesn't seem to recall."

"We provided her statement after the doctors revived her. Absolutely, we'd be interested in what the engineers can find out. We can discuss the admissibility of that evidence if and when it's discovered."

He gave Nancy an icy stare. "My settlement offers will be based on those findings," he said. He focused on Pati again, without warming his glare. "I've read your account, Ms. Lynch. And I can only say it's very... vague. Do you think you can add any details?"

"Pati, don't answer that question," Nancy interrupted.

Pati had no intention of answering that question. She liked this Jack Reagan less and less.

Nancy returned her attention to Jack Reagan. "I had hoped to get a detailed

account from my client after she was released from the hospital. Unfortunately, she was thrown into a jail cell after her release. And now, I have a prosecuting attorney throwing questions at her before I've had a chance to reinforce her knowledge of her rights."

"Ms. Lynch will likely be charged with murder. She previously pleaded to the crime of human-slaughter and is still serving her sentence. I have a responsibility to the people of Karakorum, and that means I can't let convicted killers roam the streets at their discretion."

"Ms. Lynch will have that charge dropped immediately after her sentence ends. You cannot try her before then, so she will not have a previous record you can make decisions from. And, I must add, to believe that she would commit a crime, right before she was to be released, goes against reason."

Jack sat back in his chair. "The only reason I'm concerned with is what the restored records will detail. We know Ms. Lynch dumped the ship's atmosphere where two of her crew resided. We also know a blow to the throat killed Bruno Redden. These two events must be explained in full. Until that time, Ms. Lynch is a suspect, and as such, it is reasonable to keep her in custody."

"Have you any evidence, right now, that shows Ms. Lynch had anything to do with their deaths other than what she's already stated?" Nancy asked.

Jack leaned forward and stared directly at Nancy. "No, I do not have that information."

"Then, Mr. Reagan, since your charges are not specific, do you have the authority to continue to hold Ms. Lynch in confinement? Her previous sentence is about to expire, and it has been the practice of the state not to continue confining water miners if their ship cycles early.

Jack seemed to think for a moment. He looked at Pati as if staring into her soul and then looked back at Nancy. "I'll accept a tracking bracelet for the time being. Otherwise, she returns to her cell until you can get the provost to release her."

"Pati, you good with that?" Nancy asked.

Being free while only having to wear some electronic jewelry around the ankle, she'd give up her firstborn if she had any kids. "Sure, that'll be okay," Pati said instead.

"Then we're good," Nancy said.

Jack stood from his chair and put his tablet under his left arm. He pointed at Pati, "Ms. Lynch, the tracking bracelet will let us know immediately when you're near restricted areas like ports and shipping docks. If you get the idea that you can hop on a freighter back to Earth, fine, you can think that. However, if you enter a restricted area without escort, even by mistake, you'll spend the rest

of your pre-trial time back in your cell. And there's nothing your attorney can do about that. Please, make it easy on all of us, and remain sensible." He turned and walked out the door without shutting it behind him.

"Asshole," Pati said out loud.



* * *

When Pati first arrived on Titan, Richard arranged for her to stay in a luxury apartment till the wedding. Within an hour of Nancy Tate securing her release, the government also put her up in an apartment, in the low-rent district. A place where the newly arrived immigrants stayed and were provided just enough to survive until they found employment.

It still felt like heaven to her. The ankle bracelet might track her, but that wasn't the same as having a locked door in front of you. She could stay in to eat or go to a restaurant, it was her decision, and she didn't have to decide either if she didn't want to.

She sat back on her leather couch. Like the wood she saw in the police station, it was manufactured. She'd met friends of Richard who owned the manufacturing businesses, and they told her how it was done. She didn't remember much, except that if you have enough carbon, you can replicate anything on Earth.

It made her think of Richard's family, the McLears. How the great-great, and great grandfathers ransomed their fortune on Earth to build a company that would supply billions of people in space when only thousands lived there at the time. How Richard's grandmother exploited the situation and turned their company into humanity's most powerful enterprise. Richard's father and his brother Kerry continued the dominance.

Now there existed a pipeline of liquid carbon traveling to the inner solar system on McLear tankers. She had been told it'd be economic Armageddon for the human race if Richard's family ever took their toys and went home. She didn't know how that would work, she just wanted to go home herself.

And, despite his power, Kerry McLear didn't seem to want revenge for his brother's death. Maybe it was because he would not have to share an inheritance with his younger brother, but whatever the reason, he hadn't interfered with the investigation of Richard's death or demonstrated the least bit of interest.

Yet, the apparition wanted revenge. Could it have been the McLear's means of getting it? Kerry McLear was astrophysicist smart, and that was across the board intelligent, not just science. Maybe he arranged the incident that killed the life-support in her mining ship.

Should she tell this to Nancy? She already told her about the apparition. Nancy told her not to make it part of her statement, and they could discuss it later. It made sense since nobody would believe the apparition without proof. Good thing Nancy typed her statement into a tablet instead of a straight recording. Nobody could say Nancy was lazy.

The time projected on the far wall, reminding her that Nancy would stop by with her husband in thirty minutes. They planned to take her to dinner, and Pati didn't have much more work to do to get ready. She had only to take a shower, clean her teeth and nails, fix her hair, and choose her clothes. Then she needed to see if her clothes fit right since she had rented them that afternoon. She could worry about the shoes she would rent and wear after that.

So, being ready in thirty minutes was not going to happen. Pati got up and walked into the single bedroom. Nancy was the only friend she had on Titan, Pati thought she should at least try to make it in forty-five minutes.



* * *

Pati had not seen the sun in a few months. Then, as now, it was just a big pinpoint in the sky. But to see it through the transparent roof made her feel as warm as if she was on a terrestrial beach. Nancy couldn't have picked a better place to eat.

The Tenderloin Room was maybe the third-best restaurant at Karakorum. Richard had taken her to all twelve when they courted because he could easily afford to buy the restaurants if he wanted. When Nancy and Joe brought her here, Pati almost had to refuse because she knew she couldn't afford it. Nancy would hear nothing of it and said they'd happily pick up the tab for someone who should be ready to celebrate. Pati graciously accepted and hoped she could return the favor someday.

And despite the name, none of the meats were from animals. Food was manufactured in chemical reactors and the process produced food fresher and cleaner than natural food grown or raised on Earth. How much your meal cost

depended on how much work the manufacturers put into getting it just right. If you wanted the greatest meal you ever tasted, you paid most of your salary for it unless you could afford to buy the restaurant.

“How’s your meal?” Nancy asked.

Pati turned her attention away from the ceiling and to Nancy, who was wearing a black dress with gray trim. Her hair was down this time. “Far better than prison food,” Pati said.

“I guess I should expect that answer,” Nancy replied, with a laugh.

Nancy’s husband, in his brown slacks and blue, long-sleeved shirt, did not laugh. In fact, Joe had said little since they sat down at the table for four in the middle of the half-filled restaurant. He was like Pati, from Earth, although he came from the southeastern part of North America. He quietly ate his meal as if he was the only person in the room, and only occasionally asked Nancy a question. With brown hair and blue eyes, he wasn’t bad looking, except being from Earth, he seemed a midget among men. Although he was a midget that could crush two men born and raised off of Earth, Pati reminded herself.

She heard meat being thrown onto a grill. Then the smell of spices, probably some garlic, floated past. This was the only sit-down restaurant without a wall between the kitchen and dining area. The owners used that advantage for all it was worth, and it particularly affected Pati because the food on her mining ship didn’t register on an aroma scale.

“Nancy, thanks for taking me out. Ever since I started my sentence on the ice-mining ship, I haven’t had, well, a dining experience. And this is just what I needed after everything that happened the last few days.”

“You’re welcome,” she replied. Again, her husband stayed silent. “How do you like where you’re staying? It’s not what you’re used to, I’m sure—”

“It’s perfect, Nancy. Even though I lived well being married to a McLear, it’s way better than a jail cell.”

Even Joe nodded to that.

“Well, I think we’ll be able to keep you from sitting in another jail cell this time.”

Pati assumed she meant the trial over her crew’s mutiny, a subject she still had much to talk about. “I need the whole truth to come out,” Pati said. “If they can rebuild the ship’s records, I’m all for it, because I want proof that I did what I had to do.”

Nancy shook her head, “Pati, we don’t even need that. Your word will be good enough. I know we’re going against Jack Reagan, and he’s really good. Unfortunately for him, he’s not a superman. He’ll have to let you go, or we’ll be up in front of the JJ and he’ll get beat bad.”

“I don’t want my life determined by a computer,” Pati said. She paused a moment and thought about the next question on her mind. She hadn’t asked before because Nancy wanted her to focus on her case. Now, however, the time might be right. “Nancy, is there any way I can still make that next cruiser back to Earth?”

Nancy stopped eating and didn’t look hopeful. “Pati, I’ll do all I can do to keep you on schedule. But you have to understand, it depends on what Jack Reagan does. If he wants to drag this out, you’ll be here till we finish. You can’t leave until the state decides you can or we force it. There’s no other way.”

Pati suspected as much. She came to terms with the probability after getting settled in her apartment, realizing she might stay there longer than she hoped. “Thanks,” Pati said. “I understand you’re doing your best. I’ll still be researching trips home while we wait, though.”

“I don’t blame you,” Joe said.

Nancy looked irritated, and she didn’t give Joe a positive look after his comment. She didn’t say a word either and resumed eating her meal. Pati did the same and hoped the chill she just felt was the air.

Joe shook his head before he took his next bite. Then, he wolfed down what was left on his plate. He stood up. “Nance,” he said. “I need to be getting home.”

Joe called the waiter over. A short robot, just taller than a meter high, made its way on tracks through the line of tables. When the robot arrived, Joe handed it his card to read. The robot had small arms, just long enough to reach to the other side of the table. It took the card, placed it on a scanner on its body, and returned it to Joe. “Don’t let my wife put this on her business account,” he said. He walked out, saying nothing more.

“Um, what happened?” Pati asked.

Nancy looked as if she’d seen a ghost. “I forgot to tell you, he was friends with Bruno Redden.”

“Oh, ah, how did they get to know each other?”

“Bruno helped Joe get his first job working construction when he arrived from Earth. They hadn’t talked in years, not since Joe started working at the spaceport. I think Joe feels some loyalty towards him, and he’s not sure you’re innocent when it comes to his death.”

Pati stopped eating and exhaled a deep breath. Without the recordings, everyone could come to their own conclusion about what happened. Maybe the state couldn’t convict her, but the rest of her life they’d call her a murderer four times over. All she could do was argue. She had no proof each time was an accident or self-defense.

Except, that alien that appeared to her did take credit for all that happened. It

stated it was in Richard when she hit him. In fact, it blamed her for stopping its plans. It also took credit for disabling the life support system on the mining ship. If she could show those aliens were real and lived here on Titan, then the people would have to take her account of her actions more seriously. “Nancy, I want to make an announcement about those aliens I told you about,” she said.

Nancy almost choked on her food. She finished swallowing and reached a hand over to Pati’s wrist. “Pati,” she whispered, “we’ve been through this in private, and I’ve pointed out to you we can’t make any such statement until your status is secure. With the records of the flight compromised, the only account of what happened is your recollection. If you say it happened, no one else can say different without physical proof. And if Jack Reagan tries, he’ll come close to disbarment.” Nancy released her wrist.

“Everyone thinks I’m a murderer.”

“You won’t fix that impression if you’re on a thirty-year trip to Earth.”

The statement chilled Pati’s bones. It reminded her that survival was all that mattered, just like when the life support died on the mining ship. The truth about the aliens could wait until she had certainty. “Okay, you’ve made your point,” Pati said.

“Good, no more talk about that subject until you’re on your way back to Earth. Is that clear?”

Pati nodded and finished the last bites on her plate. Nancy did the same.

“I wish I could stay and talk, Pati, but I think we’ll see enough of each other in the next few days.” She stood up from the table. “We don’t see each other until Monday, so what do you have planned for your Sunday?”

“Besides straightening out my apartment, I’m going for a gravity treatment.”

Nancy shuddered. “Oh, I hate those.”

“I need them if I’m going back to Earth. Especially with all the work I was doing in zero gravity.”

Nancy shook her head. “I haven’t been to one in years. I’m scared to think what it would do to me now.”

“You need to get it done, Nancy. You might want to go to Earth someday, and you won’t be able if you wait too long.”

“Is Earth really worth it? For someone like me, who’s never been there?”

It’d been a long day, and Pati didn’t feel like providing a dissertation on the benefits of breathing outdoors. “I think so,” she said, and then stood up. “We can talk about it another time.”

“All right, we’ll see you on Monday, then,” Nancy said. She turned and walked out along the rows of tables.

Pati waited for Nancy to walk past the shops around the restaurant seating.

Then, Pati walked out herself. It was time to learn how to live frugally again, and getting a good night's sleep was probably the best place to start.



* * *

Pati waited outside the clinic. She hated the experience but had no option if she wanted to return to Earth and be capable of living in a single gravity. The McLears had a private facility on Picus she used before; here, she had to share with the public. Three months on the mining ship made her privacy less of a problem and she walked into the office.

“Good morning,” the lady at the desk said.

“Good morning,” Pati responded. “I have an appointment for 8 a.m.”

The lady looked at the monitor on her desk. “Ms. Lynch, is it?”

“Yes.”

“Very good, please have a seat.”

Pati took a seat along the wall in the yellow receptionist area. There were two video displays on the adjacent wall, both showing a news broadcast originating here at Karakorum. Pati didn't watch these shows, however, she did find some entertainment value as they strove to make the problems of a small city newsworthy.

At the moment, it talked about events on Earth and in the satellite system. Some state governments were mad at others and threatening trade restrictions, blockades, and maybe even wars. Had she never lived on Earth, she'd believe such a place was too violent for anyone to live peacefully. Having lived most of her life there, she knew the reports were wrong or trying to turn insignificant into critical for entertainment value. Most people on Titan didn't know that, so besides their physical limitations, most had no intention of ever traveling to Earth. Which was one reason this gravity clinic was so empty.

“Ready for you now in room ‘C,’ Ms. Lynch,” the receptionist said.

“Thanks,” Pati replied. She stood up and walked through the door to the left of the receptionist. She entered a hallway with many doors. The doors to her left and right were B and A, so she walked to her right and found C. Inside was a tree for holding clothes, and a light-blue table with a hole in the wall at its head.

She knew the drill and stripped naked before plopping onto the cold, plastic table with her head next to the hole. Looking up, she watched the white ceiling

as the table slid her through the hole, and into the tank.

The tank had lighting embedded in the steel walls to prevent claustrophobia, which Pati was thankful for. There were also hundreds of needles at the end of metal arms, which she was less thankful for, but realized that's just how the job was done. The needles above her extended and inserted into different parts of her anatomy.

She had to marvel at the precision because, like the technique of an acupuncturist, she barely felt the insertion. While this happened, warm water filled the tank and allowed her to float. The table retracted and more needles entered her body from below. It would soon be time.

The manufacturers of the apparatus claimed it was painless. They must have never used it themselves because the electric current running through and around her body didn't feel good. She could say out loud if the pain was too much, but the first time she did that, she was told the treatment was useless if she couldn't take more current. She gritted her teeth, and a minute after the current began, she gritted harder.

It felt like every cubic centimeter of her body vibrated millions of times every second. Except the vibrations wouldn't go in the same direction. She tried not to scream. It was pain she had to have, and she would see it through.

The counter displayed on the top of the tank said 15 seconds were left. She gritted her teeth hard again. Would she need to see the dentist after this? Fourteen seconds.

She did this for her family. She'd been on Titan for almost three years and had no reason to stay. She had to keep thinking about why she put up with the pain. Eleven seconds.

She tried to divorce her mind from her body. The pain was there, and getting worse, so she tried not to pay attention to it. *Pretend you're watching the torture happen to another person.* A deep breath through her nose and hold. Eight seconds.

"Ehhhhh," she grunted. She could even feel the vibrations in her teeth. Like every tooth had a toothache to match the headache she felt, and the fire throughout her torso, and the feeling her legs were ready to burn off. If only they would burn off and stop hurting. Four seconds left.

She tried to rip the needles out of her body, but her body failed her. Her muscles would not obey her commands. She tried begging, which didn't work either. Then she just stopped, too exhausted to do anything except suffer. Two seconds, one second, and she was finished.

Her breathing was heavy and fast. Like every gravity clinic treatment, the minutes after the treatment were an elation that poured over her like the water

that receded. She knew her body would react to the torture by increasing muscle mass and bone density, everything she'd need to live in a single gravity. This would allow her to walk those docks in Dingle with her family. Maybe the people here on Titan didn't believe it was worth it. She wouldn't waste her time trying to explain what she couldn't explain.

The needles left her body and the table retracted back into the changing room. She took a few minutes to compose herself before sitting up on the table. She almost laughed, thinking about how she'll worry about sagging breasts back on Earth. Oh well, there were medical procedures for that, too, and she would be happy to cross that bridge when the time came.

She stood up from the table and used the towel hanging on the wall. Once dried, she put her clothes back on and used her brush to straighten her wet hair in the mirror. Once completed, she walked back into the hallway and out the door to the receptionist's office. Her first action would be to schedule an appointment for the next week.

5 Working Stiff

Pati didn't need to meet with Nancy until the afternoon, which gave her a chance to attend the training for her new job. It also meant she couldn't sleep in, and she rose when the alarm buzzed.

Kerry McLearn had decided he wouldn't subsidize her lifestyle once she'd finished her sentence. The unusual way she finished didn't seem to make a difference in that attitude, and she had very little money at the moment. All she could rely on was the basics: housing, food, and clothes from social services. If she wanted any money, she had to get out and work, and social services gave her a list of jobs needing workers.

Most of the drilling companies would take her in a heartbeat, except it would mean a long time of training, and she'd have to work full time every day. She didn't need that and also needed her time for the trial. Most of those companies would probably reject her anyway since her intentions to return to Earth were a public record.

Instead, she worked for the government, picking a job that involved keeping Karakorum maintained. The particular job she chose involved exterior maintenance, a nice benefit in that few people would see her outside the city, and none would recognize her in an excursion suit and helmet.

Fortunately, excursions were a regular part of her previous ice-mining job. Unfortunately, her earlier excursions had taken place in a vacuum. Titan, on the other hand, had an atmosphere, which meant the breathing equipment would be radically different. It also meant she would be placed at the level of a secondary school graduate.

Pati had already picked out the button-down white shirt with tan pants and brown boots the night before, and they were waiting for her as soon as she cleaned up. A simple breakfast, and she was on her way to the trolley station. Heading north on Main Street, she rode through a quick two stops and disembarked with a large crowd going in the same direction. The North Maintenance Hall was on the right of the trolley route, and with the crowd she walked through the large opening.

The crowd was mostly men, although there were a few women, and nobody seemed to notice Pati as out of the ordinary. She was also shorter than most, which meant most of the workers were Titan-born. Like her gender, her height and place of birth were not out of the ordinary for this crowd, and she worried

less about the problems of being recognized.

A security desk sat in the middle of the entrance like an island in the middle of a river of people walking by. A male and female guard sat there, apparently not worried about the crowd entering. Pati noticed a small sign on the desk and followed the instructions for those attending orientation to enter the classroom on her right. The door was transparent, and she could see two people in there already. It slid open as she approached, and she took a front seat. The two people didn't take notice of her, or of each other, and sat to the back of the twenty-seat room. Up front was a lady, maybe in her forties, who worked on some sort of equipment that sat on a desk. When Pati took her seat, the lady looked up at the students and stopped work.

“Okay, I think that's everyone,” the lady at the desk said. She was taller than Pati and had her dark hair pulled back, which highlighted a few gray streaks. Like most everyone on Titan, she had no wrinkles, and her complexion was a perfect light brown. “You're here this morning because we need to educate you on the equipment you'll use to survive outside. My name is Dr. Melanie Smith, and I'm considered the expert on Karakorum for extraterrestrial survival equipment. Any questions?”

Pati didn't have any, and the other two students made no noise.

“Fine, then I have a few questions. Has anyone here ever worked outside an Earth-like atmosphere?”

Pati raised her hand.

“Great, tell us what that entailed, Ms. Lynch, is it?”

Pati nodded. “I had to do extravehicular work on a water-mining ship,” she said.

“Anyone else?” Dr. Smith asked. After a moment of silence, she continued. “What you did, Ms. Lynch, is related to the work here on Titan, except you will not be working in a vacuum like in space. Here, the pressure outside the steel walls of Karakorum is greater than on Earth. Not significantly, so, you will not blow up like a balloon if your skin is exposed to the atmosphere.” She paused, apparently for effect. “Now, the pressure of the atmosphere is not the only similarity to Earth, the composition of the atmosphere on Titan is almost pure nitrogen. On Earth, it's eighty percent. And while I said the compositions are similar, it's that twenty percent that makes all the difference because on Earth, the twenty percent is the oxygen we need to live. Yes, Mr. Thales.”

Pati turned to look at the young guy with his hand up. “So, we can walk outside with only an air recycler?” he asked.

Dr. Smith raised her right index finger. “You're close, but remember we're here orbiting Saturn. The temperature is about a hundred Kelvin on a warm day.

If you're not wearing the insulated suits, the water in your body will freeze quite quickly. You'll be dead before it actually freezes, but I'm sure you get my point."

The thought gave Pati another reason to want to go back to Earth. When she left the mining ship in Saturn orbit, it was usually no longer than an hour. This job would be eight hours outside, with two breaks and a lunch. When it came time to suit up for work, she would definitely not worry about style points.

"Okay, now I want to focus on the breathing apparatus of choice here on Titan." Dr. Smith stood up the apparatus she was working with on the desk. "You'll be assigned one of these each day before your shift, and we've qualified experts who maintain and test these to make sure you don't run into problems outside the walls. It's an air recycler which pumps the air you breathe out through a carbon dioxide scrubber. This scrubber not only removes the gas before recycling to your breathing zone but will crack enough of the carbon dioxide back into oxygen so you can work a full eight-hours without a recharge. Most times, the only limit you have is the twelve-hour battery." She pulled a metal piece off the pack and held it up. Then she smiled, "Oh, and the time limit the Worker's Guild negotiated for a day's work."



* * *

The meeting with Nancy the day before did not go well. The bad news was the state would not negotiate an immediate release. Nancy said she offered everything except Pati's firstborn, and Jack Reagan wouldn't go for it. He seemed determined to try the case no matter how shaky the ground the case was on.

That meant she could not leave for Earth as scheduled. She'd have to find another trip months in the future, and the arrival time would be more months after that. Earth would not happen for a while.

Other than that significant drawback, there was no bad news. Nancy assured her the records on the mining ship had not been reconstructed, which again meant her account was the only record to judge with. The engineers tasked to rebuild the records had not sounded positive, said that they were working on it, and expected to have a final decision soon.

Pati tried to bring up the alien encounter again, and Nancy wouldn't hear of

it. Nancy maintained the defense needed to be simple to be effective, and the introduction of such information would only allow the prosecutors an angle to dispute her testimony. Pati countered the aliens would explain why the records were missing and provide a good explanation why the life support systems failed. Nancy, being the professional debater, pointed out the twins could have arranged the whole thing trying to get rid of her, or the lack of power to life support could have affected other systems, or, one could pick any reason because it didn't matter. It wasn't Nancy's job to determine exactly what happened, only to demonstrate Pati Lynch could not have acted in any other way to defend herself. To go over and beyond in her case could call into question that defense and result in a conviction on a lesser charge. That would mean a longer time before leaving Titan.

When Nancy raised the flag of staying longer, Pati dropped the point on the aliens. Nancy did say that if someone else independently established the existence of these aliens before the trial ended, she would consider entry of the evidence. Otherwise, without facts to support, it could only hurt her case.

Pati left Nancy's office late in the evening. She returned to her apartment, eating a quick meal and going straight to sleep. The alarm woke her the next morning, and again, she felt as if she'd just gone to bed. Pati even checked twice to make sure the clock was on morning time. She'd dreamed of being back in Ireland, and it felt wonderful if also kind of strange. A strangeness that didn't matter, because she had to get to work.



* * *

Pati arrived for work early, picked up her suit at the tool shop, and hopped into the changing room. After working on the ice-mining ship, she had no issue stripping down to workout clothes in front of her coworkers to put on the black, insulated bodysuit over her torso and extremities. The gloves and boots she'd don right before walking to her transport, and she'd put the helmet on during the transport.

The job today was a simple one: follow the NDT robot out to its testing zone and watch it do its job. The robot climbed the outside walls of Karakorum and used ultrasound to determine the thickness of those walls. The NDT stood for non-destructive testing, which was good because lots of people living in

Karakorum needed those walls to remain in good shape.

During the morning brief, Pati made the mistake of asking her boss, Larry, why the robots couldn't just test from the inside. There were eleven other workers in there, and none of the others were newbies like herself. Larry wasn't mean about his response, he just let her know that the insides of those walls had construction attached and that they must rip down buildings to get to those walls from the inside. Her coworkers weren't so cordial, and she didn't think she'd have a problem refusing to go out for a drink with them after work.

Once the suit was on, she walked out and picked up her helmet, breathing apparatus, gloves, and boots. Everything was tailored, and when she tried on the gloves, they fit very well. The boots slipped on, and she walked over to the bus. She followed her similarly dressed coworkers into the vehicle and walked to the back past the other eleven.

As the newbie, she got the assignment farthest away. The bus would drive out of the airlock, and then down along the outside wall of Karakorum dropping off workers as it went. After it dropped off Pati, the bus would return and wait for four hours, when it would go back out and pick everyone up for a one-hour lunch. The whole scheme was repeated in the afternoon.

The bus rose to get clearance after Pati boarded. It drove into the airlock, and the first door shut behind it. The airlock pressurized to fifty percent excess with mostly nitrogen and a little oxygen. Pati didn't notice other than a breeze from the additional air. The second door then opened, letting it drive out.

It was nighttime and would be for the next few days. Lights attached to poles allowed hazy visibility along the road built around Karakorum's walls. The bus stopped. A mechanical arm extended on the right side and picked up a package. The arm attached the package to the outside of the vehicle, and the trip was resumed. The bus crawled along, seemingly in no hurry to get them to their stations, and Pati had been instructed to use the time to check her breathing equipment. She noticed her coworkers were busy at it, so she better do it, too.

Outside, the bus had retrieved a package of liquid oxygen cartridges that she and her coworkers would attach to their rebreathers for a supplemental source of oxygen. Most of the rebreather apparatus she'd strap on her back, with a tube hanging down to connect a deciliter-size cartridge of liquid oxygen. The package outside was full of these containers, and Pati would pick one up when she stepped out.

The bus stopped, which she barely noticed as it traveled so slowly, and the doors opened for the first of her coworkers to get out. There was no airlock because other than the temperature, the atmospheres were similar, and a door open for a few seconds would not deplete the oxygen in the inside atmosphere.

The bus plodded forward once again, and Pati rode standing till all her other coworkers had gotten off. Her job site was a little farther, and she finally connected the tubes from her rebreather to her helmet. She activated the rebreather to make sure she heard the motor humming, and all arrows were in the right direction. She checked the connections again and then placed the helmet on her head. She took a breath and all seemed well.

Pati shuffled toward the door. When the bus stopped, she waited for the doors to open and then exited. She immediately opened the package fastened to the bus and pulled out an oxygen cartridge. Pati hooked the cartridge to the line hanging next to her right arm. Outside on Titan, it was nearly cool enough for liquid oxygen, so it was easier, more efficient, and safer to bring that along than compressed gas. At least that's what Dr. Smith told her, but she couldn't remember why.

Her half-a-meter-high NDT robot disembarked from the back of the bus and rolled toward Pati. The bus drove down a short distance and turned around about the time the robot stopped in front of her. Pati looked to see the four lights on the robot's control panel were green, and she pushed the button next to those lights to start it working.

The bus passed behind her, and she followed the robot to the wall about ten meters from the road. This section of Karakorum looked like a monster drinking can dug into the ground. She knew it was a hundred meters to the top and a thousand meters to the other side. The robot crawled onto the wall and slowly climbed. It made no sound, which actually would carry better on Titan than on Earth. Except anyone outside to hear that sound would also be wearing a helmet.

Pati backed up to get a better view of the robot, testing the thickness of the hull using ultrasound as it went. After ten minutes, it reached the top of this section of Karakorum. Then, the robot shifted over its one-meter width and crawled back down, repeating the process. To her left was the twenty-two meters remaining to be completed before lunch. The old term, "watching paint dry," came to mind. And although she never painted, or knew someone who did, she could now understand the meaning.

Two hours later, not only was she bored, but she was getting a headache. The robot was half done, right on schedule; Pati, however, was wondering how much more of this she could take. She rubbed her helmet instead of rubbing her head, which provided no relief.

Pati then remembered she had a water tube for hydration in her helmet. She turned her head and sucked in a liter of water. Her helmet displayed the amount, telling her there remained another liter to drink. She also had two pain-killing tablets placed within reach of her mouth. These, she took, and hoped they would

work.

Next to the oxygen cartridge hung the rebreather control board. She pulled this up and saw her battery was nearly at full charge. There was also almost a full cartridge of oxygen remaining. The third parameter measured by the control board was her CO₂ level, and it showed twenty-times the safe level. According to Dr. Smith's lectures, that meant her rebreather wasn't rebreathing.

Pati hit the emergency button on the control board, and a red light illuminated in her helmet display. A response was displayed with a ten-minute estimated time of arrival.

"Ten minutes!" she shouted into her helmet. She keyed her microphone and called her boss.

"Larry here," he replied.

"Larry, this is Pati. I think my rebreather stopped working, and the emergency response says it'll take ten minutes to get here."

She heard him sigh on the other end. "Okay, let me check your stats," he said. She waited fifteen seconds according to her display, which felt like a year at the moment. "All right," he said, "uh, Pati, it seems like your CO₂ level is about 12,000 ppm, which isn't good, but you won't die anytime soon either. Don't worry about the ten minutes."

"My head is killing me, Larry."

"Bleed a little more liquid oxygen into the line."

She complied by squeezing a valve fastened to the small cartridge, but she didn't feel any better. Her head hurt, and the pickup was still eight minutes away. When she went outside her mining ship, she knew a malfunction in her respirator would mean immediate death. These people didn't think immediate death was a critical situation, at least not for a new hire.

"It's not working," Pati said.

"It'll take a few minutes. Try to calm down because you're raising your CO₂ levels faster than normal. I'll see you when you return." He signed off.

She tried to calm down, except the sound of her breathing filled the inside of her helmet, and her breathing rate increased, which would hasten her death. She tried again to calm down and bled a little more of the liquid oxygen into the line. This time she noticed a difference. She had to think about her situation.

First, this wasn't out in space, and she wasn't in a vacuum. That meant instant death was less likely. There was an atmosphere of nitrogen all around her, and all it lacked to be breathable was a fraction of oxygen in it. Could she exhaust her helmet while holding her breath? Then she could let nitrogen from the atmosphere refill her helmet and add oxygen from the cartridge. That might get her to the breathable point.

There were six minutes left. She checked her CO₂ level, and it was up to 13,000ppm. The liquid oxygen was not working other than relieving her headache a little. Why wasn't it reducing the CO₂?

The robot went about its duties as if nothing was wrong. It would probably finish on time and be ready for pickup even if Pati was lying dead next to the road. She wondered if there were any emergency supplies on it, except it was working its way up the wall. By the time it returned to ground, the emergency response would already be here.

"What the hell," she said. She slipped the pack with the rebreather off her back, without disconnecting the tubes to her helmet. The tubes were long enough and she sat the pack on the hardened road in front of her after she sat down. The nearest streetlamp was at least thirty meters away on each side. Not enough to illuminate what she needed to see, so she pulled out her flashlight to see through the hazy night.

First, she checked her connections as Dr. Smith had taught her. Each tube was firmly connected, so nothing there. The battery still had a good charge, and even through the insulated glove, she could feel the pump running. The arrow on the scrubber pointed in the right direction. What else could it be?

The checks took at least four minutes of time she could have spent worrying about her mortality, and she decided keeping busy for the last two would be a good plan. After strapping the rebreather back on, she checked the valves in her helmet. She pulled a release valve, which she found did nothing because the atmospheres were equalized. She blew hard into her helmet while pulling the release valve again so she could exhaust some bad air. Then she bled more oxygen.

The CO₂ monitor showed no improvement. She thought about bleeding more oxygen but wasn't sure if there was a downside to that or not. Why couldn't they just give her a normal respirator like in space? All Dr. Smith could go on about was how much easier and simpler the rebreather was compared to carrying air with you.

Pati believed easier and simpler was something you turned on and forgot about. Not something that gave you a headache the first time you used it. She looked back at the robot; it was still going about its business.

Finally, she saw the emergency pickup tooling down the road from the same direction she'd been dropped off from. It had the same rectangular shape as the bus she rode out on, although about half as long. This one had a driver that she could see through windows that went all around the upper half of the vehicle. The driver stopped in front of her and opened the right-side door.

It wasn't airlocked, and he waved her to get in, which she didn't hesitate. She

assumed the atmosphere in the emergency vehicle was breathable, considering the driver had no helmet on, so she took hers off.

“What’s the problem, Lynch?” the driver asked. He was of some Asian descent and looked tall enough to have been born on Titan. He wore the same insulated suit as Pati did without the gloves, which probably allowed him to control his bus better. He sat before a dashboard with buttons and gages, although the traditional steering wheel was missing.

“My CO2 level went sky high,” she said.

“How high?”

She pulled her control board up to see. “It’s 12,000 ppm right now.”

“That’s it?”

“You want to try breathing it.”

“Not like it’s poisonous or anything. But I bet your scrubber stopped working. Where’s your robot?”

“It’s on the roof, testing the metal. Why?”

“Because we can’t leave it by itself. Where’s your laser pointer?”

“Uh,” she said. She wanted to ask what that was but felt stupid enough already.

“You don’t know where your laser pointer is, do you?”

“No, I, well, they didn’t give me one this morning,” she said. Then she came clean. “What does it do?”

“It controls your robot from the ground. That way, we don’t have to wait hours before taking it in.” He reached into a drawer under his dashboard, pulled out what could easily be a laser pointer, and stood up. “Wait here,” he said.

“I don’t expect to be going anywhere,” she said, under her breath, and watched the driver pull gloves from another drawer. He stood up and walked out the doors Pati had walked in through. She looked back and saw a helmet sitting on the other side of his chair, right as he entered the atmosphere of Titan without it.

The doors stayed open, and he didn’t go far, just enough to point the laser at the robot and push a few buttons. About five seconds later, he returned to the bus with the doors shutting behind him.

“How did you do that?” Pati had to ask.

He looked her up and down, “You’re from Earth?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve got a lotion I put on my face to help with the cold, even though I probably don’t need it anymore. When I get out there, I just hold my breath and squint my eyes. That quickly, the cold doesn’t affect you, although you still have to show some respect.”

Pati shook her head as he walked by her, and then wished she hadn't because her headache had only partially subsided. She looked out the windows then, saw the robot climbing down from the roof, and then make its way to the back of the emergency vehicle. When she heard the hatch close behind it, the driver started the vehicle and drove back to the shop.



* * *

“So, what’s wrong with your rebreather again?” Larry asked. When the bus driver brought her back to the shop, Larry was waiting and took the rebreather from her. He then instructed her to change out of her suit and meet him in the conference room.

Larry was an older American of Italian descent. He’d traveled to Titan two years ago and was one of the few males here she was taller than. His greasy black hair and Roman nose documented his ancestry as well as any DNA test could.

“I don’t know what went wrong,” she said. “I just know my CO2 levels were too high. And you had the numbers like I did. Plus, why would I have such a bad headache if I was dreaming up the problem?”

He shrugged. “Well, it’s good you had the headache and didn’t pass out. We would have had to come out and retrieve you before you died. Although, I wish I could say I was confident our emergency response was a perfect process.” He looked back at the rebreather on the table and shook his head. “I’m not arguing that your levels went up, Lynch. I just think you might have been doing something wrong out there that caused them to go up.”

“What could I have done wrong? I followed all the checks before I loaded the bus, and I did another check on the bus on the way out like I was supposed to.”

He bent over and shook two of the line connections. He then grabbed the scrubber and lifted the whole rebreather from that point. He looked into the hose-helmet openings.

Pati saw him licking his lips, running his tongue back and forth while staring at the rebreather. He stood back up and tightened his mouth. “Damn if I can tell what’s wrong with it,” he said. He looked back at Pati. “I can’t find a single thing wrong with this. The battery is charged, the scrubber was just recycled

yesterday, no connections are loose, and as far as I can tell, there's no blockage. Except, I can't say for certain about the blockage."

"So, blockage might be it," Pati said.

"No, I don't think that at all, because the oxygen you were bleeding into the lines was making it through. I'm only not sure about the blockage because I haven't physically examined each line and determined their condition." He put his hands on his hips. "My point is, I'm not ruling out operator error, Lynch."

Pati had had enough. She'd done everything according to instructions. Now, this clown wants to blame her. "If it's operator error," she said, "then you must be smart enough to know what my error was. So why don't you enlighten this poor little misguided minion who can't even figure out what she's breathing?"

The lighting was bright in the conference room, and white display walls ringed the area. It made seeing the blood rush to his face that much easier. "Lynch," he said. "If you plan on having a job at the end of this day, I'd watch my choice of words."

Little bastard, she thought. An ugly little runt with that smug look on his face trying to lord over her like he held the key to her existence. It was like if she didn't comply with his wishes and desires, she'd be out on the street begging for food and shelter. She clenched her right fist, held it at her side, and tried to stare him down. She started to raise her fist and then stopped. She had to cool down.

There was a trial going on, and right now, she needed every bit of data possible that showed she was an upstanding citizen of the community. Another police record showing violence against a male might keep Jack Reagan from dropping the case.

And she might just get her ass kicked by this son-of-a-bitch. He was only two years from Earth, and even if he'd never been to a gravity clinic, he'd still have the bone density and strength to hurt her bad with a single punch. Bruno and Richard might have been bigger than this jerk, but she probably couldn't even slow him down with a punch twice as hard as what she'd used to kill them.

The conference room door slammed open. "Okay, I want to see this rebreather," Dr. Smith said, as she burst in.

Larry looked at her. "Hey, Dr. Smith, we could probably use your help."

Understatement was the first term that came to Pati's mind.

Larry turned toward the rebreather and pointed. "It looks perfectly fine, except we did get higher than normal CO2 levels registered in the database when she was outside. You have any idea why that would happen?"

At least he didn't have an attitude about it, Pati thought. She saw Dr. Smith lean over and grab the rebreather, much in the same way Larry had, and just like Pati did when she ran her checks on the bus. Dr. Smith ran the same checks, only

in backward order. She turned the rebreather over and pulled the straps and frame away from the apparatus, apparently examining the equipment from the opposite side. Then she pulled the whole apparatus off the pack and sat each piece, still connected, on the table.

Dr. Smith stood back from the table and stared at the rebreather components. She rubbed her forehead with her left hand and then rubbed her chin with the same hand. She reached out and picked up the rebreather again, this time placing the parts as if looking through the frame that held it and again rubbed her forehead and chin. She looked at Larry and shrugged her shoulders. Then she took another look at the rebreather and pulled pieces apart.

It took her twenty minutes, at least. Finally, she held up the scrubber. "This is it," she said.

"You think there's something wrong with the scrubber?" Larry asked.

"Not exactly, Larry. We have a nearly perfect process for recycling the scrubbers. Even if this one got through and the material wasn't recycled, it should still work better than the CO₂ numbers you saw." She paused. "As long as the airflow is in the right direction."

"The arrow pointed in the right direction," Pati said. "I checked it at least twice before I went outside, and I looked at it a hundred times after the rescue vehicle picked me up."

She handed the scrubber to Larry. "Look closely at the arrow and then the fittings," she told him.

He took the scrubber in his thick, hairy right hand. He squinted hard, and in less than a second, his eyes went wide in surprise. He unscrewed a connective piece from the inlet and then checked the inlet. "Oh, crap. Lynch, I probably owe you an apology," he said, while he continued to examine the scrubber.

"What?" Pati said.

Dr. Smith took the scrubber from Larry's hand. She held it up to Pati. "Look at the flares on the arrow, see how the color is slightly different?"

Pati noticed, and she looked at the other end of the arrow and saw the barely recognizable scratch marks that were where flares used to be. "What happened?" she asked.

Larry and Dr. Smith looked at each other, then Dr. Smith turned to her. "Somebody modified the arrow on the scrubber so it could be put in backward. There's an extreme process used to quality control the recycling of these scrubbers, but it's not proof against purposeful tampering." She looked at Larry. "Is there any reason why this should wind up on her rebreather?"

Larry shook his head. "We just hand them out based on availability. I'll get you the name of whoever handed it to her, just remember they were not the one

who placed that scrubber on that particular rebreather.”

“I think we need to call a constable,” Dr. Smith added.

“Yes, we need to do that. If one of my workers did that, I want them rotting in a jail cell on the way back to Earth.”

“Wait,” Pati said. “You think someone tried to kill me.”

Neither Larry nor Dr. Smith seemed to want to answer that question.



* * *

Pati couldn't believe they wanted her back to work at the usual time. She just spent the evening talking to constables about her sabotaged rebreather, and they seemed to be in no hurry to finish or let her go. They continued to press on and on about who might want to see her dead. Pati had no shortage of possibilities since the tragic event on the ice-mining ship, or the accidental death of her husband, and the more they pressed, the more she had answers.

The list of suspects was not encouraging. Pati read through it and didn't know most of the people on the list, only that they worked for a McLearn, or were related to Bruno Redden, or were friends with the twins. It redoubled her desire to get off of Titan the first possible moment.

She had to wait thirty minutes for the trolley when she finally got to leave at the late hour. She walked from the station to her apartment complex. The robot at the desk let her in on sight, and she tramped her way to her apartment upstairs. Once in, she marched through the blue-carpeted and yellow-walled living room, had a quick meal in the kitchenette, and went straight to bed.

Her bedroom had the same color scheme as the living room, and only the white linens on her bed distinguished it from the living room with red leather furniture. She walked to the closet, dropped her work clothes into the laundry shoot, and threw on a soft t-shirt with shorts. They were her underclothes from the prison ship, and she would have trashed them if they weren't so comfortable and easy to sleep in.

Without even a bathroom break, she slipped into bed. She fumed about what jerks the constables were and then stopped her train of thought. If she would sleep at all, she couldn't afford to think about all the wrongs she'd experienced since moving to Titan. It would keep her up for weeks.

She instead thought about what it would be like when she got back to Earth.

The wonderful thoughts relaxed her. She nodded off. She was no longer on Titan.

She was back at the docks, at her hometown of Dingle. It seemed a cloudy day, so cloudy that she didn't notice any color, other than some green here and there, which was normal for Ireland.

The docks were empty, no boats anywhere, and no people. This was not what she was used to. Her father and brothers fished in the old style, and she spent much of her childhood walking down to see them after school. She felt a tinge of guilt dismissing their efforts as "backward" when she became a teenager and, unfortunately, that kind of thinking led her to the other place, which she couldn't quite recall at the moment. Before she could put much thought into the subject, she saw a person.

She stood by the boat ramp on Pati's left. Pati took two steps in her direction, and then she was in front of her. "Hello, Patricia," the little girl said.

The little girl was maybe eight. She wore a traditional Catholic school uniform with a green-gray tartan design. "Who are you?" Pati asked.

The little girl with brownish-red hair replied, "I'm someone very important to you, Patricia."

"Are you from my family?" Pati asked.

The girl slowly shook her head before she answered. "Patricia, I can be more important to you than your family."

"How?"

"I can give you what you want."

"What do I want?"

"Let me show you," she said. She raised both her arms into the air and disappeared. Then the sun became stronger. Not oppressive, just enough for Pati to feel the heat on her skin. Surprisingly, the docks remained as gray as before, but the sky was almost blue, and she could see the sun in its brilliant yellow. Pati felt warm, comfortable, and back where she belonged. The only problem was that nagging buzzer sound, which wouldn't stop.

She opened her eyes. The time to wake up was projected on the ceiling, and it couldn't be right.

"I just went to bed," she said to herself.

6 Machine Judge

Pati had never seen a courtroom till she landed on Titan. And for some reason, she expected most courtrooms on Earth looked the same.

Except, there was nowhere for a judge to sit. Instead, there was a screen whose primary purpose was to display the “score” of the trial. She avoided a trial for Richard’s death because Keebler settled the case with them. This time, she had to deal with Jack Reagan. Nancy said he was reasonable, but Pati had seen nothing to make her agree. He seemed like a tough bastard who only cared about winning cases and putting people in jail, a metric she learned the prosecutors were judged on. Too bad they weren't judged on getting it right. Nancy seemed confident, though, and Pati didn’t worry too much.

Nancy stood at the podium in front of the screen, facing Pati, the prosecutors who sat to Pati’s right, and a small crowd of people behind her. The crowd was here to watch a preliminary hearing of a trial that would not take place for a week, if at all. She could think of better ways to waste one’s time.

The screen displayed the words “Defense Statements.” That meant Nancy completed uploading data and was ready to start the defense. In dramatic portrayals, Pati was accustomed to the prosecutors leading. In today’s hearing, it didn’t matter because the score was calculated regardless of who went first.

“I’ve finished uploading preliminary statements for the defense,” Nancy said to the room. “We still need to conduct an inspection of the mining ship, at which time we can discuss our findings with the prosecution.” Nancy left the podium and sat down next to Pati.

Jack Reagan stood up and took his turn up front. He uploaded the prosecutor’s information, which took about five minutes. He then stood at the podium as the screen displayed, “Prosecutor’s Statement.”

“The state does not, at this time, dispute the information provided by the defendant. The state will only maintain that this trial is far from complete. And, given the gravity of the charges, must be followed to a complete conclusion which requires, no demands, admission of all pertinent facts no matter how difficult those facts are to obtain. The murder of a human being, let alone three, requires a complete and comprehensive investigation. The defendant has a previous record of deadly assault, and to dismiss this case at this time is unacceptable. Even to put a time limit on the trial could easily prevent justice being done.”

“Is he always this long-winded?” Pati whispered to Nancy.

“Yeah, I wish the JJ would get bored with him and give more points in our favor,” Nancy said.

Five minutes later, Jack Reagan left the podium. The screen flashed, “Opening Statements Complete?” Nancy and Jack both replied, “Yes,” at the same time. The screen went blank.

“Okay, let’s see what we get,” Nancy whispered to Pati.

As much as Pati wanted the trial to be finished, at the moment, she was glad this was preliminary. The machine rendering the judgment over her could do anything at the moment. The score would be from one to a hundred. While realistically, the score would not be at either of those extremes, anything could still happen.

If it came back in single digits, that would be the end. Jack Reagan would be taken out of the decision, and Pati would have to be released. Despite this being a preliminary judgment, it would become binding since the accused had a stronger right to their freedom than the state had to incarcerate, to use Nancy’s words.

On the flip side, a score over ninety, and Pati would return to her cell and wait for the final judgment. The reason to detain her was that historically the accused was expected to be sentenced to a long trip back to Earth and likely would become scarce before the final judgment. Pati wouldn’t think twice about going into hiding if that happened.

A score between meant both sides had more work to do. Either obtain additional evidence to strengthen their case, or settle, or both. The bottom line being this preliminary judgment was an official statement on where the case was at with, for the first time, both sides presenting evidence and arguments—the result providing direction on how to proceed.

The screen had not changed in the last minute, and Pati clenched her fists. The crowd had gone quiet, although a few voices were heard. Bailiffs were around the room, carrying tranquilizer guns like the ones the constables carried. Two protected the door, and another two stood equidistant from the podium. Pati felt the security was a bit overkill for a preliminary hearing.

“There,” Nancy said.

Pati saw the screen display a 35.

“Noooo!” a lady screeched.

Pati turned and saw a middle-aged, red-headed lady standing. She looked at Pati, and the look was someone who wanted to kill. Then, her body language softened, and she looked at the ground. “She killed my baby,” she whimpered out loud.

Pati turned back to look at Nancy.

“It’s Bruno Redden’s family there.”

Pati looked again and saw individuals who were probably a father, a brother, a brother’s wife, and maybe a sister. Nobody looked at Pati with sympathy.

“Let’s get back to my office and discuss.”

Pati didn’t need to be told twice. She followed Nancy out of the courtroom.



* * *

“I believe that was a good score?” Pati said. They were back in her office. Nancy sat behind her desk and Pati across from her.

“Well, the score wasn’t enough to get you released immediately, but it’s better than I hoped for at this stage of the trial.”

Pati also hoped, although she had more than one desire. “Okay, so, what’s my chances of making it back to Earth soon?” she asked.

“Well, the only answer I can give you is how much longer the trial will last, and that depends on what the results will be. Getting back to Earth is up to you, although if we get a positive result in the trial, it won’t be long before you’re on your way. Should you still choose to leave.”

Pati nodded, no need to tell Nancy her chances of staying were zero. “All right then,” she said, “what do we do now?”

“We keep looking for data that supports your statements, which is why we’ll inspect the mining ship tomorrow, looking for more evidence. The score the JJ came back with tells me that the prosecutor is living on rhetoric. The only reason he wants to keep the trial going is he hopes more incriminating evidence becomes available, and he thinks there should be no time limit. Except it’s not his call, and the JJ has programs to determine how long it can go before calling it quits. If the engineer can’t restore the mining ship records Jack Reagan is banking on, the JJ goes with your statement and any evidence that supports or contradicts.”

“And he can’t do anything about it?”

“No, not at all. The JJ works without emotion, which generally hurts public defendants more than prosecutors. We’re just lucky this time the rules favor your case. I could never see Jack breaking down in tears in order to get a conviction, but I have seen him play the victim’s fiddle to try to push up a score.”

“That’s why Bruno’s family was there.”

“Another reason why I’m glad we’re working with a JJ and not on Earth. That scream would sink you if there was a jury. The JJ doesn’t even pay attention to statements in the courtroom. Unless you or I make them.”

Pati tried hard not to feel remorse over Bruno, even though there was no reason for Pati to doubt her actions. Bruno attacked her, and he had a chance to stop more than once. They were in an emergency situation, she was in charge, and he attacked her. He got what was coming, and the only thing she wished was the recordings still existed so everyone would know what happened. Still, she couldn’t help but feel a little sympathy for his mother. “You’d think his family would accept that Bruno stepped out of line,” Pati said.

“Pati, when it comes to tragedy, people always look for someone to blame. Even if we had the video showing he attacked you, they’d still want to find a reason to show it was your fault or that you lured him into those actions. Try not to worry about it.”

“Okay, I won’t.”

Nancy sat back and stared at the ceiling. “Even though we had a good score, a score I’d take without thinking if it was the final ruling, it’s time to pour on the heat.” Nancy looked at Pati. “I want to get it even lower in the next hearing. We need to put Jack Reagan in a position where if he continues the trial, he’ll lose his license to practice law.”

“Is that so important?”

“It’s leverage we have to use, Pati. The prosecutors have unlimited funds to do what they do. If they waste resources just because they want to put a hurt on somebody they can’t convict, then there needs to be consequences. Jack Reagan, bulldog personality and all, has to follow all of those rules, and I think if we push the score down, he’ll cut his losses.” She smiled. “Or maybe even accept you’re innocent of the charges, who knows?”

Pati nodded. They should do anything if it helped her case. Three men tried to kill her, and each time they died because she defended herself. Now she was on trial for their murder. The only correct result was to clear her of those charges. Who cared how it happened, or if a lawyer had his career damaged trying to stop it?

“I’ll meet you at the Grand Center tomorrow, and we’ll go down to the spaceport to see your mining ship,” Nancy said. “We’ll then—”

“I thought they won’t let me near the docks with my ankle bracelet,” Pati said. She hadn’t thought of that restriction when Nancy mentioned it before.

“They’ll let you for this. Besides, I need you to show me around. You were living on that tub for three months, and you’re the only source of information on

what happened, so it's a task we have to do." She leaned forward. "You'll be up to it, won't you? I mean, you won't have any problems going back there, will you?"

"No problems at all," she said. Pati didn't even think about her answer. Unless Bruno or the twin's ghosts were there waiting for her, a possibility she could only laugh at, she would have no problem walking back onto her ship again.

Then again, she did see Richard's ghost.



* * *

Why am I back in Dingle again? Pati asked. She was back at the docks and saw old folks walking down to the water. Or did they walk out of the water? She couldn't tell.

It was as gray as last time, and the buildings were as dreary. Even the yellow buildings reminded her more of butter than the bright sun.

"I'm back," a young voice said behind her. Pati turned to see the young girl from before.

"How are you?" Pati asked.

"I'm doing well. Do you still want us to give you what you desire?"

"What do I desire?" Pati wasn't certain what she was expected to say.

"What everyone wants."

This confused Pati. She didn't believe all people desired the same thing. She knew, living in Dingle, she only wanted to live somewhere else. At the other place, she only wanted to leave as well. She never understood where she wanted to be. She always thought she knew, yet the experience of being where she wanted to be never seemed quite the same. Did this girl know where Pati desired to be?

"Where do I want to go?" Pati asked.

"You don't want to go anywhere," she said.

Pati really didn't understand. Okay, she was in Dingle, or was it really Dingle? "Do I desire to stay in Dingle, or just return there?" Pati asked.

"You're not in Dingle. Watch."

Pati watched, and the next moment she was orbiting Saturn like in the mining ship. Again, the colors were grayish with lots of shades, more so than in

Dingle. She remembered watching the same view from monitors in the mining ship, except now it was a panoramic view in three-dimensions.

“We don’t travel here unless we are required,” the girl said, without being seen. In fact, Pati couldn’t see herself at the moment; she just experienced the view traveling around Saturn. Then, up ahead, she saw Titan approach.

“That’s our home since we came to this galaxy,” the girl said.

Pati could see Xanadu and identify where Karakorum would be if not for the clouds. She continued toward Titan as if watching a video. She penetrated to the interior, and the next moment, she existed inside a cavern that resembled the interior of a massive cathedral on Earth. Except the color was gold, a golden-red that glowed. She examined the scene, and she saw more of that glow, or more precisely, objects that glowed.

They were like Richard, or what she saw Richard to be on the mining ship. Hundreds, no, there must have been thousands floating in the cavern.

She felt warmth, goodness, and peace. They didn’t communicate in words, or in any other human method. They somehow could share their emotions with her, and it was simple ecstasy.

“This is what you desire,” the little girl said. The little girl was still only a voice in her head. Pati suspected she was one of the apparitions.

“Yes, I am, we all are, and we’re waiting for you,” the little girl said.

It made sense. If she could transport Pati all this way, the little girl was not a little girl. Pati reviewed the scene, having no desire other than to relax in these feelings. She had questions, as well. Could this be heaven? Was she no longer alive? For the moment, the answers were immaterial. The only problem with this environment was the buzzing noise.

A buzzing noise that woke her up, and she saw the time projected onto the ceiling. “Damn,” she muttered. The dream was so wonderful, it gave her withdrawals just to wake up. She never had such a powerful dream; it couldn’t be real, though.

Pati pushed the covers off and rolled off the bed. She had her meeting with Nancy in a couple of hours. As much as she wanted to go back to bed, and maybe re-experience what she just felt, she wanted to stay out of jail first.



* * *

Pati had to admit, it was grand. She stared up into a scene where Saturn dominated the daytime sky, and the sun could be seen right behind it. The builders of Karakorum built a perfectly transparent ceiling for this regular event. Never in her life had she seen such a sight before she arrived. It was the view of a lifetime she got to see every other week, weather permitting, which wasn't normally the case.

That was probably why they named this the Grand Center. When tourists came to Titan, it was normally on their to-see lists. Pati liked it for shopping.

She sat at an open-air table, eating her oriental food, and researching return trips with the display that sat on the table. There were maybe a hundred four-seat tables in this area, meant to seat various inhabitants of Karakorum during their lunch hour. It was late breakfast now, and it wasn't so crowded.

Unlike on Earth, the tables were secured to the floor because of the low gravity and the need to keep the aisles open for serving robots. Like Earth, it had the odor of a multi-restaurant eating area, and she could smell a potpourri of cooked meats and vegetables.

Pati had ordered her meal from the display. A few minutes later, a robot rolled out to deliver it. It gave her time to enjoy the view of Saturn and research her return trip to Earth.

"There you are," Nancy said, from behind.

Pati had her mouth full of food; she turned around anyway and waved Nancy to sit down across from her.

"I'll let you eat," she said, after taking the seat.

"Thanks," Pati responded, after swallowing what was in her mouth.

"I got the results on your prison clothes," Nancy said.

"What did you find out?"

"The microscopic scans show abrasions exactly where you'd find them if you'd struggled with Bruno. Exactly as you said in your statement. It's the first physical evidence we have backing up your story. And, there's no physical evidence disputing it."

"Awesome," Pati said.

"What are you doing, besides eating?" Nancy asked. She pointed to the display in front of Pati.

"I'm researching trips home," Pati said. She pointed at the display, "I'm hoping to decide soon on how I'll leave Titan."

"Yeah, well, that's looking more certain now. But, we still have lots of work to do to actually make certain."

"Of course. I imagine we're still going down to the spaceport."

"It's a little early, but there's no reason we can't explore some when we get

there. You ready?"

"Certainly, let's go," Pati said. She stood up from her chair, as did Nancy. Nancy walked past Pati after a robot sped through with a covered dish. Pati followed as she navigated through the tables and out through a bazaar of shops. This section replicated the shops one would see at an old Caribbean seaport. Although, the workers were of whatever ethnic group that needed those jobs at the time of hire.

After walking past more shops that only intensified her desire to escape from Titan, they emerged onto Main Street. As the name implied, it was the main thoroughfare in Karakorum and ran north and south. It was thirty meters to the other side, and in-between were routes for groundcars, static walkways, and the trolleys. Since they didn't have a groundcar, they proceeded to the Grand Center Station for the trolley to take them to the spaceport. The traffic was bad, and they had a time avoiding pedestrians and groundcars heading north.

Nancy and Pati stepped around the northbound station and on the walkway over the trolley rails. The southbound station was on the other side, and they entered through the sliding glass door. Nancy, and then Pati, swiped their palms over a reader in a kiosk and entered the boarding area through separate revolving doors. Once through, they met on the metal loading platform.

Unlike the steel-framed building they'd walked through, the platform had no roof. Pati looked up through the transparent ceiling of Grand Center again, and Saturn was still visible. "Do you ever tire of seeing that?" Pati asked Nancy.

Nancy looked up. "It's all I ever knew. You lived next to the ocean on Earth, what was that like?"

Pati sighed. "If it's all you know, you think nothing about it. If you're into blues and greens my home is the most beautiful place on Earth." Pati shrugged, "Of course, that's not something you appreciate as a teenager who never left the place."

Nancy chuckled. "Being a teenager is never easy."

Pati nodded as the trolley approached from their right.

The trolley looked like a subway train with two cars, red paint, and a clanging bell as it slowed and approached. She admitted the designers at least tried to replicate the feel of nineteenth-century public transportation.

A set of doors slid open at the front and back of each car, and the pair entered the back of the leading car. The doors slid closed behind them, and the cars slowly accelerated. The trolley's top speed was forty kilometers per hour, and the driverless vehicle seemed to be at that velocity when Pati looked out to the right. After seeing several administrative buildings, she saw the cross-streets and living complexes speed by. After another stop, they went by her old street. It

went too fast for her to see her house, and maybe that was for the best. Better to just keep thinking forward.

The private factories followed, and most of the people on the train got off at the station there. There was still a significant number of passengers as the trolley slowed and approached the south terminus station.

“We’re here,” Nancy said. Pati didn’t respond but followed Nancy out the sliding glass doors. They walked off the platform, following the crowd, and traversed the walkway to the terminal. Another set of sliding doors opened on their approach, and they entered a passenger terminal that became busy as the crowd entered. Nancy led her over the gray carpet toward blue colored stations. As an older man on the left rose to help them, she turned left and walked to a door on that side. She opened the door and walked through to an open-space office area. To the right was a desk with Nancy’s husband sitting behind it. He waved her over when Pati entered the door.

“Hey, Nancy,” he said to her.

“What’s up,” she responded and hugged him.

“I’ll tell Lani that you’re here,” he said.

“Thanks, we’ll wait.”

He nodded and walked behind her to an office door, next to windows showing that office.

“Why do we need to come here?” Pati asked. “Can’t we just walk out to the ship?”

“Jack Reagan wants to have us escorted. It’s a condition of letting you come to the spaceport.”

Pati sighed and looked back at Nancy’s husband. He left open the door he entered, and he talked to a darker-skin lady at a desk. She put a tablet down, stood up, and towered over him. She let him lead her back to his desk. They were both wearing brown pants and light blue shirts. Lani held her hand out to Nancy as she walked up.

“Counselor, it’s good to see you again,” she said.

“Come on, Lani. You know to call me, Nancy.”

“Okay, sorry about the formality, but I know you’re on business. I didn’t want to be unprofessional.”

“Don’t worry about that. We have a lot to see, and we need your help. I’m on a first-name basis with everyone I work with. Even some of those I work against, so you needn’t worry.”

Lani smiled. Her dark skin surrounded Asian characteristics, although Pati couldn’t tell which country.

“Lani, this is Pati Lynch.”

“Very pleased to meet you, Pati,” she said, holding out her hand.

“And you, too,” Pati replied.

After they shook hands, Nancy looked at Joe. “Honey, we’ll be okay with Lani.”

“Oh, no problem. Lani’s the most knowledgeable stevedore we have here. If she can’t answer your question, nobody can.” He turned to Lani. “And I’m not saying that to get a better rating from my boss.”

Lani and Nancy laughed. Pati wasn’t certain of the relationship, so she held back. Joe smiled until he looked at Pati. Then he turned back to Nancy.

“Well, I’ve been here thirty years, so I should have some knowledge,” Lani said.

Pati still hadn’t gotten used to people on Titan looking so young. If Lani had worked here for thirty years, she looked as if she started in kindergarten. No wrinkles in her face, or streaks of gray hair, and her eyes were as bright as a teenager’s. When Pati got back to Earth, there would be a time in her future where she regretted leaving Titan and its low gravity.

“Let’s get started then,” Nancy said.

Lani led the way to the back of the room. They walked through a door into the massive steel hangar Pati was accustomed to, except they had to walk by all the landers and shuttles instead of going straight to the big ships. There was no shortage of these, with crowds of workers waiting to board.

“It’s the second wave of the morning rush,” Lani said to Nancy and Pati, who followed. “Everyone on their way up to Picus.”

Pati noticed some of the crowd stared at her, then a few pointed. She tried to walk faster and was next to Lani as she moved through the people.

“Don’t worry about it, Pati,” Nancy said when they exited the crowd.

“They won’t stop looking at me.”

“It won’t be for long.” Nancy took the lead with Lani, letting Pati trail a few steps behind. They traversed what turned into a road for support vehicles between the larger space-going vessels. The ceiling was fifty meters above them, except the hangar’s dimensions were box-shape and not half-cylinder like the rest of Karakorum, and there was no sky of Earth projected on the ceiling. It made for a cavernous feel, and she wondered who got the job to do NDT testing outside of this building.

“Right there,” Lani said, pointing to the right.

Pati recognized her mining ship, and the marking 37-C let her know she was correct. She could walk straight to the entry hatch and enter. Instead, she let Lani lead the way, not knowing if she’d mess up some legal issue walking where she shouldn’t.

Lani tapped the code pad next to the hatch, and the door opened in and to the left. Lani walked in, followed by Nancy and Pati. They walked through the tunnel into the common area she'd pulled the plug on.

She was told the twins secured themselves with clothing, as everything that wasn't tied down was swept out into space. All it got them was a state-sponsored funeral, since they had no other family, only each other. They died like they were born, together.

Pati stepped over to the door leading to her room. Instead of walking in, she leaned her back against the wall next to it. Pati slumped down to the floor and broke down in tears.

She only lied when she told Nancy it didn't bother her. As bad as they could be, she really liked Jake and Jeff. They had nobody in the world except each other after their parents died. The poor boys were only ten or eleven then, old enough to have it hurt bad, too young to know how to deal with it. The foster parents they were given were no help, and the state they were wards of acted much like the state that was trying to put her in jail now. It's no wonder they lived a life of crime. Pati wished she could have been better to them. There were probably times when, if she had reached out, or been friendlier, they would have trusted her after what she did to Bruno. They would all three be alive. And, if she didn't have witnesses to the apparition she saw and talked to her, she'd have character witnesses that Bruno could attack his boss when angry.

Nancy sat down next to Pati and put her arms around her. She let Pati lean her head on her shoulder. Lani walked into what was Bruno's room.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Nancy asked.

"No, no," Pati said as she lifted her head and wiped her eyes. "I'm just thinking about how things could have gone differently. The twins never had much of a chance in life, and yes, I regret what I did. This is one of those times when I wish it had been me instead of them."

Nancy hugged her and pulled her arm from Pati's front, leaving the other over her shoulders. "I'd be surprised if you didn't have any remorse. If I remember, with Richard there were a few times you wished you just held back and was quite sorry for what you did. I know this time it's been about doing what you had to do, it seems to have affected worse though."

Pati nodded, it wasn't exactly the same, but Nancy got the idea at least.

"Do you want to do this another day?" Nancy asked.

"No," Pati said. She got up, and Nancy did the same. They both brushed off Pati's clothes, and then Pati brushed off the back of Nancy's business suit. Lani walked back into the room.

"Where do you want to start?" Lani asked.

“Let’s get up to the bridge,” Nancy said. “That’s where the scene of our statement will be.”

Lani nodded and stepped up to the ladder in the center of the room. She climbed four meters into the ceiling. Pati walked over and started up next. The climb felt unusual because her usual practice was to bounce from the floor and use the ladder as a guide as she floated up in zero gravity.

Lani had cleared the landing when Pati climbed through to the bridge. Pati stepped back into what was her command area as Nancy climbed through. She scanned around, and unlike downstairs, it looked exactly as she had left it.

“Lani, could you go back down till I call for you?” Nancy asked. “This is one of those professional moments, and I need to be alone with my client.”

Lani didn’t respond and descended the ladder. Nancy closed the hatch behind her and pulled out a thin device that just fit in her hand. She touched a button on it and then waived for Pati to come closer. “If someone has bugged the area, this will scramble the sound just outside our personal space. We don’t want anyone to hear what you say, even if it would be inadmissible to the JJ.” She held the scanner over her head and then looked around. “Pati, I’d like you to examine the area, and tell me more than what you’ve already told me. When I took your statement, we were just trying to get your version of what happened. This time, I want you to refer to anything you can think of and let the scene help your memory.”

Pati complied. She reviewed landing on the iceberg that day, and how they remotely hooked heat-hoses to the glaciers. They took on their limit for a single iceberg and jumped off to find another. That’s when life-support started going south. Everything happened so fast. So Pati did a slow 360 while Nancy continued to hold the jammer over their heads.

“Nancy, the only difference from my statement I can think of is the apparition. I know you don’t want to bring that into court, but I saw it as plain as I see you now, and it floated right where you’re standing.”

Nancy didn’t lower the jammer. “Okay, tell me what you saw,” she said.

Pati pointed to her command station. “I was standing there when I saw a light reflect against my screen. It was a gold color, and I turned to look. For some reason, I walked to it and stood about there.” Pati pointed halfway between them and the command station. “It addressed me as Pati, so I asked who it was, even though the voice was exactly like Richard’s.”

“What else?”

“Well, it said it was a native of Titan, I think, and it said their people have to have revenge, so it was going to kill me by shutting down the life-support. I asked about my crew, and it said it was regrettable they were involved or

something. Then it went away. Bruno obviously believed the thing, because that's when he tried to kill me."

Nancy rubbed her chin with the left hand, while her right continued to hold the jammer up. "Well, we went through your struggle with Mr. Redden. And you told us about the twins seeing you at some point. Was there anything else?"

"No, I think I've told you everything now, as far as I can remember."

Nancy brought the jammer down and turned it off. "I have to hold it above us so we can hear each other. Kind of like a cone of silence, except you can't see the cone." Nancy tapped on the hatch with her right foot, and the hatch rose up. "Lani, you can come up now," she said.

Lani climbed the ladder and stood before them. "Anything else you need up here?" she asked.

"No," Nancy replied. "I think we're good for now. We'll need to go through the rest of the ship now, but I don't expect we'll need any more private time. You want to lead the way?"

Lani nodded and started back down the ladder. Nancy motioned for Pati to go before her. Pati started down the ladder, having trouble even in one-sixth gravity. When she dropped to the floor, her arms felt like they'd been through a workout.

Nancy dropped to the floor last and turned to Lani. "Okay, Lani, could you give me a tour of this ship? I know Pati could tell me everything, but I've been taxing her about her experience, and she could use a break."

"No problem," Lani said. "Let's walk out to the storage tanks, to begin with. They're the reason for having these ships."

Nancy let Lani lead the way again. Pati just followed, and absolutely agreed with Nancy: she could use a break.



* * *

Nancy had received a call and needed to leave early, letting Lani finish the escort with Pati around the mining ship. Pati didn't do more than inspect and think of anything that could help her defense. Unfortunately, nothing came to mind.

When Pati finished, she told Lani she was done for the day. Lani checked her watch and said that was good because it was time for her lunch. They left the mining ship and backtracked through the uncrowded hangar. They walked past

the administrative offices toward the door, Lani leading the way, and the door opened on their approach.

“No! We talk about it now!” Pati heard a male voice scream as she entered.

Nancy stood in front of Joe’s desk. About five other workers sat at theirs, watching Joe and Nancy, and definitely embarrassed over what was going on.

“Lower your voice, Joe,” Nancy hissed.

Joe noticed Lani at the door, at least that’s what it looked like to Pati. Lani walked toward the pair. They heard Joe continue to talk, albeit in a lower volume. “You’re always too busy to talk at home. You never try and see me to discuss anything. What the hell do you expect me to do?”

“Joe, I’m busy right now and have to go make this appointment. You can believe we’ll discuss this when I get home,” Nancy said. Pati was still approaching and could only see Nancy’s back.

“Don’t count on me being there.”

“Fine,” Nancy said. She turned, saw Pati, and motioned for her to follow. Pati did, and she followed her straight to the trolley station without a word.

Pati didn’t know what to say. She’d hardly been married herself, and she wound up killing her husband. She was the last person to give marital advice. But she felt like she had to say something while they stood on the platform. “Anything else you want from me today?” she asked.

Nancy exhaled and spoke while watching across the tracks, “Was there anything else you noticed while you toured the ship?” she asked.

“No, I couldn’t think of anything. But it helped me to recall the events, and there might be something I think of later.”

“Good. Keep thinking about it tonight. Can you meet me tomorrow morning, around nine? We can discuss anything you might think of and prepare for the hearing later in the morning.”

“I’ve got nothing else to do.”

“Good, I’m confident in your case, although only a fool would risk their freedom and not try to move events more to their favor.”

“How about you, are you okay? Do you need anything?” Pati asked. As much as she wanted to stay professional, she felt some sympathy for Nancy. If she couldn’t offer good advice, an offer of help never hurt.

“No, I’ve got to take care of this on my own. I should have seen it coming and defused the situation before he went off. He’s normally reasonable, and I can fix it tonight, or later if he’s serious about not coming home.” Nancy still looked across the station as if in deep thought, maybe trying to focus on multiple problems, which Pati never could do well. Pati expected tears or some emotional response, yet Nancy stood there like a rock.

Nancy looked right, which was due to the trolley arriving. Pati watched as it slowed to a stop, let the arriving personnel out, and then opened the gates for the boarders. Pati led the way this time, and again boarded the back of the first car. They each grabbed a vertical pole after the doors shut and held on as the trolley accelerated. As selfish as Pati knew her thoughts to be, she couldn't help but worry that Nancy's problems at home could hurt her case.



* * *

Pati walked into her apartment and crashed on the couch. She had little to do after the ship inspection, and had stopped by the clinic for a gravity treatment. It was a little soon since her last visit, and she had to pay for it herself; however, she expected to return to Earth, and every bit helped.

The trolley ride back to her apartment was uneventful, and she had time to reflect on her situation. As long as Nancy kept going, Pati thought she'd be okay. She needed to ensure there would be no problems in her legal representation, and other than the issue with her husband, Nancy would be fine for now.

Nancy's legal firm had another attorney working on the settlement with the McLears. Maybe that was someone Pati should visit, just to network a bit. She didn't need to tell Nancy about it and wouldn't have to apologize if she found out. All it would take was a message to that attorney to arrange a meeting. Of course, Pati would have to find out his or her name first.

"Recent messages," Pati announced to the room. The screen to her front engaged with a listing of recent messages received. Only a single message had arrived since the morning.

"Play message," she said.

The screen activated and displayed a small crowd of people. Her heart dropped when she saw the people, and a sign saying, "Pati, we miss you." It brought an immediate tear to her eye.

"Hey Pati, we all wanted to say hello," her mother said, from the left side of the crowd. She saw most of her family there and her dad on the other side of her mother. In between, she saw her two older brothers with their wives. There was her older sister with her husband. And, in the lower row, her seven nieces and nephews that weren't being held by their moms. Behind them was the house she grew up in, and the grass looked as green as ever. And somehow it was a

sunny day, too.

“We got the message you were done working on Titan, but ran into some difficulties,” her mom continued. “We wanted to send you this to cheer you up. Everyone’s doing well. Your Dad’s going to retire from fishing next year, although I think he’s already retired from working around the house.” She saw her Dad grimace as if struck by a blow, and then smile as if he’d caught a canary. “Tom’s got a new job in information systems, and Kevin bought a pub down by the water, so we’ve a good place to take you when you get home. Sarah finished medical school and is working in Killarney for now.”

Other than her Dad retiring, she already knew most of what her brothers and sister were doing with their lives. Most of that information was from mail messages, though, and it took on a stronger meaning hearing it from her mom.

“And since you’ve been gone, we’ve a few additions to the family.” Her mom walked over to the tallest child. He was a boy about twelve, which Pati knew for certain because that was definitely Tom’s son, Michael. Next to him was Kevin’s girl, Maureen, about eleven. Then there were Tom’s twins, Cathy and Christine, both five years old, and almost as cute as when they were two. The hardest part about leaving Earth was Christine wouldn’t let her go when everyone saw her off at the Shannon spaceport. Did Christine even remember her?

“And this is Kevin’s oldest son, Kevin. You remember he was an infant when you left. And this is Sarah’s boy, Rhett, the one born when you were on your way to Saturn. And this is Kevin’s daughter, Shelly, she was born, if you remember, right after you got married.” Her mom stopped for a second, looked down and wiped her eyes. She looked back at the camera. “I’m still sorry everyone couldn’t be there for the wedding. I know the McLears were willing to pay for the trip, but not all of us could afford to leave Ireland for a whole year. I know you thought you were doing the right thing when you left, and, well, at the time we agreed with you. Anyway... here’s some new additions back here. Josie, come here.” Tom’s wife walked up with Jeffery, his not quite one-year-old son. Pati’s mom took him, and then reached over to Laura, Kevin’s wife, and took the three-month-old Rachael in her other arm.

“Here’s Jeffery and Rachael; we’re hoping they won’t be too much older when you get back to see them. They’re both big eaters, and will be much bigger, except I think they’ll be just as cute as they are now.”

Her mom gave the children back to their mothers. Her brothers were laughing and shaking their heads. Then everyone looked to their right, “Pati, I thought I’d include someone you used to know. Don’t get mad at him, it was my idea.” She waved to the person on her right to walk into the camera angle.

Even after three years, Pati had no problem recognizing Jerry. Tall for an Earthling, maybe two-meters full, he also had that thick head of black hair and blue eyes. Unlike some guys his age, he hadn't put on weight, and those trousers fit him perfectly, as usual.

And three years ago, she would have shut off the message. Her life since then had been like rolling in a tumbling drier, and any hate she felt toward him had dried out like the water.

"Hi Pati," he said. "It's been a while. Just thought I'd tell you that if everything's good, maybe we could meet up when you get back, talk about old times and stuff. Anyway, hope you have a good trip, here's your mom again." He stepped out of the camera angle, and her mom stepped forward.

"Well, I don't want to hit you with a fire hose of emotions, Pati. I wanted everyone to let you know how much we miss you and we're excited you're coming back soon. If you need any help, don't think it's a bother. Love ya, goodbye." The image faded.

Pati laid down on the couch, putting her arm over her eyes. She missed them, too, and the video was what she needed. Her eyes watered while she also smiled. They were the people in her life who would do anything they could for her, just because she was family. Why'd she ever leave?

She would immediately respond to her family. She would not, however, send a video. There was no way she could make it all the way through a video message without breaking down and sobbing.



* * *

Pati arrived at Nancy's office early Friday to review what she planned to do in the JJ hearing later that morning. Pati sat opposite of Nancy, waiting on her to finish.

"Okay, Pati, here's the data I'm putting into the JJ this morning," Nancy said. A video screen emerged from her desk and rotated into Pati's field of vision. Pati read through bullet points that summarized what Nancy would upload to the JJ. It documented that Bruno attacked Pati with intent to kill, and Pati did not know why. The twins shut off life support to the bridge, and blocked any means of escape. She was forced to pull the plug because her life support was failing.

"What do you think?"

Pati continued to stare at the screen. "I'm still not comfortable leaving out the part of the apparition."

Nancy sighed. "It wouldn't be a good idea to include it."

"It's the truth."

"We've no evidence to back it up."

"We've little evidence to back up anything I said."

"Then let me put it this way." Nancy put on the deadly serious look Pati had learned to pay attention to. "Everything we have in your statement is plausible. We said Bruno attacked you and tried to kill you for no reason you know of. His documented history makes that possible. The twins, the same logic applies. This apparition you speak of, there is no documented, verifiable, instances of that happening, anywhere, ever. Because of that, the JJ will give next to no weight to the assertion. And worse of all, because there is no situation the JJ will relate it to, the JJ will lessen the weight of the rest of your statement. True or not, without some evidence from a separate, reliable source that corresponds with what you assert, you're better off not bringing it up." She leaned back in her chair, apparently waiting for Pati to respond.

"I've been through everything that happened a thousand times in my head. And, I am absolutely sure of what I saw. Could we even consider the big picture, that I have been contacted by an alien race, one that apparently can take over a human? While I'm very concerned about what happens at my trial, I also want to know what humanity wants to do about my meeting with an extraterrestrial."

Nancy did not move a muscle. Her face changed not in the least.

"You don't believe me, do you?" Pati asked.

Nancy leaned forward. "Pati, I can believe something happened that leads you to believe you met a ghost or an apparition. But from a legal standpoint, none of that matters. We're here today, right now, to make sure the state doesn't send you back to Earth on a thirty-year trip. I believe you do not deserve that, nor most of the lesser punishments, either. Please, follow me in this. I've been here before and I know what needs to be done. You have a good case, and we only need to stick to our guns so you can walk away free. After that, you can work on the possibility that you interacted with an extraterrestrial. That's an alternative you won't have if you're on a mining ship." She sat back again. "Or a long trip back to Earth."

Pati got the feeling of being a little girl chastised by an adult. But Nancy was absolutely right. She'd worked her butt off to keep Pati from spending a good part of her life in the state's custody. Now, her client wants to bring up what would be important to humanity based on a memory no living human has had. Pati would not deny she saw something that looked like a ghost and claimed to

be Richard. For now, she'd have to keep it to herself. If there were to be a meeting between humanity and extraterrestrials, that was for other people to worry about. "I see your point," Pati said. "Just keep that information to myself?"

"Until the trial is over, definitely."

"All right. What else do we need to do now?"

"What do you think of the data I'm uploading to the JJ? That was my original question."

Pati thought about what she read. The statement didn't exactly portray how she remembered living it. At the same time, nothing in the statement was wrong. "It's good," Pati said.

Nancy nodded. "Fine, Jack Reagan is still hot and heavy on this case, and I want to keep on the offensive. After the last ruling, he's not in a good position, and if we can get a better ruling this time, I think he'll start to crack."

Pati nodded her head, too. Her only concern was, from what she'd seen of that Jack Reagan, another setback wouldn't scare him.



* * *

"Counselor, can I speak with you and your client now?" Jack Reagan asked Nancy. They were in the courtroom, and the JJ just returned a "29" ruling.

"Sure, let's go," Nancy said. She got up and followed Jack Reagan through a door next to the JJ display screen. Pati followed her and emerged into a hallway with a windowed conference room on the left. Jack Reagan walked to the door and opened the lever handle. He let Nancy and Pati walk through. Nancy took a seat next to the head spot, and Pati sat next to her.

Jack Reagan closed the door and took a seat across from them. He put his tablet and a stylus on the table. "I think we need to reach a settlement," he said to Nancy.

Nancy folded her arms. "Well, I can't say I agree," she said.

"And why is that?" Jack said.

"A score of 29, and you think we should settle. You seem to believe that in the next two hearings, that score won't go any lower."

"That's not the point," he said. "I have many cases that I can put more of the state's resources toward if we finish this today. I will concede that Ms. Lynch

may have acted in self-defense and we may never know for sure what happened. Without that certainty, however, I'm still in a situation where people have been murdered, and there must be some restitution to the state. Because the murdered were convicted criminals themselves does not mean I can ignore their fate when choosing a sentence for the perpetrator."

Nancy stood up and motioned for Pati to come with her. "If that's the case, then I don't see why we're here right now." She led Pati around the table and toward the door.

"Counselor, please sit down. I don't plan on wasting anyone's time," he said.

Nancy stopped but did not sit down. "Okay, what's the offer, then?"

Jack Reagan took a breath. "Six months on a mining ship, with at least twelve weekends of leave, spread out over the months."

"Six months!" Nancy spat. "Did I miss something? Or did you not read the JJ score? There's a reason that score went down, and it's because all the evidence that has been discovered since then has supported my client's testimony. And I have every expectation that trend will continue." She nudged Pati to take her seat again and then did the same. She looked back at Jack Reagan. "Unless there's information you're not supplying."

He seemed to think for a moment. "No, not as far as the case is concerned, although the engineers are still working on the records."

"Then what's the information that doesn't concern the case?"

A look of surprise crossed his face. "It concerns your client. May I first ask a question of her before I reveal this information?"

"You can ask. I won't guarantee an answer," Nancy said.

"Fine, Ms. Lynch, have you completed your travel plans back to Earth?"

"Of course not, I'm waiting to see what happens with the trial."

"Then did you plan on taking the two-year cruise? And I only ask because most people choose that and not because I have inside information on your plans."

"Well, that's the primary choice since I won't be in debt when I return, and I can work to pay for most of my passage."

"Then, Nancy, have you discussed with your client any progress Mr. Chevelde has made in negotiating with the McLears?"

"No, I asked him to only report to us if he needed Ms. Lynch's involvement. I wanted us to focus fully on dealing with you."

"Okay, may I state what I've heard on good authority?"

"Does it pertain to this case?" Nancy said.

"It pertains to Ms. Lynch's situation."

"Go ahead, I'll stop you if I need to."

He looked at Pati. “It seems Kerry McLear is willing to provide a significant sum if you renounce any claims to your ex-husband's assets. With that money, you can travel back to Earth on whichever ship you choose and cost would not be a consideration.”

Pati knew that would be a possibility. To hear it from another person, especially an officer of the court, launched an enthusiasm rocket within her. She wanted to dance; she wanted to sing. She wanted off this damn rock.

“Yes, Ms. Lynch, you could probably buy and sell all of us with that much money. However, before you leave, we need to ensure the public doesn't see you as purchasing your way off of Titan.”

“I resent you saying that to my client,” Nancy interrupted.

“I'll get to my point. There's another fast cruiser arriving in four months.” He took a breath. “Give me three months on the ice-miner, with three more weeks of public service, and I'll drop the charges to involuntary human-slaughter. You'll be getting back to Earth faster than if you took the working cruise, which would be the next available if the trial lasts.”

Pati turned to Nancy, who met her stare. Nancy looked back at Jack Reagan. “Can I have a few moments to discuss with my client?”

“Certainly,” he said. He picked up his tablet and walked out of the conference room, shutting the door behind him.

“What do you think, Pati?”

“Besides I'm probably rich?”

“What do you think of his offer?”

“Should I take it?”

“Well, his logic is sensible. You can't spend the money when you're in jail.”

“I should accept the offer, then.”

“No way in hell you should accept his offer,” Nancy said.

“Really?”

“Of course not. He knows this case is falling apart at the seams. The offer is a last-ditch attempt to keep you from walking away scot-free. I say we tell him, thanks, but no thanks. The decision is up to you, though.”

Pati was at a loss. This could be the most important decision of her life. Three months wasn't that long of a time, and it was light-years shorter than a repatriation trip back to Earth. On the other hand, Nancy was sure she'd be walking away with no service to the state, and in her last settlement, she'd gotten better than Pati could have hoped for. “Okay, let's try to be nice,” Pati said.

Nancy got up and walked to the door. She invited Jack Reagan back in, and he took his seat as Nancy took hers.

“Sorry, Jack, not happening on the settlement,” she said.

He looked upset. "I'm not playing games here, counselor."

"Games, you say," Nancy exclaimed. "You should have dropped this case after the first JJ result. Now you think you're saving the state's resources by offering my client a shorter sentence. You must be the one playing games because you seem to think if you lose this case, you'll get a do-over. Well, it doesn't work that way, and if you don't drop this case, and the JJ comes back with a 20, I'll petition to have you removed from the state attorney's office."

Jack Reagan glared at Nancy. He didn't respond, and tapped a few buttons on his tablet with the stylus. "If I don't receive further information from you, counselor, I will see you at the settlement conference next week." He looked at Pati, "Ms. Lynch," he said, and walked out of the conference room.

"He didn't take that well," Pati said.

"Not our problem, Pati. He knows he can't drag you through the mud, trying to wear you down and get a settlement. He seems determined to try, and I guess he's pinning his hopes on the recordings and thinks they'll show something to help convict you."

"Nobody would be happier to have those recordings restored than me. It sucks not being able to tell the whole truth."

"Don't worry about it. We've got a great head of steam here, and if Jack Reagan doesn't get out of the way, his career will get crushed. He'll have no one to blame but himself, because he has so little evidence." Nancy shook her head. "He's not a bad guy; he just doesn't know when to quit."

"Maybe he thinks he's doing the right thing."

Nancy shook her head again. "The right thing would be to leave you alone. You gave your testimony, and all the physical evidence supports it. I would think, after this ruling, he'd accept it. We can hope he'll change his mind; I'm not holding my breath."

"Would you really try to get him fired?"

"It won't be me. If that score goes any lower in the third hearing, it'll go to the mayor's office, and he'll have hell to pay. It's a shame really because he's not a weasel like Keebler, but he'll have to suffer more." She stood up and motioned for Pati to do the same. "That's not our problem. We need to worry only about your case, which, I think, won't go past the last settlement conference."

Pati looked around the conference room before she walked out with Nancy. In this room, she learned that she would soon go free and that she was rich. How much better could it get?

7 The Big Problem

The afternoon and evening had been a complete waste. First, she tried to see the constables investigating the rebreather sabotage. After waiting an hour to see them, they had no answers on the progress of the case. No leads, no persons of interest, and no reason a villain would want to kill her. Pati suspected the reason for the negative answers was a lack of dedication to finding a positive one. A positive answer that might lead to more work and possibly even an arrest, which would be even more work. She stormed out of their office in frustration, having made no new friends.

The rest of the evening, she had zero to do. It was Friday, and like on Earth, a day to celebrate the end of the workweek. Pati didn't dare leave her room, though; she still believed someone was out to get her, and putting herself in harm's way for a good time could wait till she returned to Earth. Then, she could celebrate all week, and not just Friday evening.

With her blank agenda, she turned in early. Unfortunately, the drowsiness wasn't happening right away, and she just laid there on her back. She pulled her arm away from her eyes and stared at the bedroom ceiling. At least in one-sixth gravity, she was comfortable. She let the frustrations of the day subside, and as they did, she relaxed. Within a few minutes, she felt sleep come again.

Then, she was in her bedroom. Not her bedroom, her and Richard's bedroom when she enjoyed the lifestyle of the rich and famous. She sat at her dressing desk, empty of any hair-dressing tool, and the mirror didn't reflect her face. The colors resembled the overcast dock in Dingle, which was strange because she remembered bright colors in this room.

"Hello, Pati," she heard.

She turned and saw Richard standing there. He was wearing a tailored business suit, not the informal clothes he always wore. The only time he sported a business suit was when he had meetings with his father or brother and they required it.

"I am not Richard McLear," Richard said next.

That was a shock. "Who are you then?"

"Call me Temujin."

"Okay, Mr. Temujin, why are you in our bedroom?"

"We have met before."

"I didn't ask you that."

“True, but I needed to introduce myself, and it seemed appropriate to give you a reference because I did not look then how I look now.”

“I don’t remember meeting a Mr. Temujin.”

“I identified myself as Richard McLear because I wanted you to know who ended your life.”

Ended her life? She was still alive. “Nobody has ended my life,” she said.

“True, you escaped your fate. I was highly impressed with your actions.”

She made the connection. This was the apparition that appeared on her water-mining ship as the life support systems went south. He said then his reason for ending her life was revenge for killing Richard, even though he wasn’t Richard, or was he? “So why are you here, talking to me?”

“I’ve decided you’re worth more to me alive,” he said.

“What?”

“By killing Richard McLear, you set my plans back at least one of your lifetimes. I had the perfect host, and like the others, he willingly agreed to the hosting. The anger I directed at you, well, I can only say I’m not proud of my actions because it took exceptional resources to reach you out there amongst the rings, and after all that work, you still survived. Then, my people tried a second time to kill you, and you survived that as well. Since that time, I decided you were far more valuable with us than dead.”

“I still don’t know what you’re getting at.”

“You will.”

“How?”

“You’ll join with one of us. We’ve been trying to entice you using more subtle methods. Unfortunately, my first emissary met with an untimely end when you...”

Pati didn’t interrupt when he paused. He seemed to search for words, although the words were to describe an action she took. She wondered what she did, without wanting to ask this, Mr. Temujin, did he say?

“Had your gravity treatment,” he said. “Few Earthlings have that treatment, and it was the first time we saw what could happen. It affected me, too, because she was one of my, I think the best word is staff, or maybe entourage is the better word. I had to substitute another who is now ready.”

“You want me to join with you?”

“Not me, one of our people.”

“Why would I do that?”

“For this reason,” he said, and as he finished the statement, a wave of ecstasy flowed through her. Just like the other times, only stronger, more powerful.

“Isn’t this what you desire?” she heard Richard, or Mr. Temujin, ask.

She couldn't respond. She could only feel the high, so much like the pain drugs she had received after breaking her leg as a child.

"Is she ready?" Pati heard. It was the child's voice she heard in her dreams.

"That is up to her. I think she is enjoying the experience, aren't you, Pati?" he said.

"Yes."

"Then you want to come with us, don't you?"

She did, only what about her family on Earth? She got the distinct feeling that saying yes now would mean she would never see them again.

"Pati, you must think of yourself, of your own pleasure. Nobody will ever give you pleasure like this," he said.

He was right, and yet, did the ecstasy lessen as he said it? The feeling was still more wonderful than anything she had ever experienced, but because it was less, she felt some depression. She focused again on her family, and the ecstasy lessened even more.

"You don't know what you're doing, Pati," he said.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"You don't want to regret this," he said. "You are being offered an eternity of bliss. To live here on Titan as if you were in the heaven you think about. It can all happen right now."

"I want to go home," she said. She saw the girl standing next to her, on her right. Richard/Temujin stayed to her front. He looked very upset.

"This is what you can expect if you leave," he said. The ecstasy left her, and deep depression filled the void. She no longer wanted to live, because she felt so sad. There was no reason to be sad; she felt sad anyway. And sad was too light a word. It felt as though someone in her family died, that a psychological crutch had been pulled out from her.

"This is what you can expect if you go back to Earth," he said.

"I'm going back to Earth," she replied. Depression or not, she knew what she wanted.

"You won't get away from me another time. Our person nearly killed you outside the walls, and if you don't join us, you'll be dead before you leave here. You should accept the better fate."

"No!" she screamed. She jumped from her chair and launched herself at the being that looked like Richard McLearn. As her hands approached his throat, he sneered. Then, she was in a mist of white and felt a cushion below her.

Pati popped her head up from the pillow. She'd rolled over in her sleep, and from a prone position swung her head as far around as it'd go, and back the other way.

They were there in the room. Reddish-orange apparitions hovering next to her bed, in approximately the same locations as they'd been in her dream. They didn't stay long; she watched them move through the air to the end of her bed, and together they disappeared into the wall.

She rolled over again as they left, sat up, and with her right hand, rubbed her eyes. She checked the time; it was almost four in the morning. She'd been asleep for about five hours. Was the dream that long?

It didn't matter, the thing that tried to kill her had come back. Somehow, it'd gotten into her head and affected her dreams.

But what could she do about it?



* * *

“We need to talk,” Pati said. She'd called Nancy after she woke up, and Nancy had just appeared on the screen. She must have taken a minute to straighten her hair, because otherwise, she couldn't have been sleeping. Low gravity solved many human problems, keeping yourself picture-perfect while sleeping was not one of them.

“Hey, ah, what's going on?” Nancy said.

“I was contacted by the aliens again, this time in my room.”

Nancy's face tightened. “Pati, we're not on a secure line.”

“It's okay, I've got to tell someone, and soon. This can't wait.”

“Your final hearing is next week. It can wait till after then.”

“No, it can't, you see—”

“Stop talking, right now!” Nancy ordered.

Nancy looked busy at her workstation. Pati didn't have a similar arrangement in her apartment and had to use the video screen in the living room to contact people. Pati waited about a minute, and Nancy returned her attention to Pati. “I engaged a security service for the call. It's not cheap, but it'll keep our communications from being tapped.”

“Okay, that sounds good, for now.”

“Speaking of now, do you know what time it is? On a Saturday morning, no less.”

“Yeah, you see, I just had a dream.”

“A dream!”

“No, that’s not just it. You see, Nancy, I was dreaming, kind of like the other dreams I’ve been having. And you see, it all ended, and I saw those things like I saw on my ship, when that thing that pretended to be my ex-husband appeared to me, except, there were two of them.”

“What did they look like?”

“It was the same, goldish-red kind of glowing objects, smaller than us, I think, and they floated.”

“Uh-huh,” Nancy answered.

“Then, after I woke up, and saw them in the room, they floated through the wall and out of my bedroom.”

Nancy hadn’t moved a facial muscle. “No records of this event, I expect,” she said.

“No, I don’t turn that on in my bedroom, why would I? I mean, most people don’t, and why would I expect something like this to happen to me.”

“Those aliens might return, then?”

“No, I don’t think so. The conversations we had, the ones in my dreams, I don’t think they were happy.” Pati paused for a second. “Do you think they might be who’s trying to kill me?”

“Pati, unfortunately, there’s no shortage of people who might want you dead. Could be someone with the McLeers, or with Bruno Redden’s family. Maybe one of the twins had a girlfriend we never discovered or a long-lost friend. And nobody is going to be sympathetic with a former Marie Antoinette who fell from her lofty position.”

Pati stared back at the screen. “That wasn’t nice.”

“Yeah, okay, you’re right. Sorry about that, it’s just that you got me up early on a Saturday and, to be honest, Pati, I not sure what I can tell you that I haven’t told you already. No matter what happens, unless you come up with some real proof, proof other than your personal witness, you can’t go public with this before your final hearing.”

“Yeah, but they might be trying to kill me. First, there are a lot of unanswered questions about my ship’s life support going south if we don’t have an alien taking credit to kill me. Then, there’s the sabotaged rebreather, again, a lot of unanswered questions, and maybe we have a possessed person like what happened to my ex-husband. And, I’m pretty sure that’s what the aliens wanted with me just now. They said they wanted me to join with them, except I wanted to go back to Earth too bad, and...”

Nancy, again, didn’t move a facial muscle.

Pati decided not to ask Nancy if she believed her. “These things keep happening to me,” she said, “and I’m not crazy. You could have used that as a

defense if that possibility existed.”

“Yeah, I know, you’re not crazy. That’s why it’s so difficult to dismiss what you’re saying, which I’m not doing. I have to consider your legal case first. Which I believe I’m right in doing.”

“Nancy, you see, these dreams—”

“Are dreams, Pati. We have zero proof to justify any statements you make about your dreams, and while we can certify you’re not crazy, it will be far better if we don’t have to go that route in the first place.”

“Nancy, I have to do something.”

Nancy paused, she did move her facial muscles though and seemed in thought. “Okay, we can talk about who you want to see after we settle with Jack Reagan this week.”

“You want to wait that long to discuss it?”

“No, we can discuss it on Monday morning. I just don’t want you speaking about this to anyone until after we settle with him on Tuesday.”

“Then, we won’t be getting in front of the JJ next Thursday for a final hearing?”

“Well, I don’t want to beat Jack Reagan up too bad. As long as you’re good with a month or so of labor dedicated to the state.”

“I’m good, as long as I don’t have to go out on an ice-miner again.”

“I think we can give him enough to settle with us. At least, I’m pretty sure he’ll settle. He can’t afford professionally to let the JJ score get below twenty, and we’re close to that. You’ll walk free then.”

“Which would be better.”

“However, it’s not guaranteed, I don’t advise we neglect a settlement.”

“Okay,” Pati said.

“So, we’re good about keeping the alien thing under wraps till then?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“And, I can get back to sleep.”

“Sorry about that, I’ll try and call during business hours next time.”

“That’s okay. I’ll see you on Monday.”

“Right, see you then,” Pati said. She turned her screen off and ended the conversation.



* * *

Pati marched into Nancy's office first thing Monday morning. The building was empty, making Pati afraid she'd arrived too early. Making her way through the building, she arrived at Nancy's door and knocked. Nancy let her in.

It surprised Pati how tired she looked. Her clothes were clean and unwrinkled, so she hadn't been sitting at her desk all night. The look on her face suggested otherwise. The redness in her eyes did as well.

Despite her obvious exhaustion, Nancy launched into a long dissertation on needing to wait to release any information contrary to their defense. The fatigue she showed did not match the energy she put into the argument, which couldn't really be called an argument because she did all the talking. When she had finished, Pati could only agree.

The door behind Pati slammed open.

"Where were you!" Joe Tate screamed.

"Who said you could come in here!" Nancy screamed back.

Pati backed into the wall on her left to get out of the line of fire. Joe had a red in his face that Pati learned in Ireland meant he was close to crazy. His eyes were bulging out, and some of the veins in his neck and head were noticeable. Her instincts were to not get in his way.

But what if he attacked Nancy? She would feel the need to jump in and help, except she would stand little chance of holding him back. Damn, there were way too many Earth immigrants here!

Joe slammed the door behind him and stomped up to Nancy's desk. He didn't note Pati's presence in any way. "You were supposed to meet me," he said at slightly less than a yell. "Meet me an hour ago, and you didn't show up. What the hell was I supposed to do?"

"That doesn't give you the right to come storming in here. Now get out!"

"We're settling this, right here, right now."

"We are not doing anything until you get out of here."

Joe shook his head at her. His face seemed even redder than when he walked in; the veins, even more prominent. He leaned forward and put his hands on her desk. "If you try to make me leave, you will regret it," he said.

"You will already regret this," she said back. "I'm not afraid of having you arrested."

Pati caught a slight smile in his profile, "You know, I'm not worried about that. What can they do to me?"

Nancy fidgeted, which was the most unusual action Pati had seen so far in this high-decibel verbal battle. Pati waited for her reply because in the time she'd known Nancy, she was as skilled with the word as a samurai with the sword. For some reason, she was speechless.

“What do you want to do?” Joe asked. His voice seemed less violent, almost giving her an opportunity to negotiate or compromise. His body seemed less tense, the red had gone from his face, and the veins were no longer visible. Pati sensed he would not be violent.

“I asked you to leave,” Nancy replied.

“That’s all you got to say,” he said.

“We got nothing to talk about, I mean, it’s not like you’ve tried to hide your intentions. I know you want to go back to Earth,” she said.

“I’ve never said that,” he said.

“No, but you go to the gravity clinic every month. That’s a lot of pain to take for someone who plans to spend the rest of their life with me.”

“That doesn’t mean I plan on leaving.”

“What else could it be? And since I can never visit Earth, it’s plain you’re going to leave me anyway.”

“Look, I—”

“This is not about me, it’s about you waiting till you have the right time to leave. You keep acting like you want us to stay together, but you only want me until you’re ready to leave. Why should I respond to you when that’s what I can expect will happen?”

Joe stood up straight. All the aggressive energy that dissipated from his body about a minute ago had built back up. He raised his hands off the desk as he stood straight, put them on his hips while he stared at her, and then he brought his hands up. Pati sensed an animal about to spring.

“You act like this arrangement has been good for me,” Nancy continued. “You would work all the time—”

“How else can I make a living?” His fists clenched, tightened, and opened again.

“We make a living, not just you. There’s more than enough money for us both, so you must be trying to save up to go back to Earth, where I can’t possibly live.”

“You could, if you tried,” Joe gritted through his teeth.

“I’m not going to go through that torture. You knew I couldn’t go to Earth when you asked me to marry you; now you want to change everything just because you’re a failure here on Titan. All the other immigrants that come here become successful, and somehow you’re the one who can’t make it, and you want me to follow you like a puppy dog back to Earth when you’re the one with his tail between his legs!”

Pati saw the moment he began his lunge across her desk to throttle her. It was like slow motion when he first went back on his heels, and then the legs would

spring, pushing the rest of his body into a leap—but the door slammed back open.

“All right, nobody move,” the first man in the blue jumpsuit said. He was one of two, and although shorter than the other, he stood as tall as Nancy. Both had tranquilizer handguns attached to their black belts. However, it was their size and Aryan facial features that physically dominated the room. “We had complaints about the noise, folks,” he added.

Joe stopped and then stood straight up, seemingly innocent.

“Thank you for coming, constable,” Nancy said. “You’re the two new-hires from Earth, correct?” Nancy mentioned earlier she kept an eye on the police force enlisted to protect and serve Karakorum. If she didn’t know these two by name, she knew where they came from.

“Yes, ma’am, we are. I’m Constable Reich, and this is Constable Shultz. We’ve been here on Titan the last six months. Constable-Sergeant Jones had us patrolling the buildings in this area, and we heard shouting. Do you need any assistance?”

He looked at Joe after he posed the question. Joe had initially looked in their direction when they walked in. Joe then turned back to look at Nancy and kept looking at her during the conversation.

“That depends,” Nancy said. She looked at Joe, “Are we done?”

Joe looked at his feet and exhaled. “Yeah, we’re done,” he said. He turned and walked past the constables who moved out of the shorter man’s path. Joe walked out the door and turned left toward the exit.

“Will he be back after we leave?” Constable Reich asked.

“No, he won’t be back,” Nancy said.

“Good, we’ll follow him out, and if he tries to return, we’ll intervene,” he said. He walked out, followed by Constable Shultz, who shut the door behind him.

“I’m sorry you had to see that, Pati,” Nancy said. She sat down, looking more exhausted than she did before.

“Can you go home?” Pati asked. She’d seen this back home in Dingle, except it was her older brother who couldn’t go home. Fortunately, he stayed with their parents till it all blew over, and they got back together.

“Yes, he didn’t come home over the weekend, so I don’t expect he’ll be there tonight. I’ll probably change the entry permissions when I get back.”

“I’d thought you’d have to get the court to allow that,” Pati said. “I mean, you’re a great lawyer, but I have trouble believing even you could pull that off.”

Nancy seemed to think for a second, and then said, “He lost his job right after we visited the spaceport. That and his absence will give me the legal

standing I need.”

It was a cold statement, and apparently, Nancy’s ability to hold back her feelings were finally breached. She looked down and sobbed. Nancy put her arms on her desk and sunk her head into them, crying, weeping, and trying hard to stop, without success.

Pati’s dormant maternal instincts kicked in. She got out of her chair, walked over to Nancy, and hugged her from behind.

“Maybe I can help you,” Pati said.

“No, no, it’s all right,” Nancy said. Her sobbing waned, and she went silent. Pati wondered if she fell asleep when she lifted her head and took Pati’s right hand in hers.

“Thanks, Pati, I know I can’t compare my problems to yours; it’s just all these things happening from different directions that I can’t control.” She let go of Pati’s hand and turned to look her in the eyes. “I will take care of you, though; you can count on it.”

Pati didn’t doubt her.

8 Mass Media

Pati couldn't help but feel Nancy might not be at one hundred percent as her attorney. The next few days were critical; the time Pati needed her the most. If worse came to worst, she could relieve Nancy and find another lawyer to represent her. That action, unfortunately, had significant drawbacks. It would take more time, so escaping Titan wouldn't happen soon, and there weren't many lawyers as good as Nancy on Titan.

Pati mulled it over lunch at the Grand Center. After filling herself with a light meal comprised of chicken, eggs, rice, and spices she couldn't name, she walked to the trolley station. This took almost as long as the trip there because the lunch crowd was getting out and heading back to work.

She waited, followed, and then entered the station for the north-bound line. There were so many people on the platform that the next train filled up before she could get on. The doors shut in front of her, while the windows showed a car packed with people.

With nowhere to be that afternoon, she didn't worry. Some people shouted expletives after being denied a ride, and one guy punched the side of the train as it pulled away. Pati hid her smile, thinking the man might accost her for finding humor in his distress. She would walk away if he did, although, with this tight crowd, she might not be able to.

She stood straight up on the edge of the platform, hoping to take up even less space. Everyone else around her was taller, even the crowd on the other side waiting for their train heading south, which she heard coming from her right.

Like the northbound train that'd just left, the people squeezed in. Pati could no longer see through the windows to the other side and expected some would be left to wait for the next train like herself. The train didn't leave right away, though.

She heard the clanging from the left side. She didn't bother leaning over like most people to observe a train she already knew would soon arrive. Pati just stared ahead at the southbound train and waited, when she felt a push in the small of her back.

Pati couldn't keep her balance. She fell off the platform and into the path of the northbound train. The distance down was little more than a meter. A distance that took longer to fall than on Earth, and long enough to let the train get within striking distance.

The southbound train blocked one means of escape. The platform was flush with the northbound train, blocking another. When Pati struck the steel rails, the train had only a few more meters to get to her. It looked heavy enough to crush her to death, even in one-sixth gravity.

Her torso bounced from one track, and the track gauge was short enough she could grab the other rail as she hit. She swung her feet under her into a crouch. The clanging filled her ears, each clang getting louder and louder.

The danger flashed into her brain: avoid the wheels. No time to plan. She had to act. From her crouching position, she jumped straight up, facing the train that rapidly approached.

On Titan, she could jump over a four-meter-high train. Time was not on her side, however, and the train's windshield met her as she rose. The force launched her down the tracks. Her body flew out the north side of the station, and she landed on her back, hitting a rail. Her body twisted, and she rolled perpendicular to the rail for a few meters. She stopped rolling face down.

Pati didn't stop thinking. She popped her head up to see where she was. She stopped between the northbound and southbound tracks and was apparently safe. Her right-side torso ached, maybe she broke a rib or two?

"Are you okay?" a man's voice said.

The station was to her left, and from that direction, she saw the man in a light-brown utility uniform. Of European descent like herself, he looked tall enough to be a secgen.

"Ah, I just got hit by the train," she replied, without getting up.

"Don't move then," he said. He carried a package. He set it next to Pati and pulled out a handheld device to scan her body. "I'm Mike Fineman, the station-master here. Let me check you for injuries."

Pati didn't argue. She studied the surrounding area and decided no other dangers awaited. She relaxed for the moment.

"You're obviously Earth-born," he said while scanning her body.

"I think my ribs are broken," she replied.

He focused on her torso and spent a few more seconds with it. "No, just bruised. Nothing inside of your ribcage has been damaged, so that's good news." He scanned her legs up and down and placed the handheld back in the package. He helped her to her feet. "Looks like you came out of this little worse for the wear."

"Did you see who pushed me?" Pati asked.

"That's why you fell?"

"I didn't jump."

"We might have the event recorded, except it was really crowded, and, well,

you're not very tall. I don't know if the recordings will show who was near you."

"What about the people there now?" Pati asked. "Can you ask them?"

"I can call the constables, but I think if someone pushed you, they're gone by now."

Pati tried to take a deep breath, feeling the pain in her right side as she did. "Shouldn't the train at least try to stop when someone falls in front of it? I mean, aren't there safety measures for that kind of event?"

The station-master looked down. He then reached for Pati's arm. "Let's clear the track so the train can get through," he said.

"Wait, answer my question," she said.

He met her eyes. "Okay, there are brakes in the station that's supposed to bring the train to a quick stop if someone falls in, but that didn't happen."

"Why not?"

He shrugged. "I think, because we had maintenance on the tracks this morning, and those brakes were not re-activated after testing. That's the only explanation I can think of before I investigate and I don't want to bias my opinion by speculating now." He pulled her arm. "Come on, we need to get off the tracks."

Pati let him pull her to the side. He then let go of her arm, and they walked back to the station. The train that hit her clanged and pulled out, heading north full of passengers. She saw the faces staring at her as it headed north, and she wondered which one of them had pushed her.

This Mike was right, though. Whoever pushed her would have admitted to the act right away if it was an accident. They were long gone because it was intentional, or maybe it was an accident and the person was too scared to come forward?

She wondered if the constables would investigate what happened. Given how they investigated her rebreather sabotage, she wasn't hopeful. It was time for her to act because people were still trying to kill her.



* * *

Pati decided against seeing a doctor. The first aid kit the station-master used on her told her all she needed to know, and the bruises would heal on their own in a few days. Right now, she had to find a way to prevent future accidents from

happening to her.

Instead of taking the train south, she walked toward the administrative buildings next to the Grand Center. The building she entered looked like the rest: the main entrance, winged by three floors of office windows, and elevators behind a static robot acting as a receptionist. She passed the robot without asking a question and took the middle elevator up to the third floor.

The offices of the Titan Entertainment Network were unassuming. A simple plaque on the door, down the hallway from an architect's office, and across from an energy contractor. It functioned as the only local entertainment source for the Saturnian system. A space that could hold millions of Earths, it served only twenty-five thousand people.

She had to tell somebody about the apparitions. Pati had been contacted multiple times by extraterrestrials, and it was time to get the word out if only to keep the aliens from killing her. Nancy said not to, and would probably kill Pati for coming here. It wasn't Nancy's life, though.

Pati pushed the doorbell and heard an old-fashion buzzing sound. "Come in," the English-accented male voice told her, and she almost laughed hearing it. With English as the primary language of humanity, throughout an entire solar system, it seemed incredible that she could still distinguish her Irish accent from an English one, even with the lands separated by only a saltwater river.

She didn't dwell and stepped through the door into an open-space office. She noted six, maybe seven desks, with people hard at work on meter-wide screens. Not one of them lifted their head to note that she'd walked into the room.

"Hello," she said to the room.

None of the workers took notice. She waited a minute to see if one would finish their task and greet her. After two minutes, she tried again with a slightly louder voice, with the same result. The nearest desk had a young lady with blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail. She approached her.

"Pati, you made it," Connie Pearson said from behind.

She wore the same business attire as when she visited Pati at her old house, and she looked the same as that time. Pati extended her hand, "I'm glad you could meet with me with such short notice."

"No problem at all, do you want to come back to my office?"

"Sure," Pati said. Connie turned and walked toward the end of the large room. Pati caught up with her and leaned in close as they passed a worker at his desk. "What, do they do?" Pati asked, pointing back at the workers.

Connie stopped and looked around. "They build our local television shows. We need content and would have to purchase it from Earth if we didn't have them. Pretty much every local television show you've watched since you came

to Titan began on those screens.”

“Where are the actors?”

“Can’t afford to bring them here, and the computers easily replicate them on the screen. Earth has an abundance of performing arts people, so it’s never too expensive to shoot a pic there. Here, they’d just be an unnecessary expense.”

It surprised Pati to hear this, but when she gave it some thought it made sense. Back when she was married to Richard, she had time to watch some shows they produced here on Titan, and the characters were as real as anything she’d seen on Earth. One of the male leads had her thinking about sending him a message if Richard divorced her. Maybe the simulated actors were too good to be true.

Pati returned to the real world as they stepped into Connie’s office, and unlike most offices she walked into, she had to study her walls. “How much did it cost you to ship all of this?” Pati asked.

The office walls were made of the fake wood used throughout Karakorum, but on the dark-brown walls were sports memorabilia, plaques of accomplishment, pictures of families, and items she couldn’t quite identify. She saw more of the trinkets hanging on the walls than she could see of the walls.

“Please, sit here,” Connie said, motioning to a small, round table with two chairs that sat in a corner next to the door. Pati walked left and took one of the padded chairs opposite Connie’s desk. Connie stepped behind her desk and pulled out a tablet and stylus. She then took the other chair at the table, putting the table and stylus on top.

“You’ve something critical to discuss with me,” Connie said. She drew a few lines with the stylus as she made the statement.

“What are you doing with the tablet?” Pati asked.

“It’s called shorthand. I can record words better than with voice recordings, and I can put my own notes alongside. It took me a long time to master, but it’s paid dividends many times over.”

Pati nodded, somewhat fascinated with the idea of writing notes.

“What do you want to tell me?” Connie asked.

The question reminded Pati why she was there, and she didn’t know where to start. “I’ve been contacted by extraterrestrials,” she said, and waited for Connie to kick her out of her office.

Connie did not break eye contact as she took her notes, and her expression widened slightly after Pati made the declaration. Her stylus stopped; she put it on the table, and she leaned forward. “How?” she asked.

“You believe me?” Pati said.

“It depends on what you tell me. Your story will have to make sense.”

Pati nodded. "Yes, I see what you mean. How do you want me to tell you what happened?"

"Start talking. I'll interrupt only if I have to."

Pati told her about the dreams, how she met the girl, and about the ecstasy she would feel at the end of the dream. She told her about seeing Richard in her dream, and after the fight, how she woke up and saw the apparitions in her bedroom. Finally, she went through how it related to three separate attempts to kill her, and how she didn't want a fourth.

Connie took notes without asking questions.

Pati stopped talking and waited. Connie kept writing notes.

"The apparitions were just like what I saw in my dreams," Pati added.

Connie continued to write notes and did not indicate she had any intention of asking a question.

"Since it was like what I saw on the mining ship, I'm convinced the things are real, or at least real beings. Things that are living and are like us. Except they're not like us, only that they're people."

Connie didn't stop taking notes.

"And, I think the one who talked to me had taken over Richard McLear," Pati said.

"Why?" Connie finally asked.

"Oh, because he's always identified himself as Richard, although he said he's got a different name."

"What's that?"

"I can't remember. Something that began with a T. He said he was linked with Richard somehow."

Pati stopped talking. Connie continued to take notes. Pati waited her out this time.

"You said that you saw the apparition on the mining ship. Did this have anything to do with the mutiny you alleged happened?"

Damn, Pati thought. If Nancy wanted to kill her for coming here before, she'd mutilate the body for this. Pati resolved before she met with Connie not to talk about what happened on the mining ship. That was for the trial, and she could discuss enough of what she'd experienced since then to get her point across.

But maybe she could also use this to her advantage. "Connie, I didn't mean to discuss what happened on the mining ship. Because of my trial, I really shouldn't talk about it, so I need you to promise me something."

Connie put her stylus down and leaned back. "What do you need? Because I'm the one that needs your information. I will not dictate conditions."

“Thanks, Connie, I appreciate you saying that. I need you to wait until after they reach the verdict before publishing anything I tell you.”

Connie shrugged. “It’ll take me at least a week to get the story in order, and your trial ends this week, I think.”

“I’m meeting with my lawyer tomorrow for final preparation,” Pati said.

“Is everything going well?” Connie asked.

Pati nodded. “I think so. We’re not necessarily going to settle, and the preliminary scores would have me acquitted if final. After tomorrow I should be able to get rid of this.” Pati lifted her ankle above the table and pointed to the bracelet.

Connie studied the bracelet for a second. “Weren’t you down at the docks a few days ago with Nancy Tate? I thought you weren’t allowed to be there if you’re wearing one of those.”

“Nancy got me permission to be there. We were going through the mining ship to help build my case.”

“They let you back on your ship?”

“It was a tough time, too. I hated reliving the events.”

“Like meeting with the apparition,” Connie said.

Pati recognized the statement as trying to draw out more information, although Connie was no longer taking notes. “Do you need me to go into that yet? Like I said, I’d rather wait until after the trial.”

Connie smiled. “I want to hear as much as possible, because I assume you don’t have any hard evidence I can use.”

Pati shook her head.

“Normally, that would be a problem,” Connie said. “Except, and I need you to keep quiet about this too, I’ve been told about other people seeing the same apparitions, and much like how you describe it.”

Pati noticed her own jaw had just dropped. She closed her mouth, thought about what Connie said, and realized it shouldn’t be so surprising. If these beings existed on Titan, and they had already taken over Richard McLear, why wouldn’t other humans have been contacted?

“What do we do, then?” Pati asked.

“It depends on what you tell me. I’m not just putting together a story, I’m trying to build a case that not just our government, but humanity must react to. I like the idea that I’ll be the one who presents the problem. However, I think it’s more important to ensure the right people find out about this.”

“Who are the right people? I spent the last few weeks trying to figure out who I’d call first. If you hadn’t been good to me in the past, I might have gone to the constables.”

“And that’s the problem. Had you gone to the police, there might be someone in their command who’d cover-up everything. That can easily happen with governments because somebody stands to lose in these situations. With us, we get it out there, and the people force the issue on the elected officials.”

Pati liked the sound of that, and it made her happy she talked to Connie first. Once Connie got the word out, the whole solar system would know they were not alone, and it wouldn’t be up to Pati to deal with it. Primarily because she’d be on a cruise back to Earth. “I’m glad I came here,” Pati said.

Connie nodded. “So, can we go over what happened on the mining ship?” she asked.

Pati didn’t think in words, she thought in feelings, and the feelings were positive. “Sure, here’s what happened.”



* * *

Pati had a great breakfast at the plaza. It contrasted with the trouble she had sleeping the night before. After spilling her guts to Connie Pearson, she walked home and locked the doors behind her. She set alarms to let her know if the oxygen in the apartment got too low, or if the power went out, or if an air contaminant or radiation invaded her space.

No alarms went off that night. However, any noise out of the ordinary had her jumping out of bed, ready to face whatever might try to harm her. The paranoia robbed her of a half night’s sleep.

She did get to sleep, and then slept in a little longer, telling the alarms to wait until the last minute. There was only enough time to dress and take the trolley down to the Grand Center. She’d overcome her fear of the trolley, except she wouldn’t stand on the edge of the platform when waiting to board.

After breakfast, she strode to Nancy’s office. They had more work to prepare for the settlement conference with Jack Reagan, and Pati felt ready to get to it. Everything was going according to Nancy’s plan, if not always smooth.

Soon, she was outside Nancy’s office door. She knocked, unlike what Joe Tate did yesterday.

“Come in,” Nancy said through the intercom. Pati noticed her voice seemed harsh. However, Pati did as Nancy invited and walked through the door.

Nancy’s expression looked even harsher than her voice had been. Pati

approached her desk and stood by the chair she usually sat in. “What’s wrong?” Pati asked.

“Well, for starters,” Nancy said, “the Titan News Network is reporting you had a visit from extraterrestrials.”



* * *

Pati decided she’d wait till later to kick Connie Pearson’s ass. Nancy fumed, and right now, she was the most important person in Pati’s life. She sat down in the chair. “Nancy, I’m sorry, I didn’t expect this to get out.”

“At least there’s that. But, Pati, how can I say this best,” she stopped to take a breath. Nancy looked to the side and took another breath, and then stared right back at Pati. “This is serious, woman!”

“I, I, uh, Nancy.”

“What do you want from me? I’m busting my ass for you, and this is war. I had the enemy beaten, and you just gave him more ammo to keep fighting. Don’t you understand, we have to have the discipline to win this, and that includes not talking to reporters about anything that doesn’t help our case?”

“Okay, Nancy, so what do we do?”

“You know, Pati, these people here on Titan have kept capital punishment as a sentence option. Since you’ve killed four people, which Jack Reagan will point out is three more than anyone else ever in the Saturnian system, we have to consider that as a possible outcome. And the only way you get home then is if your family pays to transport your body. You get that?”

Pati looked up, exhaled. “Oh shit,” she said in her next breath.

“Yes, your existence is on the line. How-bad-do-you-want-to-live? That needs to be your thought process. There is nothing so important that you should let it threaten your life.”

“It’s all true, though,” Pati said.

“Maybe, maybe not. Unfortunately, the news report is an admissible statement that has no basis in verifiable facts. You might be right, but there’s nothing you can hand me that supports what you said to the reporter.”

Nancy sat back, and her expression softened. “Okay, now that I’ve gotten that off my chest, let me tell you what I thought about after deciding how I’d bitch you out for what you did.”

“Please,” Pati said.

“Like I said before, I think we settle with Jack Reagan this afternoon. Despite the hammering your credibility took with the media report, we’ll still carry the day if he wants to get in front of the JJ. I’ve written up a final argument that negates anything he’s brought forward so far. If he wants to bring in anything new, he needs to have already forwarded us that information.”

Pati only nodded.

“Did you get a good night’s rest?”

“No, didn’t you hear, I got pushed onto the tracks at the Grand Center station?”

“I heard you came out okay.”

“Yeah, but someone tried to kill me.”

“Ah, that would be hard to do since you’re Earth-born.”

“It still could have happened if I didn’t jump out of the way.”

“Yeah, but.” Nancy took a breath. “Okay, I see what you mean. I will not say you’re seeing shadows, just for now, keep quiet about it. Watching your back is never a bad idea, anyway.”

“I don’t like it.”

“We need you to keep your head low until after we settle. Or, the latest, on Thursday after we beat Jack Reagan in court.”

Pati shook her head.

“Pati, you’ll be fine.”

Nancy seemed confident. Pati normally would feel fine with that look. Too many odd accidents had happened, though, and her paranoia ebbed and flowed with her mood. If she was logical about it, she’d assume these accidents were random chance, except there was something personal about each one. And seeing those apparitions didn’t help.

“You want to stay here till we go see Jack Reagan?”

“Don’t we have to finish preparing anyway?” Pati asked.

“No, not really, I’ve got all I need. We can work on it some more if that will make you feel better.”

“I don’t think that’ll help.” She stood up. “I’ll go home and change clothes for the settlement conference.”

“It’s not till this afternoon.”

“I’ll walk. It’s harder for accidents to happen that way.”

“If you think that’s best.” Nancy got up and escorted her to the door. Pati walked into the hallway, and Nancy shut the door behind her.



* * *

Pati stood outside the conference room door in a brilliantly lit hallway with brown walls, darker-brown doors, and no windows. These negotiations would be both confidential and recorded, so they wouldn't use the rooms they'd already used. She hoped it would be the last conference room she saw on Titan. Just like she hoped she'd never step foot into the courts building ever again, and just like she hoped she'd never see Titan again in a few months.

The walk back to her apartment did nothing to dissuade her from leaving as soon as possible. Where before, it was just a few people who stared and turned away as she looked back. After the news report from last night, she took the center of attention no matter where she walked. She tried to take the train, just to hurry the process, and teenagers on the platform taunted the "alien-lady." The thought made Pati clutch her fists, so she took a deep breath. She had to calm down and focus on the task ahead.

Pati straightened out the black business suit Nancy had picked out for her. Everything else to this point was preliminary. Now it was crunch time. Nancy wanted Pati to dress for the occasion because a lack of respect for the prosecutors would weigh against a defendant, and dressing professionally was a defense against that.

Pati heard Nancy's voice down the hall, and soon she approached, wearing her brown business suit and carrying her black briefcase. "You doing all right?" Nancy asked.

"I'm good, just wondering what it'll be like traveling with the rich and famous back to Earth."

"How's the settlement going, then?"

"I had a message from Joel Chevelde. He sent me a proposal from the McLears."

"Excellent, what's he think?"

"He thinks it sucks. It blew my socks off, though."

"He can be greedy when he wants to be."

"You don't think I should listen to him?"

"No, you should. I meant greedy in a good way, in how he fights for a client. If you're happy with what they're offering, and he thinks he can get more, tell him to counteroffer and see what they say. Since I don't expect you want half the company, and you don't want a big fight, tell him to accept whatever they come

back with. Take the money and run.”

“I like the sound of that.”

“Thought you would, but first, we have to get you from under your responsibility to the state.”

“Right, so how are you feeling?” Pati asked.

Nancy shrugged. “I’m all right. Not a lot of sleep last night. I watched video until I passed out. That’s how I found out about you talking with Connie Pearson.” She nodded to the door Pati stood next to. “Ready?”

“Yeah, let’s go.”

Nancy opened the door and led Pati in. The room was small for conferences, although it only held a small table with two seats on each side. There were video screens on both ends, while the wall with the door and opposite were flat-white with no ornaments. Nancy walked to the seats opposite the door and took one. Pati took the other.

Nancy opened her briefcase with the hinges facing where Jack Reagan would sit. Then she pulled out her tablet and placed it next to the briefcase. She started tapping the screen when a knock on the door was heard.

“Come in,” Nancy said, without taking her attention from the tablet.

Jack Reagan stepped in, followed by another male; both were wearing black suits. “Good morning,” he said. His expression was stern, and he did not have the look of someone who wanted to chat.

Nancy nodded. Neither entrant looked at Pati, so she decided not to greet them. Jack Reagan and this guy were her enemies, and if they gave her no reason to be courteous to them, so much the better.

They took the seats opposite of Nancy and Pati, with the tall, black-suited male sitting across from Pati. He carried in a black briefcase and placed it on the floor where Pati couldn’t see it. He pulled out an electronic device and placed it on the table.

“This is Harry Meldrom, he’ll be assisting me today,” Jack Reagan said.

“Pleased to meet you, Harry,” Nancy said as she extended her hand across the table. He was obviously of European descent, pale with light-brown hair. He also looked older than Jack Reagan. Maybe in his middle-forties, adjusted for life on Titan, because he seemed too tall to be from Earth.

Harry took Nancy’s hand, “Yes, Ms. Tate, I’m happy to be working with you,” he said.

Harry now glanced at Pati and nodded, as if he’d just been given permission to say hello. Jack Reagan also nodded but immediately turned his attention to his own briefcase set across from Nancy. He pulled out a tablet, set his briefcase on the floor, and returned his attention to Nancy. “Harry will be taking additional

recordings for state purposes,” he said.

“Go right ahead,” Nancy said.

“Fine, then I’d like to call this settlement conference to order. This is Jack Reagan and Harry Meldrom negotiating for the state,” he said. In response, Pati heard the recording mechanism confirm activation. While all the previous settlement conferences were confidential, the final settlement conference would be recorded to determine if one side was purposely refusing to settle.

“This is Nancy Tate, counsel for Pati Lynch, who is also in attendance,” Nancy said.

“I would like to reference the last hearing,” Jack Reagan said, “and despite the results tabulated, the state feels confident a labor sentence of ten years is appropriate to protect the public from a repeat offender. This sentence will also allow the defendant time to rehabilitate to a behavior that will be supportive of the common good rather than a habitual tendency towards violence that has been documented and presented as evidence.”

Pati felt her face turn red. Ten years on an ice-miner! Jack Reagan should drug-tested for suggesting that kind of sentence. That bastard wasn’t on the ship with her; he wasn’t the one Bruno attacked and tried to kill. He never spent a moment with the twins. Never experienced a situation where, had he stepped in the wrong direction, he might be fatally injured, only to see the twins watching him.

Nancy’s right hand lightly grabbed Pati’s left forearm, nonverbally telling Pati to settle down. Pati took a deep breath and turned her attention from Jack Reagan to the table.

“The state’s characterization of my client is borderline unethical,” Nancy said. Jack Reagan started to respond, and when Nancy held up her hand, he stopped. “My client suffered a traumatic event,” she continued. “One she is forced to recall, time and time again, because the state, without evidence, continues to insist that her actions met the definition of murder. And yet, centuries of legal proceedings of this type have affirmed, time and again, that actions taken in self-defense do not meet that definition. As of today, my client has provided all the evidence needed to sustain a self-defense argument, and the state has not provided a shred of evidence to contradict her testimony. So, while we have no issue with the state offering an unrealistic sentence at the beginning of negotiations, we maintain the characterization of my client is uncalled for and counterproductive to reaching a settlement.”

“The state is interested in settling this murder trial,” he said. “But it also must be cognizant of the character of the defendant and allowing violent criminals to walk the streets of Karakorum can mean we’ll be back here in

another year trying a new case.”

Nancy put her hand on Pati’s arm again and stood up. “Your mischaracterization of my client is not facilitating a settlement.” Nancy put her tablet back into her briefcase and closed it. “We can leave now. I have no problem maintaining that you did not come here for settlement purposes.”

“Counselor, I am only answering why I have proposed the terms I have, and as far as what you call, ‘characterization,’ every word I used in reference to your client is verified by events. A criminal is a person convicted of a crime, which your client was. A violent criminal is a person convicted of a violent crime, which your—”

Nancy pointed her finger at Jack Reagan. “I don’t disagree that your language can be theoretically correct. However, if you wish to reach a settlement for this case, you do not start by insulting the defendant. You started this negotiation by referencing the score tabulated in the last hearing. Let me reference it as well and point out that as it stands, my client would not receive a sentence as harsh as the one you just proposed. Explain how you intend to negotiate in good faith when you begin with that proposal.”

Jack Reagan’s face remained unmoved during Nancy’s speech, and when she apparently finished, he folded his arms and sat back. “The score could still go higher.”

“We’re down to closing arguments. I know what you will say, and I have rebuttals for every point you might make. I even have rebuttals for points you cannot make. I’ve done this before, and I know my client will walk free after the JJ runs a score.”

“There’s the possibility additional evidence will present itself,” he said.

“And you’re wasting the state’s money on the possibility that evidence will present itself,” Nancy said. She picked up her briefcase. “I now maintain that you have not negotiated in good faith and we’ll let that data be added for the final hearing. Let’s go, Pati.”

Pati stood up and followed her to the door.

“I’ll do one-year labor with limited confinement,” Jack Reagan said before Nancy opened the door.

She stopped and beckoned Pati to follow her back to their seats. Once they were seated, she took her tablet out and tapped a few buttons before setting it next to her briefcase again. “One-month confinement with bracelet monitoring,” she countered.

Pati wanted to hit Nancy until she thought about it. It would be longer than then till she could get on a short cruise back home, and she’d seen everything she could on Titan, anyway. Why not?

“A year with no confinement,” he replied to Nancy.

“We’re not talking years, and I’m not going for more than two months. She’ll be leaving Titan in that amount of time, and you’ve modified settlements before with that stipulation.”

“I absolutely intend for her to leave Titan,” Jack Reagan said. “Preferably as part of the repatriation program.”

The guy next to him laughed, shaking his head. “You sure she deserves just that?” Harry Meldrom mused.

Stupid punk, Pati thought. If he didn’t shut up, she’d do more than think about his stupidity.

Jack Reagan smiled, “Harry, come on, we’re trying to settle here.”

“Ah, Jack, quit kidding around,” he said and waved dismissively at Pati. “This convict is trying to escape justice by pleading self-defense. They will all lie, cheat, steal, do whatever it takes to literally get away with murder. She killed three guys who she was supposed to see through their own sentences. Now she comes up with some story about how they mutinied—how convenient—especially when she’s the first prison ship commander to have a mutiny.”

“Shut him up,” Nancy said.

Pati had had enough, and Nancy’s hand was on her arm again. This time, she didn’t hold her temper. She stood up and reached over with her right arm. Harry Meldrom did not wear his collar buttoned, and it gave her a good point to grab. His face turned fierce as she grabbed him, and he grabbed her arm, but he couldn’t stop her from dragging him onto the table.

“Stop your client now, or I’ll be forced to,” Jack Reagan said. Pati couldn’t care less. She was going to teach this punk a lesson and switched her grip to get her right hand free. He tried to sit up and get away; Pati pushed him back down. He was definitely a Titan-born, big and nasty looking, all marshmallow inside.

“You’re done insulting me, asshole,” Pati said, as she brought her right hand back to punch him. Then she blacked out.

She woke up in a prison cell, laying on a cot, and feeling a massive headache.

“You didn’t make my job any easier,” she heard Nancy say.

9 The Final Trial

The courtroom looked the same, and Pati took her usual seat. Nancy had joked that they might as well put Pati's name on the defendant's chair, but that was after the second JJ ruling when it looked like walking free was a given.

Today, Pati worried but was not scared. Nancy said the worst case should be no more than living on Titan a few more years, although that was bad because she had to wear a disguise just to get to the courtroom without being abused for being the "alien-lady," as the teenagers labeled her. Regardless, it would probably blow over after a few months, and she could live a normal life until she could leave. Better would be to walk out of here today, and on the first cruise ship back to Earth.

She no longer worried about being sent back in the repatriation program. Following her attack on Harry Meldrom, Nancy took her on a tour of the ships built for just such a trip. This included the hallway connected to this courtroom, each dock door leading to the ships, and they even entered one of the ships. Pati took notes during the tour, and despite Nancy's confidence, she decided then to have a Plan B.

Pati wore a business casual suit. Tan slacks with a blue blouse that fit loosely at the wrists. Nancy wanted her to wear the black business suit. Pati had other ideas. She needed to be ready to deal with anything that could happen.

Nancy sat next to her in the courtroom, going through notes on her tablet. She'd committed the final statements to a document ready for upload to the JJ. She also would say a few words to support the document, an act expected to gain another point or two in Pati's favor. Pati thought she was making the statement more to antagonize Jack Reagan, which was fine by her.

Pati looked over at him. He also was busy reviewing documents on his tablet, and the minion who taunted her into pummeling him sat at the other chair. There was still about five minutes before noon when the trial started, so whatever he had up his sleeve, it better be good because Jack Reagan had played all his cards. When this was all over, hopefully, he'd have his position reviewed and knocked down a few notches for dragging this trial out. If that was unrealistic, she'd settle for a pissed-off look because she was walking out a free person.

Pati scanned the courtroom; it was a little more crowded than in the previous hearings. Bruno's family was here again, and his mom still looked like she

wanted blood. Pati wondered how she'd feel if someone had killed her child, whether the circumstances were warranted or not. Maybe being a mother meant you had to check part of your discretion at the door when it came to your kids. A thought that made her think of her own mother, and how much better life would be when she could be with her.

She decided reminiscing about family would have to wait till after the trial. Pati continued to scan the courtroom and noted there were a few reporters, none being Connie Pearson. That was good because after how the people of Karakorum taunted her, Pati might not be able to control herself. Connie had all but given her word the story would not come out until after the trial, and she couldn't even wait a few hours before broadcasting. Pati reviewed the crowd once more, making sure Connie wasn't sitting in a regular seat outside of the press box. While scanning, she saw the courtroom door open, and he walked in.

Kerry McLear, maybe the most powerful man in the solar system, if not the wealthiest, walked through the door with his bodyguard and assistant. Pati knew them all from her marriage to Richard, and despite that fact of relation, Kerry never looked in her direction.

She remembered his resemblance to Richard, the same brownish hair with some gray in it, although Kerry wasn't balding like Richard was. He was taller too, easily over two meters. Pati knew he spent most of his time on Picus managing the factories, which would normally make him unable to live in even the one-sixth gravity of Titan. She also knew that he had a private gravity-treatment facility to keep him in shape for his visits to Earth. He had it all physically, both the size and bone density. Nobody would kill him with one punch.

Jack Reagan turned when he heard the gasps from the crowd. He immediately stood and turned toward Kerry. "Mr. McLear, we didn't expect your presence."

Kerry led his two-man entourage to a trio of unoccupied seats near the front. "No, I didn't forward a notification, Mr. Reagan. I'm simply here as a private citizen to observe our justice system," Kerry said. The seat he took was two rows behind Jack Reagan and had empty seats on both sides for his bodyguard and assistant. They took the seats, the bodyguard scanning the room, and the assistant working on a tablet. Kerry just sat there as if waiting for a stage play or movie to begin.

"Thank you for your participation, Mr. McLear," Jack Reagan said. Pati suspected he was kissing up to Kerry. Kerry was not officially part of the legal system in the Saturnian system. However, his family could influence how tax revenues were spent. Should today's event not go according to Kerry's desires,

Jack Reagan could be out of a job.

It didn't make sense, though. Why would he be here, when there would be millions of other tasks vying for his attention? He did not attempt to influence the settlement negotiations for killing his brother, why now? Even if he could influence the proceedings by his attendance, Jack Reagan no longer could do much to affect the outcome. The JJ would render the score based on the previous data uploaded, and Nancy's final statement. Also, Kerry could have sent a minion to influence the trial before now, so why waste his valuable time, which could literally be measured in gold.

"It's now 12 p.m., and I call the proceedings to order," Jack Reagan said. "Counselor," he said to Nancy.

"Thank you," she said. She stood up from her chair and proceeded to the podium in front of the JJ screen. For the next five minutes, she uploaded her final statement into the JJ. When she finished, she stood at the podium and took a breath.

"The final data for my client's defense has been uploaded. Before we have the computers render a final decision, I would like to say a few words."

There were a few murmurs from the crowd behind Pati. Bruno's family probably wasn't happy, and maybe a few others who were eager to see the results. They'd have to suck it up since it wasn't their necks on the line.

"This trial has gone too far," she began. "As a public defendant, I have to ensure people accused of crimes are not wrongly convicted because they do not have the resources to defend themselves against the state, who regularly, is trying to incarcerate people. In this trial, we see the state prolonging the inevitable on the basis that the accusation is so extreme that every opportunity for them to collect evidence must be granted. That they have, through the use of questionable tactics, extended the trial to this date makes it a matter of questionable ethics. Because, in this extended timeframe, the state has not yet provided a single scrap of evidence to disprove any of my client's statements of fact. Therefore, the prosecutors acting for the state should consider themselves unethical."

Pati looked at Jack Reagan and his minion. Jack looked upset, and the minion was turning red. Was Nancy trying to goad them into doing something stupid? If so, Pati certainly approved.

"We, the people of Titan, utilize the electronic means of judgment because of the inability to find an unbiased jury of peers in a civilization with such a small population. When used properly, it has been a significant resource saver as well. However, in such situations as we find ourselves today, unscrupulous attorneys can try to manipulate the system to get results that benefit them personally, and

justice be damned.”

Pati didn't look at the prosecutors this time, which was probably good because she couldn't wipe the smile off her face, and that might be pushing it.

“However, what's done is done. The actions of the state can be addressed, and fortunately will not affect the outcome of this trial. The Defense will now rest,” Nancy said. She walked from behind the podium and back to her seat.

Pati now took a quick look at Jack Reagan and his minion, and they still looked upset. She turned back to Nancy after she sat back down. “Now what?”

“Did you like my backhanded attack on Jack Reagan?” Nancy asked with a smile.

“It was brilliant; they didn't jump over the table and attack you, though.”

“I couldn't expect that much. I just wanted to get it on the record that their behavior in this trial needs to be looked at. Having Kerry McLear here only helps.”

“Is that why he's here?”

“I don't have a clue why he's here. You were related to him. Why do you think he's here?”

“I've been beating my brain since he walked in and I still can't come up with a good answer. I never really knew him because he lived on Picus most of the time I was married to Richard.”

“Maybe he has business here today? And he's only a spectator?” Nancy said.

“He's never been a spectator,” Pati said. “If it's business hours, he's all about business. He used to send Richard nasty messages for not being at work, and...” Pati noticed she no longer had Nancy's attention. She turned and looked at Jack Reagan, who had a disgusted look on his face. She returned her attention to Nancy, who seemed pleased that Jack Reagan was so discomforted.

“We're done,” Nancy said to Jack Reagan.

Jack Reagan returned his attention to his tablet. Pati looked back at Nancy. “So, we're good?” she asked.

“I'm comfortable,” she said. “The arguments I uploaded contradict every assertion he's made and negate anything he's tried to allege. It's all about smoke and mirrors for them, and I just shot a laser beam right through it. They'll be lucky they don't get carted off for this.”

Pati nodded. She sat back in her chair facing the JJ screen. A few moments later, Jack Reagan stood up.

“The state will proceed with the final ruling,” he said. Pati then heard the courtroom door open behind her. She didn't turn, even though she saw it caught Jack Reagan's attention. It was enough to stop him from talking, and he continued to stare at who walked in, so Pati looked.

It was the engineer who had been working on her mining ship's records, and he held in his left hand a black container that was just large enough to contain a data storage disk. She felt a chill as he walked directly to Jack Reagan.

He turned to greet the engineer, and they spoke words Pati couldn't make out. She hoped Jack Reagan would be thinking about cutting his losses by now, but the changed look on his face displayed the same level of determination as she saw in their first meeting.

"I don't like this," Nancy said. She stood up, "The state needs to wrap up this trial," she said aloud to the courtroom.

Jack Reagan ignored her and continued to talk to the engineer. After a few more sentences, he took the black container from the engineer. Then, he looked at Nancy, "The state has evidence to introduce," he said.

"The time is over for that," Nancy replied. "This trial has dragged out long enough. Will the state choose to retry this case if it does not find the result to its liking?"

Jack Reagan's face tightened in anger. He looked down and took a breath. He then looked back at Nancy and held up the black container. "These are the restored records from the mining ship. It should verify everything your client has alleged in this case. I can upload them now, and if what your client has alleged is true, then it should be favorable to your case."

Pati about jumped out of her chair. Proof of everything she'd witnessed was in that black container. Everyone could see she had to kill Bruno, had to pull the plug on the twins, and had faced an extraterrestrial who might be somewhere in Karakorum. It was her ace card, and it made certain she'd be going home on the next ship back to Earth.

"The Defense contests admission of this evidence," Nancy declared.

Pati held her breath. She held her hands, too, because she wanted to shake some sense into her attorney. However, she'd spent a good deal of time trusting Nancy, now wasn't the best time to argue, at least not yet.

"This evidence was already allowed," Jack Reagan said. "The ship's records were a part of this trial from the beginning, except they weren't immediately available. Because they're available now, it would be an injustice not to present them because they're an absolute presentation of the facts."

"Then the Defense must have sufficient time to review those records before they are uploaded for consideration," Nancy said.

"How long?" Jack Reagan asked.

"At least one month," she replied.

Pati did not catch most of the conversation other than the one-month extension. While Nancy and Jack Reagan were going back and forth, there were

two teenagers with their parents behind her. Two girls, and Pati could not understand why they would be here because they weren't part of Bruno's family. What really got her, though, was one of them called her "alien-lady" during the legal haggling. It reminded her of how she'd been treated since yesterday, and what she might have to face here on Karakorum when she was released. She couldn't handle one more month.

"No, Nancy, I can't wait that long," Pati whispered to her.

"You've got no choice," Nancy said, also in a whisper. "You don't know what's on that disk, and no lawyer would let you face a JJ decision without knowing all the state's evidence. Maybe it's all good, and you'll be fine, but I won't let it happen because I would rightfully be thrown out of the legal profession."

"This isn't about you, it's about me," Pati said.

"Right, and you can wait another month."

"The trial will go on after you review the records and probably last until after the next ship out of here. If you can't work faster, we need to take the chance."

"That's not enough time for me to review the records."

"It's my life, Nancy."

Nancy sat back in her chair. Pati recognized the look her mother would give her if she was about to get into trouble, and that looked pissed her off.

"Yes, it's your life," she said. "But as your representative before the law, the subject matter expert who is here to see that you do not make bad decisions based on ignorance of that law, I'm telling you, that you must wait."

"I'm not waiting."

"You're not going to do anything else while I'm your attorney," Nancy said out loud.

Pati stood and turned to Jack Reagan. "Can I overrule my counsel?" she asked.

Jack Reagan's eyes got wide and then looked to the side. He put his right hand to his chin, seemed to think, and then looked back at Pati. "Yes, you have that right, Ms. Lynch. However, the state doesn't advise you to overrule your counsel during a hearing, especially since we see no reason why the one-month recess cannot be granted for a review of the records."

"I know what happened on that ship," she said. "Everyone, and especially, 'the state,' has called me a liar about what that happened that day. Now, I have proof to back me up and I want everyone to see it." Pati sat back down without breaking eye contact with Jack Reagan.

Jack Reagan took a deep breath. He looked back at Pati, "Ms. Lynch, I'm suggesting, and warning, that you follow your counsel's advice. If you do not,

the state will contest any effort to appeal the decision.”

“I expect an appeal is your plan after the decision,” Pati said. She looked at Nancy, who also looked at Jack Reagan. Apparently, she did not want to fight being overruled, which was fine.

Jack Reagan shrugged, stood up, and walked to the podium. He had the black container in his hand, and once there, he pulled a disk out of it. A minute later, he returned to his seat. He worked with his tablet for a minute and then stood up. “Please display evidence just uploaded,” he said to the courtroom.

Pati sat back. The room darkened slightly and the JJ screen illuminated. The next frame she saw was the bridge on her mining ship, with Bruno and her working at his station. It was the camera behind her command station, and it showed her standing behind him.

She heard Bruno’s mother let out a low sob behind her. Hopefully, after this viewing, she might at least understand what happened, although forgiveness was probably asking too much. Then again, what was there to forgive?

Jack Reagan spoke. “What these recordings will present is the moments of the actual incident. What happened leading up to the incident is not in dispute; however, what you will see could be contradictory to testimony provided by the Defense.”

“What?” Pati mumbled. She saw the time displayed at the upper right of the screen, and that was exactly the time before the apparition appeared. She was behind Bruno, watching him as he manipulated the life-support controls when she watched herself slapping Bruno in the back of the head.

“You bitch!” Bruno’s mom said behind her, loud enough for the whole courtroom to hear. Pati ignored it and watched the action on-screen.

“If you don’t stop hitting me, I will hit back, and I don’t mean with just my fists,” Bruno yelled.

“You threatening me,” Pati on-screen yelled back.

“I’m saying I’m going to defend myself,” he yelled back.

Pati in her seat didn’t like it. This happened weeks before, which wasn’t the date listed on the screen. Something wasn’t right.

“You better watch your mouth, Bruno. I don’t have to endorse your parole when we get back, you know.”

“Yeah, you always say that. But I won’t let you get away with hitting me all the time. So, shove your endorsement up your ass!”

Pati, in her chair, recognized this wasn’t one of her better moments. Maybe the state was showing this scene before the actual event to trash her. She couldn’t understand why they’d still want to do that, when the actual event would prove them wrong, anyway. Then she saw on-screen Pati push Bruno. And that, she

remembered for a fact, did not happen.

It didn't stop there. It showed her wrestling with him on the ground after the attempted push. For a time, like the real thing, it showed Bruno on top of her, punching her in the back of the head. Then, he got to his feet and stood a few paces from her. On-screen Pati got up, she walked the two paces, and punched Bruno in the throat, while he did nothing to defend himself.

"That's a lie!" Pati screamed.

"The state requests the Defense refrain from comment until the presentation is complete," Jack Reagan said.

Pati complied. Next, she watched how she pulled the plug on the twins without her attempting to deal with them or showing how her own life-support had been disconnected. It was too much.

She stood and looked at Jack Reagan and his minion and screamed, "This-is-not-what-happened!" She then forced herself to hold her emotions in check, although it felt like covering a volcano.

Jack Reagan, however, did not look like a victorious conqueror. He looked slightly to the side as if in thought, reviewing the situation. Obviously, something was not right with him.

"Ms. Lynch," Harry Meldrom said, "the evidence has been recovered and certified by a professional engineer. And it demonstrates quite well what happened on the mining ship. Now, your counsel has completed testimony, and it's time for you to receive your just sentence."

"I already served a sentence. After this, I'm getting on the first ship out of this hellhole." She left her chair and walked to the prosecutor's table.

Harry Meldrom stood up, too, and stepped closer to Jack Reagan. "Ms. Lynch, I agree that you'll be on the next ship. But you'll be back in Earth orbit thirty years later."

Pati continued to close in on Harry Meldrom. She had her guard up as she got close—and she fell to the floor.

"Bailiffs, please return Ms. Lynch to her chair," Jack Reagan said.

Pati couldn't move. She heard everything people were saying, and she could see and move her eyes, but that was it. In a second, she felt hands on her arms, and they lifted her to her feet without putting weight on them. She could see the two female bailiffs carrying her back to her chair. They sat her down and put straps over her arms that secured them to the chair.

She felt Nancy lean close to her. "I'll take it from here and see what I can salvage," Nancy said.

Pati could look at the JJ screen and see about sixty degrees in each direction. Her ability to move her head was gone. She just listened and prayed.

Nancy stood. “The Defense objects to the introduction of the recently displayed evidence,” she said. “We strongly suggest the court remove the data from any records used to tabulate the final decision.”

Pati saw text appear on the screen. “Objection respectfully overruled,” the text said.

“In that case,” Nancy continued, “The Defense requires a recess to review. The defendant hastily overruled her counsel in this matter, and we feel such a course would be granted upon appeal should the recess of at least thirty days not be granted.”

Pati saw displayed on the JJ screen: “Defendant’s overrule of counsel has happened before in this jurisdiction and has not been appealed. Previous case law does not exist to predict outcome of appeal. Recess will not be granted.” Her arms grew cold when she sensed Nancy had sat back down.

“It’s the best I can do for now,” Nancy whispered. “We’ll have to see what happens.”

Pati cried. With the paralysis wearing off, she could only shed a few tears. It made her stomach hurt. She could only hope.

The screen displayed: “Does the State and Defense have further information?”

“No,” Jack Reagan said first. Nancy also replied in the negative.

The screen went blank and then displayed “76.”

“Yes!” a man behind Pati screamed, and applause broke out.

“The Defense appeals this decision,” Nancy yelled above the crowd.

“The state notes the request,” Jack Reagan replied, in a voice that also carried above the crowd.

Pati needed to break down, cover her face, and sob like she never had. The score she received meant she was being repatriated back to Earth. However long she didn’t remember, she just knew she was in for hell, or even worse.

“Come on,” Nancy said, from behind her.

The paralyzing drug had mostly worn off, and Pati sobbed without making much noise. She felt her chair move forward. There must have been wheels somewhere in the legs, and Nancy rolled her toward the JJ screen. Before they went through the door that led to the docks, Nancy walked to her front and leaned over to get close.

“You’ll be in orbit around Saturn during the appeal, instead of the long trip back to Earth. Even in the best case, you’re not getting back to Earth for a few years, but I think we can still get you there with all the complexities of this JJ decision.”

Pati still cried, making more noise as they approached the door. It opened on

their approach, and Nancy wheeled her through. They entered a brightly lit, white hallway alone, and Pati heard the door shut behind her.

“Of course, things would have gone better for you had you listened to Temujin, and joined us,” Nancy said.



* * *

The drug’s effect dissipated enough so Pati’s jaw could open. She tried to ask how Nancy knew about Temujin, because that was not a name she gave to Connie to report. She only told Connie she had met with the leader of the extraterrestrials.

“He wanted that name after we learned more about your history on Earth,” Nancy said. “It seemed appropriate since you labeled our land, Xanadu, and then this settlement, Karakorum.” She pushed Pati’s chair down the white hallway, with white, windowed doors on the left side.

Pati couldn’t ask questions, first, because the drug still slightly affected her, second, because she still tried to wrap her brain around what she heard from Nancy’s mouth. Finally, she was a condemned woman, and the life she’d been sentenced to seemed as dark as this hallway was white.

Nancy stopped the chair and stepped around to look Pati in the eyes. She stood there, different. Even wearing the same business suit, the same hairstyle, and the same makeup: she wasn’t Nancy Tate.

“While you were on the mining ship, Nancy made the right decision and joined with us. She’s with me now, and she’s never been happier. Just like we promised you.”

Pati understood what the alien believed, and she couldn’t believe a person would agree to that deal. Pati wanted to strike out and snap her neck, possibly relieve Nancy of the possession as she did for Richard. It also would give her the chance to escape. With the drug wearing off, would she have a chance?

“I don’t have to worry about anyone hearing us. This hallway is blocked for the condemned and their attorneys. The state goes the extra effort to see that our conversations remain private.”

There were six doors total. When Nancy brought her here yesterday, she pointed out doors three and six as the likely ships for the next repatriate. One through three were for the shorter trips, lasting less than two decades. While four

through six were for the longer ones, lasting up to half a lifetime. Each door had a window that allowed a person to ensure a ship was on the other side before opening. The ship's hatch also contained windows for the same reason.

"You could have avoided this," Nancy said. "The engineer was ready to make the records look like whatever we wanted them to look like. Make it look like Bruno and the twins died by accident—simple—and if you'd joined us, that would have happened, and you'd be free."

The drug had worn off, but Pati remained silent. She tested the straps securing her wrists. Simple velcro held them in place, which is what she expected.

"And you going to the media didn't make our mission easier. Luckily, with your temper, we could use the youth who had joined us to unnerve you. That worked well in the trial when you overruled Nancy Tate. I couldn't look like I was throwing you to the wolves and still have people believe I was your defense counsel. Fortunately, you did your part admirably, and now I can put you on the boat to Earth, which will orbit Saturn during your appeal. I might even get you acquitted, but you will never see Earth again. In fact, the ship will have technical difficulties soon after you lift off. I won't tell you what they'll be because you should have the excitement of finding out for yourself."

She walked back behind Pati and pushed her forward again. "I think the airlock to your ship is behind the fifth door," Nancy said.

Pati saw the door approaching fast. The straps on her wrists and ankles were well placed. Jumping up, breaking free of the restraints, and attacking Nancy wasn't going to happen.

"Yes, here we are," Nancy said when she stopped at the airlock. She walked to the door and pushed the enter button on the right side of the airlock door. The doors opened, and Pati could see the interior of the ship the state expected her to live much of the rest of her life in.

"Now, as your attorney, I need to explain to you that you'll board this ship, and after liftoff, you'll orbit Saturn until your appeal is complete. If you're acquitted, you'll return here immediately. If your sentence is upheld, the ship will then travel to Earth and arrive approximately thirty years from today." She smiled. "Although you needn't worry, you'll not have to suffer that long."

Pati remained silent. Nancy went behind her and pushed the chair through the hatch. Pati spent hours the previous night getting to know this model, and she recognized every piece as Nancy pushed her toward what was called the command center. A humorous designation, considering the occupant would command nothing.

Nancy pushed her to a spot up front where the chair was designed to be

secured and would be part of the furniture after launch. Pati felt it lock into position, and her arms remained strapped to the chair.

“You’ll be on your way soon,” Nancy said. She walked once again to Pati’s front. She had a look that was even more removed from the Nancy Tate she knew. “And, they have commanded me to complete one more task.”

Nancy pulled out a decimeter-long knife from the inside of her jacket and held it in her right hand. The metal reflected off the ship’s lighting. “I was told to kill you before you left. Temujin believes you’ll escape again unless you are eliminated directly by hand.”

“He can’t kill me himself,” Pati spat. The bravado masked her fear. She had resolved not to say a word, and yet the brandished knife ended that resolution because this could be her end.

“Well, after your last meeting, he’d found a cooperative human and is busy attending to him. Temujin planned on dealing with you directly, and we worked to extend the trial so he could accomplish the act. Since you rushed the process, he had an alternative plan to delegate the mission to me.”

Pati saw Nancy take a deep breath and look her over. Pati hadn’t prayed in a long time. She didn’t close her eyes, but she did think out a quick prayer for help.

“Then again, it wouldn’t look good if I had blood on my clothes,” Nancy said. “If I had time to prepare, I could have had a cleaner method of disposing of you, but I’ll just have to let the ship’s programming do its job.” Nancy returned the knife to her pocket. “Goodbye, it’s been nice working with you,” she said and walked away.

Pati could hear the light footsteps toward the hatch, and it was time to activate Plan B. She hadn’t lived with Bruno and the twins for three months without learning how easily situations could go wrong. She had to expect it and be prepared. That she would wind up on a ship back to Earth after the trial was not considered likely, but it was possible, and she had to be ready.

Pati had reviewed the procedures for transporting a condemned criminal to these ships, how they’re secured from the courtroom, and how they are moved there by the defense counsel. Sometimes the defense counsel was not trusted, and the bailiffs would provide the transport. Pati was prepared for either situation, and it started with the small pliers she’d placed in each of her sleeves.

With Nancy four steps behind her, Pati pronated her wrists to pull out those pliers. She’d practiced this move last night, and in a second, had the set from her right sleeve out. She held them in her fingers and thumb, again severely pronating the wrist and clamped on the strap that held her arm down.

She pulled out the other pliers with her left hand. While the right-side strap

was held tighter and farther up her forearm, the left strap was looser, and she could loosen it further. It allowed her to slip her arm out.

Nancy was at the door, and Pati could afford the sound lifting the strap off of her right wrist. The same with her ankles tied to the chair. Pati swung her head around to make sure Nancy had exited. She was no longer on the ship and the hatches began to close. Pati jumped from the chair, pulling off her right shoe.

Her shoe was a flat sole, black, and ankle-high. It matched the business casual ensemble she wore and was made of faux leather. Compared to most shoes worn on Titan, it was substantial, and perfect for the task at hand.

The ship's hatch and dock door closed simultaneously, and Pati had at least five seconds after Nancy walked through. She also had to be light on the floor as she raced to the exit because she might launch herself into the ceiling.

The door had maybe two decimeters to close, and Pati dove, grabbing a shelf on the left side to help propel her. Pati bounced off the deck, rose up, and smashed into the hatch. The hatch then finished its downward cycle.

Or had it? Pati straightened and saw she had her shoe trapped underneath the hatch. It no longer moved, but she also did not hear the latching sounds that would accompany securing a ship from the vacuum of space.

She exhaled and allowed herself a tight smile. Step one of her plan had worked. She took a deep breath, realizing steps two, three, and four depended on a great deal of luck. After step four, she'd have to figure out step five and the rest.

First, she had to open this hatch. Since they secured a prisoner to the chair, there was no need to lock them in the ship before launch. The square control panel on the right side had an emergency open switch, and Pati flipped off the cover and engaged. The hatch slowly opened up.

Before retrieving her shoe, she walked back to the galley section, pulled a glove used for cooking, and placed it in the gap where the hatch would try to seal. She then put her bent shoe back on, grateful the sole wasn't damaged.

Looking through the window in the dock door, she checked to make sure the hallway was clear of people. Nancy should have exited by now unless she waited for the launch. If that had been the case, her face would be on the other side of the docking hatch, staring back at Pati, and aware of why the ship hadn't left. Or, possibly, she had watched every move Pati made and had already called the bailiffs in to shoot her with the tranquilizer guns.

Since Nancy's face wasn't visible, Pati felt confident. She stuck her head toward the window and looked around the hallway.

Nancy was still there, and she wasn't alone.

10 Run for Your Life

Pati had planned her escape. Once she blocked the ship's hatch from closing, she knew she could open it again from the inside. That would leave her only the docking hatch to open before she could escape from the ship that would, according to Nancy, take her to a quick if merciful death.

Like the ship's hatch, the docking hatch had a window, and a control panel to the upper right. The control panel was for emergencies only and was less complex. There was a simple open and close button, built to withstand Titan's atmosphere.

The docking hatch also had a window, and because Nancy was on the other side, Pati waited to open it. She held her right hand next to the control panel and tried to decipher what was going on.

She saw Nancy standing off to the left facing away, near the door to the spaceport which was secured from entry. Pati couldn't hear the sounds; she could only see body movements. Nancy appeared to be screaming. Then she lunged forward, and just as quickly, she jerked back. Not just her head, her entire body flew at least three meters before landing on the floor of the hallway. She didn't get up.

Pati saw Joe Tate standing where Nancy had been. He didn't stand there long; he rushed to Nancy and knelt down beside her. He seemed to try to help her up or was he trying to aid her in some way. After a few seconds, he put both of his hands to his face.

She didn't know if she should still wait. She intended to disembark from the ship into an empty hallway. Once the hatch and ship's door closed behind her, the ship would launch into an orbit around Saturn. If Nancy's alien friends had reprogrammed it to crash, Pati would have a cover and more time to find a way back to Earth.

If the ship didn't launch soon, though, it would attract attention. She couldn't wait much longer. But how could she get past Joe Tate? And what happened to Nancy?

Joe only took a few more seconds next to Nancy. He stood and put his hands on his hips while still staring at Nancy on the floor. He then looked right at Pati.

She didn't have time to duck. She stayed still, hoping he didn't look at her specifically. There was the possibility he just looked in her direction, and her movement from the window might catch his attention. She hoped he would turn

away in a second and then wander out of the hallway from whichever way he'd entered.

She was disappointed. He strode straight to the docking hatch and looked her in the eyes through the window. His eyes seemed intent and emotionless. He pushed buttons next to the hatch, and it opened. He waved her to follow.

Pati didn't have much of a choice and stepped through the open hatch into the hallway.

"She's dead," Joe said.

"How?"

"I don't think we have time to discuss."

"What do we do with her, then?"

"She'll have to carry out your sentence," Joe said. "Help me put her in the ship."

Pati followed and helped pick her up. Despite having just killed his wife, it surprised Pati how gingerly he held her head and shoulders. Pati grabbed her legs and followed him through the hatch. They sat her in the chair, Pati's chair, and they walked away.

Joe stopped to grab a towel from a drawer in the galley. She noticed he had a wound in his left forearm. He wiped the blood off and took a large bandage from the medical supply cabinet. He applied the bandage to the wound, which stopped the blood flow and remained attached to his arm.

Joe walked back to where he hit Nancy, and Pati saw blood on the floor. Joe stepped over and wiped it up. "It's my blood," he said. "She slashed me with the knife, which is why I punched back." He finished wiping the blood and returned the towel to the ship.

Pati followed him part of the way into the ship. She removed the glove from the ship's hatch and tossed it in. Joe walked out after taking one last look at Nancy. The doors activated and he stood there waiting for them to shut. "Did I at least get the alien in her, too?" he asked Pati without turning to face her.

Pati had to think first, and then answered. "No, the alien in Richard came back to haunt me."

Joe nodded, and Pati heard the ship move away from the dock. He looked down the hall to the spaceport door. "Follow me," he said.

Pati had planned on getting out that way, and it was good to have a guide who worked in the spaceport and knew every square meter. She followed him to that door, but once they reached it, he turned to the right and tapped the wall. He pushed open a door that had been invisible.

"Where did this come from?" she asked.

Joe didn't respond. He walked in and stood there, waiting for her to follow.

Pati looked back down the hall, seeing the polished white throughout, and nothing left to reveal what had just happened.

“Now,” he said.

She hurried in, and he pushed the door closed. She saw a lever protruding from the center of the door and a handle on the right side. She heard a latch engage, and he turned back to face her.

“This place should be a sanctuary for us for the moment.”

“But, how did you know they possessed her?”

Joe took a deep breath. “Okay, you knew we were having trouble, and I hadn’t been home for a while. Well, it’s because she changed a couple of months ago, and when your alien report came out, it explained why or at least gave me a good idea. I was in the spaceport during your trial.”

“I thought they fired you; that’s what Nancy told me.”

“Suspended for a day. I knew about this tunnel since I help build this courthouse. Working construction was my first job when I arrived from Earth. I saw the drawings and checked it out later on. I think the McLears wanted it added in secret.”

“Kerry McLear was at my trial.”

“He was? Then this might not be a safe place. Let’s get going.”

“Wait, what happened with Nancy in the hallway?”

He stopped, sighed. “When your score was announced, I knew she would be taking you to your ship. You would be alone together, and I thought the alien might reveal herself. I raced to this tunnel, walked through, and placed my handheld on the hallway floor, shutting the door behind me. After she delivered you to the ship, I was waiting in the hallway with my handheld, having recorded your entire conversation.”

“When she told me about Temujin?”

“Yeah, whoever that is? But she exploded like I’d never seen before, and she attacked me with this knife.” Joe pulled the bloodstained knife out of his pocket and held it up to Pati. “I couldn’t believe it, she’d never been violent like that, and when the knife came toward me, I just reacted.” He shook his head. “I didn’t want it to end like this,” he said.

“I know how you feel,” Pati said. The passageway she stood in was a light-brown color with an oak-like wooden finish. Single lights illuminated along the path, and she could see a door at the end, maybe twenty or twenty-five meters away. “Should we keep going?” she asked.

He didn’t reply. He put the knife away and moved. She followed him to a door that had a similar lever and handle attached. Joe tapped a switch next to the door, and the lights went out. Pati saw nothing but darkness.

“I’ve got a hold of the door,” Joe said. “I’m going to crack it and see if anyone's out there.”

“Out where?”

“It opens between the two buildings. It’s a covered space, and you can’t see this door unless you’re standing next to it. I don’t want to take any chances, though.” The door cracked open, and she saw his outline from the light that entered.

“Wait,” Pati said.

He turned to look at her.

“What do we do when we get out there?”

“I guess we find a way to get lost.”

“Where?”

“I think up north, near the old areas of Karakorum. A lot of that area is deserted, and we can plan on how to survive from there. Given what happened in your trial for murder, I expect I’ll get the same treatment for what I did to Nancy if I’m caught.”

They were both fugitives from the law. Fugitives where every person could be monitored and facial recognition cameras were as prevalent as traffic control devices. The only thing they had going for them was a minuscule timeframe before the authorities would notice Nancy was missing. When they went to look for Joe and found him missing as well, the game would be up.

For Pati, all it would take was one person recognizing her.

Joe finished checking outside and opened the door to walk through. Pati followed, and the door shut automatically behind them. What was a secret hallway opening became indistinguishable from the surrounding wall.

They had exited into landscaping and stood on rubble mined from Titan. There was a fake terrace with trees and bushes between them and the south terminus station. The angle of the building made it difficult for those emerging from the spaceport terminal to see them standing there. It wasn’t impossible to see them, just unlikely. And if they ducked, they’d be invisible from the distance.

“We’ll walk from here,” Joe said. “You able to make it to the other end of Karakorum?”

“I’m from Earth, remember,” she said.

“Hopefully, that means yes,” he said. He walked toward the spaceport entrance, then around the landscaping toward the terminus station. People were getting off the train and making their way in, which caused Joe to stop.

He waited for the last person to enter the terminal and then turned to Pati. “Wait here,” he said. He hurried to the terminal entrance and went inside.

“I don’t need this,” she whispered to herself. With him going off on his own,

what would happen to her? How long did he expect her to wait?

She had to admit, though; he solved problems two through five for her. She escaped her sentence of a thirty-year voyage back to Earth. And now she stood outside the courthouse, semi-free, determining her next steps for survival. If the options looked bleak, they didn't look hopeless or impossible.

She waited, maybe ten minutes. Her handheld was left back in the courthouse, so she didn't really know how long Joe had been gone. If he deserted her, she'd have to survive without the knowledge of how to live in Karakorum without resources. Her situation might still be hopeless and impossible.

And yet, he needed her, too. She was the only witness to Nancy attacking him. If he was caught, he'd need her. Keeping her safe was in his best interest. Did he know it?

Joe marched out of the terminal entrance at a fast step. He carried objects in his arms Pati couldn't make out. When he got closer, it looked like he carried two hats.

"Here, put this on," Joe said, handing her a brown cloth hat that she'd seen workers in the spaceport don. It had a wide brim extending around the circumference.

"What for?"

"Fewer people will notice you this way. We're getting off this moon."

"I need a hat to leave here?"

"No, we're going to your apartment to get clothes and personal stuff you can't live without. We'll go to my place first and do the same."

"I don't think we need to do that. Can't we just go—"

"I know a guy whose shuttle is leaving in two hours. No more and no less," Joe said. "The last place we want to be is standing around in the spaceport. There's no safe place for us, and we might as well keep moving till we come back here."

"What if we just find a place to hole up that's safe? Then we'll come back here in time to leave?"

"I can't think of one place that we wouldn't have to travel to. Might as well grab what we need before we leave because I don't think we'll be coming back for a while."

Pati didn't enjoy hearing the last part of his statement. However, she couldn't argue with the first, and after putting the hat on followed him past the terminus, and along the roadway that paralleled the rails.



* * *

Pati waited across from her apartment building. It was about a hundred meters away, and she could just make out the people who entered and exited. She didn't want to get any closer and perhaps be recognized, while at the same time, she wanted to be ready the moment Joe walked out. They had stopped by the hostel Joe was staying at and picked up the few possessions he'd took with him when he left Nancy. Along the way, it was an interesting conversation.

The man with the ship leaving in two hours was a recruiter for an ice-mining colony on a nearby moon. Joe knew him from his multiple trips to Karakorum looking for workers. He also knew there would be no questions asked of a couple of Earth-borns who wanted jobs and will work immediately.

Pati had never heard of the place. She questioned why, considering ice-mining was all she'd done for the last three months. Joe said the ice was not sent to Karakorum or anywhere else around Saturn but was destined for the inner solar system.

That didn't stop her. She wanted to know what would happen when the constables at that colony recognized them. He had an answer for that, too. The moon was outside the McLear influence and not governed through Karakorum. It went straight to the confederacy for policing, which was a very, very long way away. Another reason it would be the perfect location to hole up for a while.

Pati wasn't convinced, but she could not think of an alternative plan to ensure survival. Joe seemed confident, when he didn't feel remorse for killing Nancy, which Pati hoped wouldn't become a problem of its own.

She checked the spare handheld that Joe gave her. He'd been gone about fifteen minutes, and they had less than an hour to get back to the spaceport. She used the handheld to calculate how long to walk back, and they still had minutes to spare, assuming no other issues arose.

Her heart jumped when she saw him at the entrance. It beat harder as he stopped to talk. She couldn't make out who he talked with, and possibly it was the static robot at the desk. He held her case she used for short trips and continued to talk. Pati leaned left and right as if it would help her see better. Finally, Joe walked away at a fast step toward Pati's location. A minute later, he was walking up.

"We have to hurry," he said, handing her the case.

"I know, did you get my tablet, too?"

“It’s in the case,” Joe said. He looked behind him. “The robot asked me to wait at the desk as I left.”

“Why?”

“Not a clue. He let me in when I said I worked for Nancy and came to pick up your possessions. Didn’t seem to be interested in me at all. Walking out, he called me by name. When I responded, he asked me to wait. When I asked why he wouldn’t give me a straight answer.”

“It’s only been an hour,” Pati said.

“I know.”

“Maybe they tried to contact the ship and got suspicious when there wasn’t a response?”

She saw Joe looked down and put his right hand over his eyes.

“Joe, we have to think this out,” she said.

He looked back up and took a breath. She could see him struggle to control himself. “We can walk while we think,” he said.

Pati agreed by taking the lead heading back to the spaceport. They walked over the trolley tracks and onto the walkway going south. Most people did that, and their faces would be less visible with fewer walking against them.

“Do you think the aliens have something to do with the robot?” Joe asked.

Pati considered it. If Nancy was dead, the alien in her had communicated that fact to the others. Maybe the possessed humans couldn’t overtly go after them, so they’d have to find a way to get the word out that fugitives were on the run. Maybe the robot that tried to detain Joe was the result?

Pati lowered her face and pulled her hat down a bit when a lady looked at her too long. She walked faster, and Joe kept up.

“We’ve only forty-five minutes before Gemini takes off,” Joe said.

“You sure this guy’s legitimate?”

“I know where he works, and it’s legitimate. Or at least I know it’s there and that they’re always looking for workers.”

Pati wished she had a hood to help hide her face better. The crowds weren’t bad, and as expected, most people walked with them, limiting the number who would see their faces. There was just too much to lose by being recognized, and Connie Pearson’s report didn’t help.

“From the Grand Center, it’s only another thirty minutes,” Joe said. “I think we’re good.”

The road opened up on both sides as they entered the Grand Center. The walkway paralleled the trolley lines, going straight through the Grand Center, which shortened the distance they had to travel. Pati found a couple walking ahead of them, and she tailed behind. When Joe tried to walk around them, she

grabbed his arm. He got the idea to use them as a cover. Not perfect, but at least it improved their chances of remaining undetected.

Groundcars buzzed by on their left, moving about twice as fast as the crowd walked. Pati had the thought of jumping on the back of one and forcing the driver to take them to the spaceport in half the time. They would probably get there, too, followed by half the constable force on Titan. Slow and steady had to be the motto now, and, of course, stealth.

Joe grabbed her arm and pulled her off to the right. In the one-sixth gravity, he carried her for a few feet till he stopped and let her feet back down. "There were constables in that last groundcar," he said. "One of them turned around."

"Oh—"

"This way," he said. He pulled her again, except this time she followed and they walked to the outside of the crowd. Joe then resumed marching toward the spaceport.

"What now?" Pati asked.

"They're turning around. I pulled you away right as we were in their blind spot."

"Do you think they saw us?"

"I think that's why they're pulling back around. I don't know for sure. I don't want to stay and find out either." Joe stepped up and fell back in line with the crowd.

Pati could see through the crowd what Joe imagined. The groundcar had an open top, and it wasn't marked. The three men and one woman in it had looped around and were again heading southbound, and they were searching the crowd.

"Don't walk too fast," Joe said.

"They might find us."

"Only if we look out of place. If they're searching, it's because they're not sure what they saw."

Pati wanted to sprint away. Instead, she forced herself to follow the crowd and stay in step with Joe. She pulled out her handheld and noted they'd lost a few minutes of time. The five-minute cushion they had when they left her apartment was down to three.

"Don't worry about the time," Joe said. "Try to keep people between you and the road."

Pati complied, although she peeked every few minutes to see where the constables were. Since they hadn't gone off-road directly toward them, she figured they were safe for the moment. And, by the time they exited the Grand Center, the crowd had thinned to where she could see the constables were no longer after them, if they ever had been.

“I think it was you they saw,” Joe said.

“Why? The robot stopped you,” Pati replied. They continued to walk in a thinner crowd.

“You were the last person they saw with Nancy in the courtroom. I’m just a husband who had no ability to even get to her, according to their knowledge.”

“You could have walked through the door to the spaceport hangar.”

“It’s locked from that end. With our code, we can get to the hangar from the courtroom hallway, but not the other direction.”

“I’m not sure, Joe. If the robot tried to stop you...”

“It just asked me to stay. I told it no, and nothing else happened when I walked off.”

“It had no ability to stop you. It was a static robot.”

Joe shook his head. “Yeah, but the constables could have been on me fairly quickly after I entered your apartment. I think it’s more about my wife missing and they wanted to contact me. Since those robots are part of the communications net, it responded to a request to find me for notification.”

Pati didn’t reply, because she couldn’t argue against his facts. Her feelings, though, said his facts didn’t tell the whole story. Still, he’d gotten her this far without issue, so maybe he still had a handle on the situation. Her instinct said otherwise.

In ten minutes, they passed by Pati’s old street. She would not even glance at the McLear house. Those days were gone, and there was too much work to do before she could even be free, let alone rich. Someday, from Earth, she might find the legal team to collect the settlement they had promised her. This was not the time to think about it.

They continued past the factories, and ten minutes after that were approaching the south terminus. Pati checked her handheld again, and they’d reclaimed the five-minute cushion they started with. They had only to get inside the terminal. That thought made her heart sink.

Joe led her into the parking lot Pati was familiar with. He stopped between two parked groundcars that were perpendicular to the route they’d take to the terminal. The groundcars were short enough even for Earth-borns to see over, and she could see the terminal entrance from where they stood. He turned to face her. “I’m going to scout the entrance and make sure it’s clear. Once we’re in, we turn right and go straight into the hangar.”

“I know the route well,” Pati said.

“Good, once I’m sure, I’ll turn and wave. You walk—do not run—walk to me, and we’ll go in together.”

“Okay, I’ll wait for your signal,” Pati said.

Joe nodded and moved off. She bent down, staying just high enough to see Joe over the groundcars. He moved past the left side of the terminus station and up to the terminal entrance. Without a train disembarking passengers, the walkway to the doors was empty, and he didn't need much time to spy the area. He turned back toward her and froze.

Pati saw two figures, a little taller than Joe, march toward him from the terminus station. She guessed they had been standing by the platform doors, which she couldn't see from where she stood. She then guessed it was an excellent place to station constables conducting a dragnet. Joe's body language suggested she guessed correctly.

Pati thought she could run. Get out of here and head back north to old Karakorum like Joe originally said they should. Except, if they had Joe, he would probably confess to the plan. Not only that, the constables would know for sure she was on the loose. She had no illusion she could run forever on this god-forsaken moon where she had no friends.

She didn't like the idea of running, anyway. There were only two constables, and she and Joe were both Earth-born. Pati moved out from between the and walked around the terminus station. If she surprised the constables, she needed to come in from a different direction than that which they saw Joe approach from. She only hoped they'd still be there after the minute it'd take to walk around.

Once she was out of their line of sight, she ran, keeping low, until she rounded the station. She stood up and approached, walking along another sidewalk. They were questioning Joe, although she couldn't make out exactly what was being said.

Then Joe saw her. She knew it because he immediately looked in the direction from which he had come, not in her direction. The constables turned to see where Joe looked, and she approached from their blind spot. Two well-placed punches and these secgen constables would be incapacitated. She'd watch their heads though; no reason to add to her list of accidental deaths.

Then she saw one of their faces. He was one of the constables that stormed into Nancy's office during her argument with Joe. Nancy said then he had just arrived from Earth. A well-placed punch would bounce off of his body. She was now only a few steps away, and her plan had failed before it even began.

The face she recognized looked at her and he pointed. Pati got to within a step of his partner, and as he turned to his right, she relieved him of the tranquilizer gun in his belt. She'd never used one before, and it took a moment to get a finger on the trigger.

The constable, certainly upset to have had his weapon lifted so easily, lunged

at Pati. She didn't have time to think and pulled the trigger. She watched his expression go from anger to surprise, and finally to incoherence in less than a second's time.

The other constable had his weapon out. But he held his fire until his partner fell off of Pati. Her gun had a clear shot before that happened, and she pulled the trigger three more times. At least one dart struck him because he fell into a heap like his partner. She didn't bother to watch his face.

"Excellent," Joe said.

"Back to the original plan?"

"No, you were right. They're looking for me, not you. We have to go around."

"How?"

"Back through the tunnel. Let's go."

Pati followed him off to the side, back around the landscaping to the section of the building where the spaceport construction stopped, and the courthouse construction began. She checked behind them, and nobody had followed.

Joe tapped the wall, and nothing happened. He tapped the wall again, and again nothing happened.

"What's wrong?" Pati asked.

"I can't find the tap pad that's embedded in the wall."

She focused on the areas where Joe tapped. There seemed no clue where a secret touch pad would be placed, as should be the case if it was to remain hidden. Except, it was no good if nobody could find it, so wouldn't there be some clue as to the location?

"Can you find the door?" Pati asked.

"Not unless I get it open."

Pati recalled her grandmother's house in Ireland. The thing was built nearly two hundred years ago, and something about it reminded her of this wall.

"Damn," Joe said. "We'll have to try to sneak in the front way."

Pati turned to check where she'd shot the constables, and already terminal workers were attending to them. "No, we're not going to get in that way," Pati said.

"Then we're caught. Because I have no idea how to open this door." He sat down on the crushed gravel and shook his head.

"Isn't there another entrance? Maybe for freight?" she asked.

"Guarded full-time to keep smugglers from moving contraband," Joe said. He continued to shake his head and then put his right hand over his eyes.

She refused to give up but had no idea what to do. Pati leaned against the wall. Maybe they could go on the run here. With Joe's knowledge of Karakorum,

they might stand a chance. Not a good chance, since he'd given up already. Somehow, she'd have to motivate him and do it fast.

Pati tapped her head against the wall as she thought, trying to find ideas. None came to her, except her grandmother's house. Considering that her grandmother had died a few years ago, what possibly could her old house have to do with their situation?

Pati tapped her knuckles against the wall. She tapped them again on a different spot. The sound was different.

"Hey, Joe, if I found the door, would you be able to locate the touch pad?"

Joe shrugged, but he didn't look at her.

She took that as a positive, or at least not a negative. After her grandmother died, Pati helped clean the house. Her father wanted to contract some remodeling but needed to locate utilities that weren't diagramed in the ancient building's plans. He tapped walls until he heard a hollowness and focused on that area.

And it worked, she hoped. She heard a hollowness as she tapped, and it continued until she'd traversed about the width of the tunnel she used earlier. The location was about two meters from where Joe had looked.

"It's right over here," she said.

"How do you know?"

"Just trust me. Here's the right side." She tapped with her right hand. Then she tapped with her left. "And here's the other side."

Joe's expression was not enthusiastic. However, he got up and moved into Pati's position. He tapped once, and they heard the door unlatch.

"Damn, how did you—"

"Don't think about it, just move," she said.

Joe opened the door, and they jumped in. The lights came on right after he closed it behind them. "Come on," he said and led her to the other side. He stopped to crack the last door and inspect the hallway. "It's clear," he said and bounded in.

Pati followed him into the empty hallway. Joe let the door close on its own and they heard the latches.

"Now what?" Pati asked. Being back where she started did not give her confidence.

"Into the spaceport," Joe said. He faced the door and tapped the keypad next to it for entry.

"Will they know it's you?" Pati asked.

"It's a general code used throughout the spaceport, and we all use it on multiple doors. They won't know it's me, at least not for a while."

The door opened and Joe led her through. The open space made her feel

vulnerable, although there were not many workers around to threaten them. Joe almost ran down the dark walkway leading to the lander docks. Most of the slips were empty, having taken the passengers up to Picus for the workday. A few were parked, and unmanned, ready for a fugitive to steal.

Except, the lander would not make it past Picus. There, she'd be back under the control of Kerry McLear. It'd probably be better to stay on Titan than let that happen.

Joe kept moving. Soon, they'd cleared the lander slips and were walking past shuttles, which had greater range. They could try to steal one, but getting away was another matter, and where would they go?

A man stood behind one of the shuttles, and he seemed to recognize Joe. Joe hurried toward him and stopped when he got there.

"You're late," the man said. He was taller than both of them and his black hair was longer than Pati's.

"Gemini, thanks for waiting," Joe said.

"We need workers, so I figured I'd give you a few minutes before I left."

"Well, we're here."

"Who's your friend?"

Joe looked at Pati. "Her name's Terri," he said. He looked back at Gemini. "You ready to go or do you want to stay longer for introductions?"

"Fine, get in," Gemini said. He led them into the shuttle and assigned them seats before shutting the shuttle door. The cabin contained about twenty seats in rows of four. Joe and Pati sat in front, on the left. Before the shuttle moved, Pati had to ask. "Joe, have you been to Enceladus before?"

<<<The End>>>

Pati has escaped Karakorum and the rigged trial that almost incarcerated her through senior citizenship, if not an accidental execution. She's on her way to the moon Enceladus, and an ice-mining colony where no questions will be asked about her past. However, such places usually have secrets of their own to hide, and the aliens who rigged her trial have their own plans to execute there.

Find out what happens in "Enceladus," book two in the Titan's Plague series available at:

[Enceladus: Titan's Plague Book Two](#)

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<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B07CGKX2TP/>

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About the Author

Tom Briggs is a retired engineer, military veteran, and lifelong devourer of science fiction novels and military history books. Writing science fiction became a passion before retirement, and he utilizes that effort now to justify not seeking professional employment while still able to work. He lives in Southern Illinois with his beautiful wife and any relatives traveling through.

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