

## 6

*Insubordination.*

“Jiménez!” bellowed Commander Lynch. “Let’s go!”

“One second, sir.”

Lynch glanced at his comm. “We don’t *have* a second, Ensign.”

Ensign Jiménez tapped frantically at her terminal.

“Holbrook has a thing about meetings starting on time,” said Lynch as he followed the young ensign’s darting fingers. “Do you even know where the Orion Conference Room is?”

“Yes, I do, sir,” said Ensign Jiménez, responding without looking up from her terminal as she continued her feverish tapping. “I’m trying to set some simulations running before we leave. I’ll be able to check the results during the meeting.”

*Insubordination*, seethed Lynch. Most officers under him would trip over themselves to comply with any command he barked their way, but not Jiménez. No amount of yelling or threats seemed to faze her. “There’s no point to whatever stupid simulation you’re arranging,” he grouched. The chief engineer moved his large frame into intention range of the exit, triggering the department doors open. “They’re just that: simulations. They don’t count for a crock of shit in the real world.”

Ensign Jiménez continued tapping at her terminal.

*What the hell is she simulating anyway?* Lynch had no idea, didn’t really care, and in any case had no time to ask. Besides, her answer was likely to set him off on a tirade that would redden his nose and cheeks, giving his face a clown-like appearance—not a good look just before

stepping into a meeting with the entire senior staff.

Lynch opened his mouth to yell anew but caught himself before he made a sound. If he left Ensign Jiménez alone to continue her efforts, she would surely arrive late to the captain's weekly staff meeting, knocking her down a peg in Holbrook's eyes. Paired with a reprimand for her pursuit of a side project while on duty, he might have enough to lay the groundwork for ousting her from the engineering department. Without another word, the chief engineer slinked through the open door and whisked down the corridor.

Jiménez hated that Lynch was annoyed but was grateful for the quiet to finish bootstrapping her simulations. The ship had affirmed her memory of the Orion Conference Room's location, directly beneath engineering on the next deck down. It had offered directions as well: proceed left from engineering for fifty meters; turn left again and walk another fifty meters to Pneumatic Cab Access A-8-23; ride a P-cab down to access point B-8-23, and retrace the hundred meters to the conference room's door.

Although logical and straightforward, following the ship's recommended route would make her woefully late for the meeting. Besides the time to walk two hundred meters through the *Avenger*, waits for P-cabs ranged from thirty seconds to several minutes during peak demand, not to mention the cab travel time itself. With just over six minutes left before the meeting, a late arrival was essentially guaranteed.

Jiménez continued to work, allowing another forty-five seconds before she'd force herself to leave. Despite the handful of minutes remaining, she had no intention of arriving late. Rather than heading left to grab a P-cab, she would exit right and jog thirty meters to Runway 42-AC. Most runways afforded access to each of the ship's three decks but that one ran between the ship's top and bottom decks, bypassing her destination. She would take Runway 42-AC down

to Deck C, dash left for three meters to Runway 41-BC, clamber up to the middle deck, and backtrack the twenty-seven meters to the conference room. The 140-meter difference and zero time spent waiting for a P-cab would allow her to arrive in ninety seconds tops.

Her configurations finished, Jiménez set her simulations running. After arranging for their completion notifications to arrive silently at her comm, she sprang from her chair and rushed out of engineering.

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Lynch fumed as he approached the Orion Conference Room. Between the corridor foot traffic, the two-minute wait for a cab, and his cab's meanderings through the ship, he was officially late. He pushed his body to keep up his modest pace. Every second counted when it came to Holbrook's irritation level for tardy arrivals. He'd pin the blame on Jiménez, setting her up for a double dose of the captain's ire whenever she finally did arrive.

The chief engineer trundled down the passageway, stood still before the conference room entrance until the doors opened, and walked in, slightly winded. He slipped into an empty chair not far from the doors. The captain, seated at the opposite end of the long conference table, continued his succession of general announcements, including one about improper sleep cycles. Relieved at entering unnoticed, Lynch focused on moving himself closer to the table with successive scoots of his chair.

"Good of you to join us, Commander," said Captain Holbrook. No heads turned, but all attention shifted to the chief engineer. A conversation with the captain was like a magnifying glass, focusing the entire room on a single person.

Lynch stopped mid-scoot, his right hand thrust between his legs, grasping the front of his chair. "Apologies for being late, Captain," he said slightly flustered, "but it was Ensign Jiménez

who delayed me in engineering. I spent several minutes trying to convince her to leave so we'd arrive on time for your staff meeting. I finally gave up, but by then there wasn't enough time left for me not to be late."

"She was in engineering when you left her?" Holbrook asked, cocking his head slightly.

"Yes, sir," said Lynch, offering a stern expression of concern that masked his glee at the chance to dig the ensign's hole a little deeper. "I kept reminding her how much you hate late arrivals, but she ignored me. She tapped away at her terminal the whole time I was standing there, even as I left. Whatever she was working on, it wasn't any assignment *I* had given her." The chief engineer shook his head slowly, reinforcing his disappointment with Jiménez's behavior. "I expect she'll be along any moment now."

Holbrook's brows lifted. "Indeed," he said, eliciting chuckles from around the table.

With a sheepish grin, Lynch joined the others in the jest, unsure of the joke but pleased at having made trouble for the ensign. He finished scooting his chair to the table and scanned the room. At the far end, two seats down on the captain's right, sat Ensign Jiménez, her head lowered and eyes burrowed into the table. The chief engineer's face puffed red.

"Now that we're all here, let's get started," said Holbrook. "The report from engineering will come last—Commander Lynch informed me he has a serious issue to discuss and I'm guessing it'll consume the bulk of our time. We'll begin with the medical department."

Dr. Marsden tapped controls rendered beneath the table's glass surface, summoning a holographic spreadsheet above the table's center. "I have three crew members in Sickbay currently. One is recovering from alien food poisoning. One has a second-degree radiation burn. He'll be there for a few days for tissue regeneration and cancer cell flushing. The third is a broken arm, which Dr. Sadler set two days ago, but the crewman returned this morning with a

fever. We're treating him for an infection.

"That's the tally of physical ailments." The doctor swiped in a new slide, showing a much longer list of patients. "As for the crew's mental health, in the past thirty-six hours we've seen thirteen cases of acute stress disorder, seven cases of depression, three panic attacks, and one case of hysteria."

"Ensign Orr?" asked Stephens.

Lynch smirked. *Orr is always overdramatic, working himself up about the smallest of things.*

"Correct," said Dr. Marsden. "We have him resting in his quarters." She tapped the controls, closing her presentation. "That's twenty-five cases of mental distress since word of our mission got out. I expect we'll see a lot more of these during our trip."

"Thank you, Doctor," said Holbrook. "Communications."

"Comms systems green," said Lieutenant Bhat. The communications chief ran his hand through his cropped hair.

*Flustered as usual.* Lynch had witnessed the lieutenant's nervous mannerism many times before, always struck by the vivid contrast between Bhat's mostly gray strands and his medium-brown skin.

"There have been a number of security-related communications incidents," continued Bhat, "but I defer to Lieutenant Byrne's report for discussion."

"Very well," said Holbrook. "Security."

"Security status green," said Lieutenant Byrne. The security chief's freckles, dimples, and full lips gave him a boyish appearance. "No active security incidents to report. As Lieutenant Bhat mentioned, there were seventeen instances of mission details being discussed in private off-

ship conversations and messages. The message scrubbers caught and blocked all leaked details, though we should consider locking down off-ship communications. A lot of people and alien governments would be interested to learn we're traveling to the galactic center."

"I recommend against it, Captain," said Dr. Marsden, her expression stern.

*Disregard her opinion at your own peril.* Lynch had tangled with the *Avenger's* chief medical officer before. The doctor's short stature belied her outsize presence, her viewpoints forcefully presented and remarks to the point.

"I'm no psychologist, but the crew is already taking this assignment hard. Preventing them—us—from communicating with their loved ones will only demoralize them further and may solidify the perception that we're actually on a suicide mission."

"I agree with the doctor," said Stephens. "I'd prefer we issue some warnings about not discussing mission-confidential details when speaking with people off-ship and see how we do."

"All right, then, let's leave communications where they are for now. But we may revisit this decision should circumstances change." The captain turned to Lieutenant Commander Martin Phillips. "Ops," he said.

"Ship's operations green," said Phillips. "However, I'd like to schedule some drills over the next few weeks to make sure we stay sharp on this trip."

*Readiness drills—a colossal waste of time. But he has to make it seem like he actually does something aboard this vessel.*

"Agreed," said Holbrook. For an instant Lynch thought the captain had agreed with his mental assessment of Phillips and the readiness drills. He nearly fell out of his chair. "Please coordinate the drills with Commander Stephens." He continued with Ensign Jeremy Higgins. "Combat systems and tactical."

“All weapons and targeting systems are green,” said Higgins.

“Science department,” said Holbrook.

“Science department green,” said Ensign Reilly.

“Nav—”

“Though I will say we’re not at all prepared for this mission,” interrupted Reilly.

*Bravo—another joust with the captain.* The young officer and youngest department head was not much older than most cadets fresh out of the Academy. In spite of her age, Ensign Reilly was full of aplomb, and a brilliant scientist with advanced degrees in biology, chemistry, and physics. Her interjections never failed to catch the captain off guard.

“Please continue, Ensign,” said Holbrook.

“Normally I’d have my team learning more about the planet or system we’re sailing to, researching physical conditions and life forms, but as long as we don’t know what our actual mission is the science department has no way to prepare for it.”

“Acknowledged, Ensign,” said Holbrook. “That information will be forthcoming.” The captain moved on. “Navigation.”

“Navigation systems green,” said Ensign Doerr. “I’ve spent some time with the ship refining our course to Plana Petram. I’ve computed a new trajectory that’s slightly less direct but swings us closer to several massive stars on the topside of the galactic disc. It’ll give us enough of a boost in speed to shave a day off the trip.”

“A four percent reduction in total travel time?” Lynch grumbled from his end of the table. “That’s like trimming a few millimeters off those red bangs of yours and gushing about a new haircut.” *Find something else to do, Ensign, that isn’t speeding us to our graves.*

“I agree it’s not much,” said Doerr, stammering after the pointed rebuke by a senior officer,

“but ... it is some savings. I figured getting th-there as fast as possible was worthwhile, even by a little bit.” The ensign sank into her chair.

“Some time savings, even if small, is a good thing,” said Stephens. “Thank you, Ensign, for your efforts.”

Ensign Doerr nodded, staring with a glum look into the table.

“Helm.”

“Helm green sir,” said Lieutenant Commander Mills. “The ship is on track to reach Plana Petram in approximately nineteen days. Ensign Doerr mentioned her new course to me right before the meeting, and I plan to lay it in after conferring with her.”

“Very good,” said Holbrook. The captain looked down the table to Commander Lynch. “Engineering.”

*Finally.* Lynch filled the room with a grandiose clearing of his throat. “Engineering condition red.” He paused, letting the words sink in, then sat forward in his chair and mashed at the tabletop’s virtual controls. After several corrections and restarts from fat-fingering neighboring buttons, a list of engineering systems, each one annotated with a green dot, emerged above the table. “The ship’s power plant is hovering at ninety-eight percent efficiency. The Gravity Drive is operational and performing as expected. Core ship systems are functioning within tolerances. Hull integrity and ship superstructure are both sound.” He clasped his hands on the table and sat quietly, almost beaming.

Holbrook waited, expecting Lynch to continue, but the commander remained silent. “You reported engineering condition red,” the captain eventually said, “but nothing of what I’ve heard so far sounds like a problem.”

“Yes, sir,” said Lynch, appreciative of Holbrook leading him into the next part of his



presentation, “the operational status of all engineering systems at this moment is green. It’s the *future* I’m concerned about.” Lynch swiped his holographic slide deck to a view of the *Avenger*’s underbelly with callouts to three large, glowing red discs nestled in the rounded vertices of the black, triangular warship. “The Gravity Drive consists of three gravity field generators that work in concert to create a bubble of warped spacetime around the ship. The exact shape of this warp bubble determines our direction and speed relative to the spacetime outside the bubble.”

His next slide contained a topside view of the triangular *Avenger*, showing three overlapping toroidal spheres resembling transparent, electric red donuts centered at the field generators. “Here is a diagram of the warp fields produced by the three generators and how they overlap to form the ship’s warp bubble. Changing any one of the fields results in a different composite bubble and therefore different direction and speed. Travel to a specific destination requires balancing the three field generators to an exquisite degree. An imbalance of even one part in a trillion over time can drive us light-years off in the wrong direction.”

“Everyone here knows the basics of gravitational propulsion,” said Stephens, his tone gruff. “Is there a reason for the refresher?”

Lynch gave Stephens a cold stare. *There’s a reason behind everything I do, executive idiot.* “With that background,” Lynch continued, still staring at Stephens as he drew out the last word, “I turn now to our current situation, a predicament directly related to our mission. First, we plan to engage the Gravity Drive non-stop for three weeks to reach Plana Petram, and then presumably for a subsequent two weeks of travel to the galactic core.” The commander swiped to a slide showing the exponential decline in engine efficiency with the decrease in matter density per cubic light-year. “Second, more than half of that operating time will occur in a region of space where the matter density is much lower than the galactic planar mean, forcing the engines

to work harder to generate a warp field.”

Commander Lynch ended his presentation with a flourished, bouncing tap on the tabletop that closed his slides. “The inefficiencies of operating in low-density space combined with the prolonged use of the Gravity Drive will put an enormous strain on the field generators, pushing them beyond their safe operational limits. Losing a generator would be a catastrophic event, destroying up to a third of the ship and killing an untold number of the crew.” Lynch had gestured with his hands during the presentation—he brought them to rest, clasped again on the table. “The *Avenger* is a Trident class starship, commissioned over thirty years ago. It could have easily operated within these mission parameters right out of dry dock, but not thirty years on, sixteen years since its last complete overhaul. It is my determination as this ship’s chief engineer that the *Avenger* cannot continue with its orders as currently executed.”

No one stirred after Lynch’s final word. The lieutenant commander basked in the consternation he had created.

“Cannot continue with our orders as currently executed?” yelled Holbrook, causing those closest to him to jump in their seats. “What in Hades does that mean?”

Lynch kept calm in the face of the captain’s heated reproach, his plan proceeding as designed. “It means we cannot travel to Plana Petram within the three-week timeframe you’ve set for us. By my calculations we will need at least twice that amount of time.”

Holbrook huffed, incredulous. “Six weeks to reach Plana Petram?”

“At *least* six weeks, Captain,” said Lynch. “Even that pushes the limits of what I consider reasonable.”

“Why is this information only coming to me now?” asked Holbrook, the anger building in his voice.

Lynch deadpanned, “This is the first Captain’s Staff since we set course for Plana Petram. It’s the first chance we’ve had to discuss the matter.”

“But in the meantime, we’ve informed CentCom of our three-week ETA,” said Commander Stephens. “They’re expecting us to arrive in nineteen days.”

“Is that true?” asked Lynch. *Please say those words again—I want to savor each one.*

“Yes,” said Holbrook. “Commodore Ahrens will be at Plana Petram to brief us on the full mission details. He’s already en route in a sleeper, set to arrive about eighteen days from now. He can’t wake to find we’re only halfway there. And the mission itself, whatever it is, cannot absorb a three- or four-week delay. The urgency of the situation has been stressed to me several times. At this late date we can’t just tell CentCom, ‘sorry, we made a mistake; it’s going to take twice the time we said.’ We have to be at Plana Petram when we promised we would.”

*We made a mistake? I didn’t promise three weeks.* Pursing his thick lips Lynch nodded and said, “Thank you for explaining the situation, Captain. I had not previously understood that CentCom was basing their timetables on our original projections. I see how six weeks of travel time is not an acceptable outcome.”

The captain’s entire frame had stiffened at the suggestion they push out their arrival date, a disaster of immense proportions. Holbrook visibly relaxed with Lynch’s response, likely believing his chief engineer was considering creative alternatives.

The corners of Lynch’s mouth curved upwards. “Unfortunately, I cannot change physics. The near certainty of catastrophic damage to this vessel is real. The *Avenger* will not survive the stresses of a forced three-week journey to Plana Petram, and I will not be held responsible if you decide to try.” His eyes grew wide and lips almost pouty, reflecting the feigned heavy heart bringing him to his next words. “If CentCom is indeed counting on us arriving in nineteen days,”

he said, holding the moment in the air, “then we must immediately inform them it simply won’t be possible and petition for reassignment from this mission.”

An avalanche of anxious conversations flooded the room as Holbrook and Stephens sat with pained faces at the opposite end of the table, shellshocked by Lynch’s pronouncement.

Petitioning for reassignment was an action reserved for only the most desperate circumstances. Short of a medical or equipment emergency, it typically mandated the loss of command for the vessel’s captain.

Lynch stifled a grin as he eased back in his chair. He grew excited at the prospect of torpedoing Holbrook’s career, the *Avenger*’s smug and pompous star captain, and possibly even Stephens’s as well. When they came for Holbrook, the crew would line the corridors of the *Avenger*—Lynch himself standing outside the doors to engineering—as the military guards escorted the disgraced captain to the shuttle bay, a last march through his soon-to-be former ship—

“I think there’s a way.”

Lynch chuckled at the words, believing them the product of some comedic portion of his mind. He stopped when the room grew hushed.

“What was that, Ensign?” asked Holbrook.

“I think there’s a way,” said Ensign Jiménez. “To get to Plana Petram in nineteen days. Or nearly nineteen.”

Lynch studied Jiménez from his end of the table. He had no idea what kind of stunt she was pulling but granted that the ensign was sharp, not to be underestimated. He needed to head her off before she could speak another word. “Ensign Jiménez,” he said in a calm, patronizing voice, “this is a meeting of the ship’s department heads. Your attendance here is solely to assist me, the

engineering chief, in presenting information to the captain and the rest of his senior staff. It is not to ask questions or to offer your own opinions.”

“I’m sure the ensign knows her role in this meeting,” said Commander Stephens. “What she has to say must be significant for her to break protocol.”

*I hope to God my plan takes you down with Holbrook, you condescending prick.*

“Ensign Jiménez,” said Holbrook, “what were you starting to say?”

Lynch bore down on the young officer from across the table with an expression that conveyed the volcanic anger he would unleash should she say anything further. She paused a moment before replying to Holbrook. “It’s nothing, sir,” she said. “Commander Lynch is right—it’s not my place to speak in this meeting. I should first discuss my findings with him to get his opinion.”

*Findings?* Everything came to Lynch in a rush: the special side project, the simulations, the scramble to assemble results for the meeting. Jiménez was also aware of the infeasibility of a three-week trip to Plana Petram, but instead of allowing that fact to simply and elegantly disqualify them from the mission she had been researching ways to surmount it!

“What findings, Ensign?” asked Stephens.

Reviewing the ensign’s data before she described any of it would be Lynch’s only hope of defeating whatever idea she had come up with.

“I’ve been running some simulations of a technique to reduce the strain on the Gravity Drive—”

“Captain, I need to vet the ensign’s findings before they’re presented in this meeting,” interrupted Lynch. “I am responsible for all recommended or suggested courses of action, no matter how improbable, that come out of engineering. While I was aware of Ensign Jiménez’s

attempt to find solutions to our quandary, I did not have sufficient time before this meeting to review her methodology or her data. Once we adjourn, I will confer with the ensign and, if warranted, have her—”

“What were your findings, Ensign?” the captain asked.

“Sir,” said Jiménez. She glanced at Lynch one more time before forging ahead.

“Commander Lynch is correct that traveling for so long in low mass density space will place a big strain on the engines. The problem comes from maintaining a near-constant field strength for three weeks, so I wondered, what if we could somehow let the engines rest a bit during the journey.” She tapped the controls on the tabletop in front of her, summoning a slide with columns of numbers. “I designed a simulation of the *Avenger* traveling to Plana Petram where we vary the amount of time we keep the Gravity Drive engaged. This is the data from twenty different runs of the simulation.”

Holbrook blinked at the sprawling matrix of numbers. “Can you walk us through what we’re looking at here?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” said Jiménez with quaking hands, her first time speaking up in a Captain’s Staff. “Each row is a day of travel time, and each number is the estimated system integrity level at the end of that day. This first column shows what happens if we continue as we are now, keeping the warp field strength constant for the next nineteen days. You can see how starting at day ten the numbers turn from yellow to orange and eventually fall into the red. This is the situation Commander Lynch has raised.

“The other columns contain data for different engine duty cycles. For example, the fourth column shows a ninety-five five duty cycle—the engines engaged for fifty-seven seconds out of every minute. Even with that slight change, all the system integrity levels stay out of the red.”

“You’re talking about pulsing the Gravity Drive,” said Stephens.

“That’s essentially the idea,” she said.

“Interesting,” said Stephens. “Am I right in reading the final column to say at a fifty-fifty duty cycle system integrity remains green for the entire trip, but it’ll take us twice as long to get there?”

“That’s right, sir,” said Jiménez. “That’s the tradeoff with giving the field generators more and more time to rest—they do less work, so the ship doesn’t move as fast. This is essentially the same as Commander Lynch’s request to take six weeks to reach Plana Petram.”

“It seems like the eighty-seven thirteen run is the most promising,” said Holbrook.

“Yes sir. By engaging the engines for fifty-two seconds out of every minute we can reduce the strain on the Gravity Drive and stay out of the yellow except at the very end, and increase our travel time by only two and a half days.”

“Just one and a half with Ensign Doerr’s route optimizations,” said Stephens.

“This seems promising,” said Holbrook as he reviewed the numbers. “Commander Lynch, what’s your opinion?”

Concealing his rage as best he could, Lynch spoke in measured tones. “As I said earlier, I have had no time, Captain, to review these numbers or Ensign Jiménez’s simulation for correctness. So it would be—”

“I understand that, Commander,” said Holbrook. “I’m asking if the ensign’s idea seems sound, if her conclusion seems plausible.”

How best to respond while salvaging his plan? If he said her idea couldn’t work, any review by the ship’s computer would expose that as a lie. Yet confirming her approach meant keeping their assignment and flying to their deaths at the galactic core. “It seems reasonable that

changing the duty cycle would reduce the strain on the Gravity Drive, and in fact I had planned to investigate that option myself,” he said, his speech still measured and rigid. “However, while the pulsing, as you put it, Commander Stephens, will lighten the load on the field generators, it will more than double, maybe even triple, our energy consumption compared to keeping the field generators fully energized.”

“Will we run out of power?” asked Stephens.

“Err ... no,” said Lynch, “but consuming that much energy is obscene. Each time we disengage the field generators we’ll turn around and power them right back up again.”

“Obscene,” said Stephens, “but not otherwise a problem?”

As much as Lynch wanted to portray energy consumption as an issue, the *Avenger’s* power plant could easily drive a hundred such trips. “That is correct,” said Lynch. He reached for any other possible complication. “Though the varying field strength will increase the stresses on the gravitational waveguides.”

“What’s the worst-case outcome of that?” asked Holbrook.

“Nothing as bad as losing a field generator,” Lynch conceded, “but if we lose a waveguide, we won’t be able to sail. We’ll be immobile until another CentCom vessel can help us with repairs or a tow.”

Holbrook rubbed his chin. “What’s your opinion, Commander?” he asked, addressing his executive officer.

“This plan seems to give us the best chance of carrying out our orders,” said Stephens. “At least we won’t have to ask CentCom to take us off the mission.”

“If a waveguide fails just before we reach Plana Petram,” said Lynch, “that will turn into a three-week setback for CentCom because they’ll be forced to send a new ship.”



“True,” said Holbrook, “but that seems like a much more manageable risk than our present situation.” He turned to Jiménez. “Good work, Ensign.”

“Thank you, sir,” she said with a sheepish smile.

“I want Commander Lynch to review your simulation and then the two of you to work on implementing this new plan,” said the captain. “It’s now your top priority. Keep me apprised of your progress.”

“Yes, sir,” said Jiménez.

“Yes, sir,” said Commander Lynch. He briefly locked eyes with Jiménez. *You’ve caused me to lose this battle, but the war is not over. I promise you will pay for sinking my plan.*

“Thank you, everyone,” said Holbrook as he stood from the table.

The captain and the other officers filed out of the room. Just before exiting, Lynch caught Stephens lean in close to Jiménez as he passed her on his way to the door. “Nice work,” he said.

Jiménez emerged last from the conference room with a smile that disappeared once she discovered Lynch waiting for her, his large hands jammed into his pockets. She walked over to him, and the two headed together down the passageway, side by side, with the chief engineer’s bulk consuming most of the space between them.

Lynch spoke under his breath to Jiménez. “If you ever talk out of turn again,” he said, “I will wrap my hands around your neck and strangle you until you are dead.”

Jiménez could only nod. Her body began to shake.

## 7

Holbrook sat on the deck in his quarters, legs sprawled, back slumped against the bulkhead. His right hand held a glass, once tall with whiskey. His left hand batted drool from his chin. Tonight's bender wasn't the worst he'd ever had, but it was the worst in a long time. He dubbed it a "two" on the nullihol pill scale. If summoned for an emergency, he'd need that many pills to wick the alcohol from his system.

Holbrook shifted his weight, making himself more comfortable on the hard deck. From his mind's eye he looked down on his laid-out body, judging.

*What would Dad say?*

He rolled his eyes at the thought. *Dad wouldn't say anything. He's dead. Been dead a long time.*

Holding the glass to the light, Holbrook studied the remaining few centimeters of amber liquid. He took a drink, keeping the liquor in his mouth, letting it burn the insides of his cheeks. He released it in a trickle, a trail of fire down his throat.

Captain Holbrook hoisted the glass to his lips, took in the last of the whiskey, and let his arm fall to his side. The glass escaped his hand, bouncing once on the deck before rolling away.

He hadn't thought about his dad in a while. Captain Thomas Holbrook the second died when Holbrook was eight years, two months. Almost thirty years later, Holbrook could still picture him: big, strong, fearless, resolute, commanding attention and respect. The news of his dad's death hit him hard—he cried for days and wouldn't come out of his room. When he finally emerged, he refused to leave the house. He finished the school year at home, his assignments and

lessons transmitted to him.

The psychologists told Holbrook's mom his anguish only partly explained his withdrawal. Fear, they said, played as large a role. Holbrook had always been a skittish child, afraid of random sounds and sudden movements. His dad had been the anchor that allowed him to function in the world, checking under his bed for monsters, lingering in his room until he fell asleep, investigating strange noises in the dead of night. One day, just before Holbrook's sixth birthday, the vicious neighbor dog five doors away escaped its force field pen, raced out of its yard, and charged down the sidewalk toward him. His dad jumped in front of the animal without hesitation, taking a bite in the leg to protect his son. His dad's strength and devotion fostered in the younger Holbrook an unconscious sense of comfort, one that extended across the light-years and between his dad's long stints away from home.

His dad's death unmoored him.

Without his dad, Thomas and the rest of his family found themselves alone in a perilous world. The monsters were real. They weren't under the bed—they fell out of the sky.

The Regenitors and their spider drop-ships burrowing like ticks kilometers into the earth's crust.

The Skaxx drones piercing the global defense grid and raining fire across several continents.

The Thetan rampage.

He'd forgotten the Thetan rampage, repressed it. The events came flooding back. Holbrook tried to shake the thoughts from his head, but his half-conscious mind pushed on, dredging his memory. He breathed fast and shallow, on the verge of hyperventilating. Black spots filled his vision. The world went dark ....

Thomas Holbrook III sat in the dark, clutching his baby brother Timmy in the far corner of

the basement. His arms and legs shook not from cold but from fear. Footsteps plodded overhead, nails and floorboards squealing under tremendous weight. Muffled screams and weapons fire drifted down through closed hopper windows.

Thomas sobbed softly.

“Focus on your breath,” his mom shouted in a whisper from her hiding place across the room. “Your *breath*.”

Slow, deliberate breaths calmed the body and the mind, she’d told him more than once. Thomas focused on his breath, reining it in, deepening it. He drew the cool basement air into his lungs, much cooler than the air upstairs. The day had been hot for early fall.

“Thomas, did you open the upstairs windows?” his mom had called from the kitchen doorway.

Thomas walked in from the den, his vid on pause. He stood before her in a t-shirt and shorts, both garments struggling to cover his nine-year-old body on the brink of a growth spurt that would add nearly a meter to his frame. “Most of them,” he said. “I opened the ones in my bedroom and the ones in yours.”

“Did you open the ones in Dad’s office?” she asked.

A repurposed third bedroom, his dad’s office sat across from the room he shared with Timmy. He made a point of skipping that room. “Why do I have to be the one to open them?” he asked, bunching his fists.

“Your brother can’t do it, Thomas,” said his mom. “He’s not tall enough to reach. And I have to start taking up dinner.”

Thomas made no motion to comply.

“I need you to be a big boy and open those windows,” she said, notching up the sternness in

her voice.

“I just don’t like going in there,” he mustered, still not moving. “To see all Dad’s stuff, everything in the same place ... it just reminds me he’s never coming back.”

His mom walked to him and crouched to his height. Her hazel eyes flashed a mix of his pain and some of her own. “How ’bout this,” she said, “if you open the windows for me, I’ll take care of closing them later this evening, before we head to bed. Deal?”

He didn’t want to go in there at all, but one trip into that room was better than two. “Deal,” Thomas said, sullen as he accepted the best arrangement he would get. He turned slowly and wandered up the stairs, head hunched, taking his time with each step.

“Hurry back down,” she said. “It’s almost dinner. And after you’ll need to take out the trash. It’s nearly overflowing.”

Thomas didn’t talk much at dinner despite his mom’s attempts to draw him out. His little brother, oblivious as usual, babbled on about some new dinosaur he discovered during holo-adventure time in school.

Warm, rotting trash greeted Thomas’s nostrils when he swung open the small cabinet door next to the sink. He tugged at the garbage can, sliding it out on its platform, and looped his hand through the liner’s drawstrings. Thomas hoisted the plastic bag out and set it on the kitchen floor. Freed from the confines of its container, the white, overfull bag pancaked across the black and white tiles.

Thomas lifted the overloaded trash bag with both hands and backed into the screen door, nudging it open with his rear. He scurried around the house to a large black garbage bin, flipped open its lid, and tossed the bag inside.

“Shit,” he said, bemoaning the patches of nighttime sky visible through the crisscrossed

branches overhead. Thomas planned to survey the planets during the final moments of twilight, when they dangled like shining pearls against the starless blue-black evening sky. He'd forgotten all about them.

He bounded into his front yard and up the steps to the porch, spun around, and fixed his gaze upwards. The old trees in his neighborhood obscured large swaths of sky, but from this vantage point the heavens appeared through a ragged, round gap in the canopy.

Thomas ran through his progression, starting with the planets. Venus, Mars, and Jupiter hung in conjunction directly above him. Two degrees south the white supergiant Deneb burned its nuclear fire. His finger traced a line from Deneb through the yellow supergiant Sadr to Albireo, then a new, perpendicular line from Delta Cygni, through Sadr again, to Epsilon Cygni. Together the five stars formed the Northern Cross, the backbone of the constellation Cygnus. His dad had taught him how to find the asterism. He'd taken up tracing its shape as a way to remember him.

A shooting star peeled across the jagged circle of sky. And a second. "No way," Thomas said in amazement. The odds of witnessing a shooting star at the exact time of its fiery transit were improbably small. The odds of seeing a second—

A third shooting star streaked across the sky, then a fourth, and a fifth.

He turned back to the house. "Mom," he yelled, "you'll never believe this!"

The house lights went dark.

Not just the lights in his house, but next door in Mr. Huntsel's house, and at the Dylans' place across the street. And not just the lights in the houses but all the streetlights too. Shrouded in darkness, Thomas looked at his comm, or at least where his comm should have been with his left forearm raised in front of his body. Its face had also gone black. No amount of tapping

brought it back to life.

Thomas looked up again. Thousands of stars twinkled in the unobscured patch of sky where there had only been a handful before. *The power has to be out across the entire prefect.* His astronomy text had described how urban light pollution overwhelmed all but the brightest stars. Now even the faintest were visible.

The shooting stars came faster, ten more before Thomas gave up counting. Some moved in straight lines, while others raced across the sky only to stop abruptly and turn at sharp angles.

Thomas froze in the engulfing darkness. He wanted to run but his legs wouldn't budge. Discordant sounds began to displace the silence that had filled the neighborhood. Several large booms rang out in the distance. Footsteps clattered beyond the front hedge. A mother called for her child. Somebody screamed. He trembled so badly his teeth chattered.

"Thomas."

The voice came from his rear. He turned. His mom stood inside the house behind the screen door, her face awash in glowing green light.

"Come inside," she said in an urgent whisper. "Hurry." He walked the remaining distance to the front screen door and pulled it open. "Don't let it slam," she said.

Thomas entered the house and eased the screen door against its frame. He reached for the front door to close it.

"Leave it," his mom whispered. "We've got to get to the basement." In one hand his mom held a chemical light stick from the emergency stash she kept under the sink. In her other she gripped his little brother's wrist.

"What's going on, Mom?" Thomas asked.

"Shh," she said. "I'll explain once we're down there." She led the boys quickly through the

front room, the light stick painting the walls and furniture in luminescent green. They rounded a corner and stopped before a small door under the main staircase.

“Go on,” she said, opening the door. “Take your brother’s hand.” She held the light stick above them as Thomas grabbed his little brother. The green light batted the darkness from the first few steps of staircase before yielding to the basement’s black void below. “Head down there. I’ll be right behind you. Please hold on to the railing.”

Thomas nodded and took a timid step onto the stairs. He reached for the railing as the green light disappeared. “Mom!” he yelled. “Bring back the light!”

His mom’s green face reappeared in the doorway. “We can’t take the light down there,” she said. “They might see it.”

“Who—”

“You have to head down there without a light,” said his mom. “Hold the railing and test each step with your foot. And move slowly. Remember, you’ve got your brother and he can’t see either.” His mom’s green face disappeared again, leaving the two boys standing alone in the dark.

Thomas worked his way down the stairs at a slow pace, counting each step before blindly testing it with his foot. He gently pulled his brother along. Timmy, normally jumpy and noisy, remained quiet. Their clasped palms grew clammy.

At step eight the basement door creaked open. It shut with a click.

Thomas glanced over his shoulder, but there was only darkness behind him. “Mom, is that you?” he asked in a loud whisper.

Footsteps rattled the treads to his rear.

“Mom!” he whisper-shouted, his terror growing.

The footsteps drew closer.



Thomas wanted to bound down the stairs, putting distance between whatever was approaching from behind, but moving that fast in the dark would be foolish. He picked up the pace as best he could.

A hand landed on his right shoulder.

Thomas flinched and jumped and let out a stifled wail.

“It’s me,” said his mom, gently squeezing his shoulder. “Keep going.”

Thomas, relieved but heart pounding, inched with his brother down the stairs.

Step thirteen didn’t thump like the others. It had a solid feel and a wider surface. He’d reached the basement’s cement floor. Thomas took two steps forward, pulling his brother to make space for his mom to come the rest of the way off the stairs.

His mom’s hand still on his shoulder, she spun him around and leaned down to him. Their noses almost touched in the darkness. “Thomas,” she said, “take your brother to the far corner of the basement. Follow the wall under the stairs to where it turns, then head all the way to the end.”

“But Mom . . .” Thomas fell silent as cold metal brushed against his arm. “Is that Dad’s gun?”

His mom hesitated. “Yes,” she said. “I have his shotgun and some plasma shells.”

Thomas was stunned. His mom complained about guns in the house on many occasions, one point of friction with his dad but a concession she made in her marriage to a soldier. She was a nonviolent person who held nothing but patience and compassion in her heart. Whenever they found so much as a spider in the house, she would trap it and release it back outside. He could never imagine her wielding a gun or leveling it to shoot anything living. “What’s going on, Mom?” he pleaded. “You promised you’d tell me once we got down here.”

His mom hesitated again. “I don’t know for sure, Thomas,” she said. “I’m just being extra cautious. But something like this happened recently in a city in France.”

“Something like what?” he asked.

“There’s a race of aliens called the Thetans,” she said. “They deployed an energy dampening field ... it’s like an invisible blanket over the city that disabled all the electronics—computers, lights, everything. Then they came down in their ships. All of this might be a blackout, but none of the electronics work.”

Thomas unconsciously tapped at his comm. The screen still didn’t respond.

His mom lifted her hand from his shoulder and gently cupped his cheek in her palm. “If it *is* the Thetans, we need to hide and stay quiet. They might come in the house. The Thetans don’t take prisoners.”

*They don’t take prisoners.* He and his brother used that phrase once while playing space pirates. His mom asked if he knew what it meant—he was shocked when she told him. “Timmy and me are nice pirates,” he insisted. They didn’t kill people, they just looked for gold and rare earths. He never used that phrase again.

“Take your brother Timmy to the far corner and don’t move. Don’t make a sound.”

“Where will you be?” asked Thomas.

“There’s a stack of large boxes a few feet straight ahead. I’ll be behind them. If anything that isn’t human comes down the stairs, I’m gonna blast it with the shotgun.” She kissed Thomas on the forehead and found Timmy for a hug. “Now go, and be as quiet as you can.”

Thomas took his brother as he felt his way along the basement wall, walking under the stairs and turning left when he hit the corner. He moved along the next wall to the end, pressed his back into the corner, and slid down until his rear end landed on the floor. He pulled Timmy to sit

between his legs and wrapped his arms around his little brother.

“Remember, Timmy,” Thomas said, “we have to be quiet. We can’t make a sound.” The instructions were more for himself than for his little brother, who hadn’t made a noise the entire time. Thomas began shaking. He fought to stop it.

In the blackness without a working comm, Thomas quickly lost track of time. The initial burst of adrenaline subsided, he nodded off to sleep in the monotony of the dark, quiet basement.

A muffled blaster discharge jolted him awake. Or something like a blaster. It had the normal throb of blaster fire, but also a high-pitched whine. Whatever it was, the sound came from the street, in front of their house.

How long had he been asleep? Minutes? Hours? He had no idea.

A muffled scream and a second discharge reached his ears, this time louder, closer, and accompanied by a lightning flash through the hopper windows.

*A person ... an alien ... someone is in the yard.*

A loud crash upstairs. Silence. A thud. Then another thud. And another.

*Footsteps.*

Someone or something had entered the house. Thomas looked towards the ceiling, following the intruder as he moved across the living room. Joists and floorboards groaned with each leaden step.

*It’s far too heavy to be a person.*

The plodding footsteps rounded a corner. A loud creak came from the top of the stairs.

*They’re outside the basement door!*

Thomas’s heart pounded into this throat, and he had trouble breathing. He plunged into a panic, his body shaking uncontrollably. He fought to stifle a sob.

The doorknob jiggled.

Thomas waited for the creak of the door opening.

Another jiggle.

*What's it waiting for? Just get it over with!*

A weighty step landed on the floor above, shaking the ceiling. Another step. And another. And one more. The intruder was on the move, heading away from the basement door along the path it took through the living room....

A horn blared.

The all-clear signal jolted Thomas, his brother, and his mom awake. They had slept the entire night and most of the morning in the basement. By time they crawled up the stairs and spilled from the house out into the front yard, the sun sat at its mid-morning spot in the sky.

“Stay back,” said his mom. Thomas waited, holding hands with his brother as the two boys stood in the grass. They were safe. CentCom personnel roamed the streets, even through their house. Thomas ignored his mom’s admonition, walking to the property line with his brother in tow, to the row of Azalea bushes that separated their yard from the sidewalk. Timmy was too short to see above the bushes, but Thomas had no trouble peering into the street.

Bodies littered the black asphalt. Most were human, neighbors. Some bodies seemed OK, unmoving but without visible signs of trauma. Others were torn apart, rib cages wrenched open, limbs missing. In the street not too far from where Thomas stood with his brother, a dead Thetan lay on its back in a pool of red-black blood, glaring at the hazy blue sky through its bulbous, smoky black helmet. It was humanoid, but much larger than a person. And blubbery, the product of a world with half Earth’s gravity. The skin of the Thetan’s black environment suit rippled over rolls of fat, like a walrus in a wetsuit. Thomas couldn’t help but stare, black death from the sky

rotting in the bright morning sun.

He overheard his mom asking a soldier about the alien. Their best guess for cause of death was either a weapon malfunction or friendly fire. They were puzzled why the other Thetans left the body behind. Perhaps lugging its dead weight back to their ship through full Earth gravity was more than they could manage.

*Was that Thetan in our house last night?* Thomas shuddered at the thought of confronting it in the dark. *Why didn't it come for us in the basement?* Tears streamed down his face, and he started to shake. He couldn't control himself. They came close to dying last night. A strange turn of luck kept them alive. He wanted to run, but he wasn't sure there was anyplace safe to go. He grew short of breath as the full consequences of his dad's death came into view. Without his dad, Thomas and his family were on their own, left to fend for themselves in a truly dangerous world.

Thomas cursed his dad. *No father should leave his family, leave them alone in such a dangerous world, leave them to survive by luck.* His dad went off in his starship, but he didn't think what would happen to his family if he never returned, didn't worry what it would mean for them to be all alone—

*Bzzzz.*

Holbrook's comm roused him from his memories. He'd set a reminder to take some nullihol pills before falling asleep.

Too tired to move, he ignored the alarm. He'd take the pills in the morning. It would just mean being a little bit later out of his quarters.

Holbrook lowered himself onto his side on the deck, placed his arm under his head, and sank into sleep.

## 8

“What do you mean that was my last drink?” asked the young woman from her barstool.

“Just what I said—that was your last drink for the night.” The bartender, a burly man with a balding crown, twisted a white dish towel into ever tighter knots. Irritation played across his chubby face. “*You* know they limit your tab to three drinks a day.”

The young woman tapped her comm. “I will point out, sir, the time is 12:07 a.m. A new day has begun, and with it a new tab.”

The bartender frowned at the young woman, his knuckles white from his grip. “Your residency contract covers up to three drinks a night,” he said. His voice shifted from gruff to saccharine sweet and a wide, feigned smile replaced his scowl. “But there’s no limit to how much you can drink in this bar, just on what’s already paid for.” The bartender grabbed a bottle of liquor from one of the lighted shelves behind him and wagged it gently in front of the woman. “I’d be happy to pour you a new drink, miss. Alls I need is another form of payment.”

The woman scoffed.

“Then that’s that,” he snapped, slamming the bottle back on the shelf. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have some *paying* customers to attend to.” The bartender whipped the dish towel over his shoulder and disappeared around the corner.

“There goes your tip, asshole,” the woman yelled after him. She squeezed her eyes shut and whimpered in frustration. *Three drinks a night? The whole thing’s barbaric. Who are they to decide how many drinks I can have?* Small teardrops emerged—she quickly pinched them away. *They don’t own me, though they sure act like they do. It’s just part of their never-ending stream of*

*controlling bullshit.*

The woman swiveled left on her barstool and surveyed the faintly lit space. The Andromeda Lounge was nearly empty, typical for such a late hour on a weeknight. Small booths with burgundy-colored upholstery lined the walls, the candle discs on their tables flickering apparitions onto the ceiling.

She swiveled right and discovered two men staring at her from the opposite end of the bar. One gave her a broad smile. She shot them both a dirty look and returned her attention to her glass, spying several small shards of ice swimming in the meager remnants of her drink. She jiggled the glass, placed it to her lips, and leaned her head far back to coax the final, watered-down drops of alcohol into her mouth.

“The next one’s on me,” said a loud voice in a slight German accent far too close to her right ear.

The woman glanced sideways—the two men from the other end of the bar had migrated to the barstools next to hers. *The evening’s growing worse by the moment.*

“What’ll it be?” asked the man who had smiled at her, encroaching on her personal space from the adjacent stool. He was middle-aged and skinny, with short, receding blond hair. A cropped, patchy beard concealed most of the cleft in his chin, and the man’s liquor-laden breath wafted across her face. His companion, also middle-aged and a bit dirtier blond, stood beside him with a smile, leaning against the bar.

“I’m calling it a night,” she said.

“Don’t be that way,” said the man. “We haven’t even been properly introduced. I’m Dr. Martin Freidrich, and my friend here is Dr. Rudolf Weiss.” Weiss’s hand lifted in a weak wave from the wrist. “And you are?”

“Thirsty,” said the woman.

Freidrich chuckled. “He has you on a tight leash.”

“Who does?”

“The guy who’s paying your bills,” said Freidrich, smiling. “Rudolf and I heard your exchange with the bartender. We have a little bet going on your story.”

“My story?” *Pricks*.

“Yes, your story,” said Freidrich. “You know, the reason a beautiful, young girl like you is here on a research station out in the literal middle of nowhere.” Freidrich cinched in closer as he spoke. “Rudolf here thinks you’re a researcher’s lonely, neglected young wife, forced to follow where his work takes him.”

“Is that so,” she said.

Weiss nodded with a toothy, intoxicated smile.

“My explanation is more charitable,” said Freidrich. “I don’t think you’re a married woman looking to pick up men in a bar.”

“How big of you,” said the woman. She scanned her glass again for any missed drops of alcohol.

“My guess is you’re an overworked research assistant to a crusty old physicist struggling through his mid-life crisis.”

*Sexist pricks*. Still staring into her glass, the woman said, “Are you and Rudolf researchers, then?”

“Why yes,” said Freidrich with a wide grin, “Dr. Weiss and I are physicists, and we’re researching an incredibly exciting topic, but it’s very, very complicated.” His eyes sparkled as he grasped the back of her barstool with his left hand and stroked the mid portion of her bare back



with his top two fingers. “If we’re successful, and I can objectively say we’re very close, they’ll award us the Nobel-Wasserman prize in Physics.”

“Oh, that does sound *very* exciting,” she said in a sarcastic tone.

“It is,” he continued, nodding. “It’s perhaps best described as a grand theory of everything.”

“God, not more string theory bullshit,” said the woman. She closed her eyes and brought her fingers to the sides of her head, slowly massaging her temples.

Freidrich paused. His smile evaporated. “Maybe you are familiar with several of string theory’s challenges,” he said. “I agree it’s had its share of setbacks, but it’s hardly, as you say, bullshit.”

*Deluded, sexist pricks.* The woman swiveled on her barstool to face the two men. Her ice-blue eyes savaged them, gazing out from under close-cropped dark bangs. She wore a short, dark, tight-fitting dress with thin straps that looped over her bare shoulders. The men’s attention fell to the exposed, rounded tops of her breasts, shifting unfettered beneath the dress’s sheer material. “I’ll at least give you both some credit for consistency,” she said. “The stories you made up about me are as ridiculous as your grand unified theory.”

Freidrich’s face quickly reddened. “Listen, honey,” he said through clenched teeth and a forced smile, “if you think string theory is wrong, it’s only because you don’t understand it.”

*Patronizing, deluded, sexist pricks.* The woman’s eyes narrowed. “Either of my recent papers on entropic gravity should have been enough for all you zealots to toss your grand theory in the dumpster where it belongs,” she said. “Maybe you saw them in the Journal of Classical and Quantum Gravity?”

The two men blinked at her, their mouths agape.

“You string theorists always say, ‘By proving X we’ll finally demonstrate that string theory

is correct,' but when X turns out to be false you say, 'Proving Y will show that string theory is correct.' And on and on it goes. That's the problem with a theory that's non-falsifiable."

"I thought you looked familiar," said Weiss, wagging his finger at her. "You're Rebekah Riesen."

"Dr. Rebekah Riesen," she corrected.

"My God," he said, placing his palm against his cheek. "Here, Martin, we're dreaming of the Nobel-Wasserman prize in Physics but she's received it three times, twice before she was twenty-five."

"That's right," Dr. Riesen growled, eyes smoldering on Freidrich. "And the reason I think string theory is wrong is because I *do* understand it."

Freidrich's gaping mouth snapped shut.

"Bartender!" shouted Dr. Riesen.

The bartender emerged from around the pillar, stopping in front of Dr. Riesen.

"I'll have another," she said, pointing to her empty glass. She tipped her head towards Freidrich. "He's buying."

- - -

Dr. Martin Freidrich's hand moved along Dr. Riesen's waist, sliding slowly across the fabric of her dress at the small of her back before slipping farther down to caress her buttocks. Dr. Riesen ran her fingers through his hair while her other hand toyed with his waistband.

Freidrich pulled her closer. She enjoyed the firmness of his body pressing into hers.

He planted a kiss on her lips, then worked his way across her cheek to nibble her ear. "I know they say you're a mistake," he whispered, "but I don't see how you could be any more perfect."

Dr. Riesen reached behind her back, grabbed Freidrich's wrist, and lifted his arm from around her body. She pushed him away and smiled. "I've got to get to bed," she said.

"How 'bout mine?" asked Freidrich. "I can tell Rudolph to go sleep in the lab."

"Not tonight," she said, shaking her head. She stepped backwards to stand within intention range of her apartment door.

"When, then?" he asked, taking a step toward her as the door slid open.

Dr. Riesen stood radiant in the corridor lights, framed by the dark foyer behind her: long, athletic legs flowing into wide hips; large, perfectly shaped breasts; pouty lips and ice-blue eyes under a bob of black hair veiling alabaster skin. "I'll message you," she said, moving backwards into her apartment. She stopped a few paces inside.

Freidrich stood frozen, staring at her silhouetted form as she lingered in the twilight between the corridor and the apartment's dark interior.

Dr. Riesen crossed her arms over her chest and grasped her dress straps. She drew the straps slowly down, peeling her dress away to fully expose her breasts. "You know you're right," she said, standing in the shadowed light of the doorway. "I'm not sure I could be more perfect." Freidrich started forward as the door slid shut in front of him.

Engulfed in the blackness of her apartment, Dr. Riesen returned her dress straps to her shoulders and stepped gingerly through the living room. She dodged the coffee table, finding her way to the couch where she dropped herself onto the pillows, breathed deep, and leaned her head back. She sat in the darkness, tears rolling down her cheeks from the corners of her closed eyes.

"Another challenging night?" said a man's deep voice from across the room.

Dr. Riesen jumped. "God, don't *do* that!" she said, snapping her head up. She quickly wiped away the tears with her hands.

“I’m sorry, my child, I did not mean to frighten you.” A side table lamp came to life in the far corner, filling the space with a soft, warm glow, revealing a man sitting in a chair with wide cushioned armrests. He wore a hooded, crimson robe and crimson leather sandals. “Were you at the bar or taking another walk?” he asked.

“I went to the bar tonight,” said Dr. Riesen.

“How was it?”

“Typical,” she said as she sat up straight on the couch. “They cut me off on drinks again.”

“You should be thankful The Brotherhood pays for any drinks at all,” said the man. “You know how we frown on alcohol. Besides, it’s never a solution to life’s problems.”

“I also ran into the typical bunch of idiots,” she said, fishing for sympathy. “Tonight they thought I was either a lowly research assistant or a physicist’s trophy wife.”

“Wasn’t that your objective?” asked the man. “Didn’t you present yourself in a way so they would assume you’re anything other than what you are?”

Her face still wet from tears, Dr. Riesen crossed her arms over her chest and gave the man an angry look. “And what am I, Rabbi?”

The man smiled. “You are many things,” he said, “starting with the most brilliant physicist alive.”

Dr. Riesen rolled her eyes.

“Was the man you were kissing in the hall one of the idiots?” he asked.

She shrugged. “What if he was?”

“You disrespect yourself by allowing a man you hold in such low regard to touch you as he did,” he said. “And you dishonor yourself by teasing him with your body.”

“That asshole got what he deserved,” she said. “But I think it’s your honor you’re worried

about, not mine.” She cupped the undersides of her breasts and lifted, their smooth white tops erupting from her dress. “This is who I am. It’s not my fault all this makes you and the others so uncomfortable.”

The man blinked at her in the warm table light. “I have little desire or energy for verbal sparring at such a late hour, Rebekah, but I think you know nothing you do dishonors me, for the way you act does not arise from anything I ever taught you. Your behavior is yours alone, as is the dishonor it brings.”

Dr. Riesen looked away, her gaze landing on the couch arm’s dark velvety upholstery. She ran her hand across the nap, smoothing it to fall in one direction. “What’re you doing up this late anyway?” she asked.

“I couldn’t sleep,” he said. “I figured I would wait up for your return.”

More tears welled. Dr. Riesen wiped them away with the back of her hand.

The man moved from his chair and sat next to Dr. Riesen on the couch. The crow’s feet at his temples accented his gentle smile, and his kind eyes peered at her through round glasses with thin rims. A smattering of gray patches dotted his dark brown, neatly cropped beard. He took her hands in his. “Have you reconsidered your decision?” he asked.

“I have not,” said Dr. Riesen. “If anything, I’m even more determined to go.”

The man sighed. “This choice will be much more destructive than the alcohol you consume every night,” he said. “And it still won’t be the answer to your problems.”

Tears ran down Dr. Riesen’s face. The man put his arm around her shoulders and squeezed her gently. He gave her a kind smile. “Let me tell you a story.”

- - -

I rose at the God-forsaken fourth hour of the twenty-third day of the year 2302 A.D. Of

course I know God forsakes nothing in His creation as everything manifests His perfect will, including 3 a.m. and all other moments in time. And of course I was no stranger to waking before dawn, as each day the entire Quad bustles with chores and chants before the stars have receded from the sky. Still, my faith struggled to find the divinity in flailing out of a deep sleep to quiet my bleating alarm, in scrambling to dress with my mind in a fog, in stumbling from my quarters to stand with a dozen men in the dead of night.

Once we assembled on the flat patch outside the Quad's main gate, the Admor raised his hand to settle us, shouted, "Yatsa!" and our party of Three, Seven, and Three lurched forward. Our destination: the Q'erh Radvid, a circular depression atop the tan-white Qumran cliffs that soared four hundred meters before us, a massive glacier of stone towering in the blueish moonlight. A thin layer of dust floated at our feet as we shuffled along the soft dirt path that meandered a kilometer to the sheer cliffside. I caught myself sipping from my flask despite lack of thirst and resolved not to exhaust my water supply on nerves. After a short time we reached the rugged cliff base and found the tortoise-shaped stone that marks the start of the summit trail. Without a word or pause, we took to the path.

Moreh Grünfeld and I walked behind the Admor, who maintained an aggressive pace despite his 116 years. His staff struck the rock path with a steady beat, breaking the silence around us with a sharp thwack.

"Rabbi Lehr," the Moreh said, clasping my shoulder as he took me aside at the previous night's rehearsal, "during our travel to the summit you will find the Admor's staff jarring, but in it you will also find comfort."

"Were you a member of a prior Tchiyah ceremony?" I asked.

"Indeed," the Moreh said through a wide smile, "the previous one."

As the Moreh alluded, I winced with each teeth-rattling crack of the Admor's staff, but the steady hypnotic repetition drew my mind from the dull aches that grew in my knees and ankles.

The Admor, the Moreh to my left, and I formed the Tchiyah party's forward Three. Behind us trudged the Seven coffin bearers: three rows of two monks walking abreast and a seventh in front to steer. Together they shouldered their load with huffs and grunts. The final Three, the ovum and sperm holders who also walked abreast, followed by the monk with the ceremonial womb, marched at the rear.

Most of our jagged pathway had been carved from the solid rock of the cliff face. The path ran wide in spots but narrowed for long stretches. The grade remained steady throughout, not too steep or shallow. We encountered neither sand nor loose rock to challenge our footing, though our leather sandals sometimes slid where the stone had worn smooth. The landscape lacked life: no plants grew from the cliffside, no insects darted about, no animals rustled. This barren panorama provided little distraction from the black expanse just beyond the path's ragged edge, a dark void waiting to swallow a careless hiker, to caress them in an onrush of air and blackness before they dashed to the ground below.

After marching for an hour, the Admor slammed his staff into the stone path and cried, "atsor!" signaling a ten-minute rest. We stopped on a wide, flat overhang with ample space for the Seven to set down their heavy wooden load with its morbid contents. I had broken a sweat on our hike but did not overheat thanks to my robe's chimney-like channeling of the cool night air. The coffin bearers hadn't been as lucky. They tossed the wood bundles from their backs and let their robes fall away from their torsos—seven molting snakes shedding their crimson skins. They hunched forward with their hands on their knees as they heaved air into their lungs. At least their return trip would be easier.

I moved to the path's edge and peered down to locate the trailhead. The moon had risen above the cliffs, leaving the alluvial plain in a darkness interrupted only by the yellow pinpricks of lantern light that winked from the Quad's walkways far below. Farther to the east shimmered the Dead Sea, a black mirror stretching to the eastern horizon.

I turned around to find the party had reassembled, and I sprinted to regain my place in the procession. The Admor, upon seeing all returned to their positions and the Seven again shouldering the coffin, shouted, "Yatsa!" He pounded his staff into the stone trail, spun on his heels, and resumed leading us in our march up the path.

The second half of our journey mirrored the first, with a pounding staff and an ominous darkness at path's edge. The air grew cooler as our elevation increased, and winds jostled us at times with gusts of varied strength. Despite our ascent, we were not climbing to a destination high above the Earth's surface. The Qumran cliffs form the leading edge of the African tectonic plate, marking the point where it drives the Arabian plate down into the fiery mantle. The Dead Sea and its environs sit on the Arabian side of this subduction zone, four hundred meters below sea level. We were not unlike creatures from the ocean's depths on an arduous journey to the surface.

Another hour of travel brought sight of the trail's end, and a squall so cold my ears and nose throbbed with pain. Moments later a stronger gust drove me into the Moreh, and the Tchiyah party had to stand its ground until the blast subsided. As we continued, more gusts whipped around us and a steady wind grew until we could no longer make forward progress. The coffin bearers set down their parcel, and we huddled against the cliffside. My teeth chattered as I pulled my robe tight and pinched closed the portion at my ankles. I donned my hood and gripped the rough rock face as best I could with frozen hands.



Sand welled from the ground below and rasped at exposed skin, striving to etch us from the cliff. We crouched and clung for ten minutes as the storm raged and showed no sign it would end. I looked eastward against the wind, making slits of my eyes. A few ruffled, gray clouds with orange bellies hung low as the horizon sprouted hints of soft blue. My concern grew—the Tchiyah ceremony had to begin the moment the first rays of light bolted from the sunrise. We could not turn back and attempt the next morning, for The Prophet’s spirit had already spent the past three days moving through the three bardos, the intermediate stages between death and rebirth. We had to move.

I spied the Admor nestled into the cliff face on my right. He looked skyward, but with eyes pinched shut and brow furrowed. His lips moved—I only made out fragments of his speech over the din of the wind. During a lull, those loose sounds formed words from the Sheheḥeyanu blessing:

*Blessed are You,  
Lord our God,  
King of the Universe,  
Who has kept us alive, sustained us,  
And enabled us to reach this season.*

I, too, recited the blessing, followed by others, until the entire Tchiyah party shouted above the gale. I found myself crying, for if our prayers failed, 250 years of rebirths and revelations would end.

However, that morning God heard our words and acted, for seconds later the winds slackened to a gentle breeze. No longer forced to shelter against the cliffside, we stood and rejoiced with wide grins. Tears raced down my face, for God had shown His will indeed included

The Prophet's return.

As we stood beaming, an anguished shriek tore through our celebration. I turned to find the Admor with a wild look on his face. He began screaming, a staccato of sounds made unintelligible by his distress, each syllable punctuated by spittle that flew from his lips. His eyes bulged as they followed the line of his raised left arm and forefinger aimed at the glowing eastern horizon. We had survived the wind, but we had not yet reached the summit or prepared for the ceremony. We retook our positions without delay, the coffin bearers once again hoisted their morbid load, and we scrambled along the path's final stretch.

The Admor, the Moreh, and I bounded up the trail, but when I glanced back, I discovered the Seven thirty paces behind us. They moved as fast as they could but struggled under the coffin's weight. I ran to them, lined up next to the lead coffin bearer, and lent my back to the effort. Even with eight men, the casket bore down on my thin frame, taxing my muscles and sinews, but together we moved faster up the trail. I closed my eyes and focused on placing one foot in front of the other, trusting my workmates to keep us on the path.

Time raced or froze—I had no sense, only the focus to move the coffin up the trail. I was on the verge of collapsing when the word “atsor!” broke the silence and we stopped moving. I opened my eyes, surprised to find we had arrived at the summit. The eastern sky was brighter than moments ago, but the sun had still not risen.

The Seven and I moved with haste to the ash pit, a half-meter deep rectangular gouge with jagged edges and a rugged floor that suggested the work of chisels and pickaxes. Despite its name the pit contained no ashes, the contents of the last Tchiyah ceremony having blown away decades ago. The eight of us centered the coffin into the pit.

The Seven unbundled their wood packs into the gap between the pit's edges and the casket's

sides. As they worked, the lead coffin bearer swung open the lid and removed a large goatskin flask. Within the box a crimson-dyed burlap shroud traced the contours of a motionless head and torso. The lead bearer lowered the lid, pulled the cork from the flask, and doused the coffin and wood with accelerant.

Twelve of us took positions around the ash pit, forming a semi-circle that opened to the east. The Admor faced us from across the coffin, and we all stood motionless until the first ray of sunlight danced from the horizon. The Admor spoke:

“Tichyah. Rebirth. Today we observe the passing of The Prophet, not from this world to the next, but from the discarded body here before us to the new one we shall conceive. We are the joyful witnesses to his last moments in the world between worlds, and to the first moments of his next journey upon this Earth. We exult in excited anticipation of revelation.”

“Amen,” we all cried out.

As the Admor finished his remarks, the lead coffin bearer walked to the casket. He reached into the front of his robe near his chest and withdrew a closed fist that pulsed with a gentle, red warmth. In a quick motion he flung the contents of his hand, three match beads, into the ash pit. Each glowing, milky-red pearl erupted in flame where it landed, and in seconds a conflagration engulfed the container. Gray smoke drifted high into the morning air, carried by a gentle breeze. Burning wood tinged my nostrils.

The trailing Three moved from their positions and presented themselves to the Admor. The monk with the womb, a shiny silver heart-shaped vessel about the size of a drumhead and several inches thick, held it outstretched from his body. Upon the Admor’s nod, the ovum and sperm holders inserted their separate cryotubes, foot-long silver batons, into cavities along the womb’s top edge. As they stepped back, the Admor bowed his head and pressed his hands together at his

chest in prayer. We all followed suit, though I kept one eye fixed on the womb, waiting for the sign of conception. I stood breathless until the small green dot appeared at the container's center.

The green dot also cued my part in the ceremony. I walked to the Admor, who raised his head and lowered his hands and said, "Rabbi Lehr, do you swear to protect this Prophet child, to guard and defend no matter the cost, even to the forfeit of your own life?"

"I do," I said, my voice gravelly. Though conceived only moments before, an enormous love rose within my heart for the new child, the next Prophet. Love, and a great pride in my selection above all others for the honor of Protector. I would be a father to this fatherless child, give all of myself and more, and never, ever, let harm come.

The following days dragged into weeks and crawled into months. Each morning after reciting my prayers at the tiny wooden desk in my quarters, I would add a new mark to the tally of days I kept on a special page in my journal. As spring became summer, my despair over the remaining time turned to anticipation of the coming birth. I visited the gestational womb every day, bursting into the room to count the green dots arrayed in a spiral across its copper face. Each new glowing mote signaled the successful completion of another step in the fetus's development.

At last the Birth Day arrived, just after Yom Kippur. Each moment lives with me still in vivid memory. I stared in awe as the baby's crown bulged from the copper birth canal the Caretakers had attached to the womb that morning. The full head, shoulders, and torso emerged, the contraction protocol having entered its fastest and most forceful phase. Next came the belly, the umbilical, and gasps of shock and disbelief. A rabbi attendant offered the pithy observation, "This is the fuck-up of all fuck-ups."

Two hours later Moreh Grünfeld and I stood outside the large wooden door to the Admor's office. The Moreh carried a despondent look on his age-lined face. As Director of the

Generational Program, even a minor mishap meant major grief for him. When the newborn Prophet three generations prior emerged with an eye color closer to steel gray than the expected ice-blue the program's detractors hurled the barb, "Unreliable in small things, unreliable in big things," a fair criticism, for if we could not guarantee a trait as basic as a man's eye color, what confidence could we assert in anything more significant? That day we fully confirmed their criticism.

Moreh Grünfeld twice struck the door's massive driftwood planks with the tethered black iron ball knocker before pushing it open. The Admor's assistant would have greeted us but had already left for the day. Cool air enveloped us as we entered the dark space, the antechamber to the main office. The Admor preferred a frigid workspace, and we shivered as we transited from the warm early evening air. Once inside, the Moreh nudged the great door shut.

We walked the short distance to the main office door, dodging a desk and other furniture, gray lumps in the room's dim light. The Moreh tapped with his knuckles, then nudged the door. Yellow-orange sunlight rushed from the breach, blinding us in the moment. The Moreh's head disappeared into the crack and was met by a curt, "Come in." He pushed the door open wide enough for us both to pass.

Fading golden sunlight filled the Admor's office, streaming through tall panes of glass that stretched from floor to ceiling along the room's entire western wall. The windows looked out onto a small garden of short trees and flower bushes, interspersed with a sandy path. Birds made their last stops of the day at several hanging feeders. Across from the garden rose the Quad's stone block outer wall, and beyond it the white-tan cliffs.

Though immense, the room contained little furniture, just a simple wooden desk flanked by the Admor's large leather chair and its two lesser, wooden counterparts. On the wall behind the

Admor hung a fifteen-foot-tall oil on wood painting of the first man to hold his position, watching us with his fiery black eyes. This man of small stature possessed the courage and conviction to break from traditional Jewish teachings, basing The Brotherhood on the truths found in many different faiths. A cloister of Jewish monks was unheard of before him, much less one embracing the Buddhist belief in reincarnation.

The Admor trained his eyes on us as we approached. “Sit down,” he barked as he nodded at the chairs facing the desk. The Moreh took one while I remained standing to his side and slightly behind. The Admor’s command notwithstanding, protocol dictated I stay on my feet, for sitting next to the Moreh would imply equivalent status. Our current predicament was more than enough grief for one day.

Deep, wide wrinkles crossed the Admor’s face like the grooves in bark on an old tree. Arteries bulged and pulsed beneath the papery skin at his temples. Fat eyebrows sat like caterpillars over sunken eyes as the Admor stared through thin-rimmed glasses at Moreh Grünfeld. The Moreh fixed his gaze on the Admor’s desktop.

“Have they determined the root cause?” the Admor asked, speaking in his typical low tone.

“As near as they can tell,” Moreh Grünfeld said, looking up as he fidgeted in his chair, “the error must have occurred sometime after the annealing phase that separates the male sperm from the female. We rechecked the photographs and genetic profile of each individual spermatozoon and confirmed the Tchiyah cohort contained no female sperm.” The Moreh paused as he shuffled in his seat. “However, they suspect a microscopic droplet of seminal fluid clinging to the outside of the pipet must have introduced female sperm into the transport cylinder.”

“So not only do we have a female Prophet,” the Admor said, his voice building to a low growl, “we don’t even have a record of the contributing spermatozoon’s genetic composition?”

“Correct,” the Moreh said in a quavering voice, “but we have sequenced the child’s DNA and reconstructed the spermatozoon’s profile. We have confirmed the child is genetically healthy and anomaly-free.”

“Except,” the Admor hissed, “the child is female instead of male.” The Admor spoke slowly and with emphasis, and the Moreh’s head sank lower after each word. “Why didn’t the genetic scanners flag this error at the start?”

“The scanners are designed to detect genetic sequence errors and anomalies,” said the Moreh. “A female embryo is technically not a genetic sequence error.”

“Error, mistake, call it what you will, but this is not the desired outcome in any sense,” the Admor said. “Why didn’t any of the subsequent generational stages catch it?”

The Moreh hesitated. “Your excellency, those systems were similarly restricted in scope. They assumed a male embryo in sym-utero, so none of the automated checks bothered to confirm the fetus’s sex. I have directed such testing be added at multiple stages, including conception, and future Tchiyah ceremonies will depart with secondary ova and spermatozoa cohorts as a backup for gender errors in the primary zygote. This mistake will not happen again.”

The Admor didn’t stir for several long seconds. “It seems we have a plan for the future,” he finally said. “Now what do we do about our current predicament?”

After a long pause, the Moreh said, “The Prophet cannot be female. It is unfortunate but necessary to restart the generational process.”

The Admor pursed his lips. “Reluctantly I have reached the same conclusion,” he said.

“Perhaps a Hamatat Hessed ceremony,” said the Moreh. “This, after all, would be a mercy killing. And then we hold a new Tchiyah ceremony three days later.”

“We must not!” I shouted.

The Admor and Moreh looked at me in shock, as I had no permission or place in that meeting to speak.

“Killing is wrong,” I stammered. “Killing a child, an infant, to correct our so-called mistake is evil.”

“The Prophet must be male,” said the Admor in a lecturing tone. “This child, this female, should never have existed.”

“Who says she is not to be The Prophet?” I asked. “Who says our tradition of male Prophets is correct? Who is to say this female Prophet is not God’s will?”

Silence fell over the room. Finally, the Admor spoke. “This issue is not up for debate,” he said. “We must trust in what we think is right. We are far along in the process of welcoming The Prophet back to this world, but not so far along we cannot fix this error. We must do this for the good of the program.”

I took a deep breath. The Admor and Moreh had so far been sympathetic to my point of view in that they had not immediately called the guards to drag me away to one of the contemplation cells below ground. I would likely find any further outburst met with a swift and harsh response. But after all my consultations with God since the birth of The Prophet, I had steeled myself to my current course, had settled upon my next action before I walked into the Admor’s office. “The child has a name.”

The Moreh burst from his chair. “She cannot!” he yelled, his face contorted in anger.

“No, no, no, no, no!” shouted the Admor, each syllable louder than the last.

“The child has a name,” I said again, this time with more force, determined to see it through. “Her name is Rebekah.”

The Admor thrust his palms flat against his ears, and his eyes rolled back in his head. He



began blubbering what may have started as a prayer but drifted to what sounded like the ramblings of an unhinged man.

“Blasphemy!” shouted the Moreh standing next to me. His eyes bulged, threatening to leap from their sockets. “You cannot give this child a name! This child cannot be the next Prophet!”

“Her name is Rebekah,” I repeated, my tone calm. Every muscle in my body tensed, and sweat beaded across my brow, but I stood fast in my resolve. I drew strength from the oath I swore nine months prior, to guard and defend that child no matter the cost, even to my life.

The Admor slowly lowered his hands from his ears. His bloodshot eyes looked past me, as if in a trance. “We cannot kill a child who has a name,” he said.

“We must!” yelled the Moreh, quickly cowering. Although he fully intended to kill a baby not even a day old, he likely recoiled upon hearing his insistence they do so. He grew calmer, though his body shook with anger. “Your excellency,” he pleaded, “please let us fix this mistake.”

“We cannot kill a child who has a name,” the Admor said again, still looking past me, resignation in his voice. He stood and slowly raised his arms, turning his palms flat to face me. His eyes finally connected with mine, full of fire. I raised my arms and offered my palms in kind. He hissed the benediction that initiated the Protector’s service, “You, Rabbi Lehr, are the Protector. Raise this child, the next Prophet, and keep her from harm, so that God may reveal to us, through her, the inner workings of His holy Universe.”

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Rabbi Lehr gently lowered Dr. Riesen’s head from his shoulder, moving slowly to avoid waking her. He reached into a box at the end of the couch and pulled out a blanket. He spread it over her arms and legs.

“We must trust in what we think is right,” whispered Rabbi Lehr, “and what can be more right than God’s will?” He caressed her head. “God chose for you to return to His Universe as a woman. That they cannot understand the wisdom of God’s decision does not make you a mistake. The mistake is their questioning of God’s will.” He caressed her head again. “I only wish you could believe that.”

## 9

“Welcome to Plana Petram, Captain Holbrook, Commander Stephens.”

The greeting startled the two *Avenger* officers as they exited their shuttle’s airlock. An aught stood before them, two meters tall with white phlesh, short, dark hair, a slim pointed nose, and a wide, toothy smile. He wore a dark blue suit with narrow lapels, and his head jerked bird-like as his gaze shifted between the two officers.

“You’ve got to be shitting me,” Stephens huffed, shaking his head in disgust.

The aught blinked at the two men, its eyelids clicking softly. “Commodore Ahrens sent me to greet you upon your arrival and to escort you to the meeting room. I understand this is your first time at Plana Petram?”

Stephens glared at the aught, leaving Holbrook to nod in the affirmative for both of them. “We’re not in the habit of traveling this far from home,” he said.

“That affords me the pleasure of giving you a welcome tour of this research station while we walk. But first, let me introduce myself. My name is Magellan,” he said with a shallow bow, “as in Ferdinand Magellan, the sixteenth century Portuguese explorer, namesake of the Magellanic clouds. From our vantage point fifty-three thousand light-years from Earth we have a spectacular view of those clouds and the sixty-seven other satellite galaxies this side of the galactic disc. This way, gentlemen.” Magellan headed to the left down the corridor. The two *Avenger* officers followed, hanging back out of the aught’s earshot.

“Really?” whispered Stephens. “Ahrens sends an aught to meet us?”

“I’m sure there’s a good reason he couldn’t be here himself,” said Holbrook, his voice low.

“But this is official CentCom business,” said Stephens. “This thing has probably tipped off the entire Collective to our presence, maybe even to the mission, whatever the hell it is.”

Holbrook motioned Stephens to keep his voice down. “Most aughts aren’t part of The Collective,” he whispered. “Besides, this one’s intelligence level doesn’t seem to be very high. I doubt it can do much more than run errands.”

“All aughts are dangerous—you know that,” sneered Stephens, his voice rising. “They can’t be trusted, none of ’em. I’d destroy ’em all if I had the chance.”

Magellan spun around, facing the two men. The aught locked his eyes on Stephens, its lids clicking like camera shutters. The commander, startled, tensed his muscles as if readying himself for a fight.

Magellan smiled wide at Stephens. “The Plana Petram station came about as a fluke,” he said as he continued leading the men down the corridor, walking backwards in perfect step. “A survey probe venturing into this volume of intergalactic space chanced upon this capsule-shaped body, a 5.987 quadrillion kilogram class C asteroid the length of Manhattan, a strange find in a region where the space density averages only one hydrogen atom per cubic meter. The station consists of nine levels, eight of them subterranean. This top level hosts recreation space and dining facilities, while the others consist primarily of living quarters and research labs.”

The three arrived at the Grand Lounge, a cavernous circular room of couches and plush chairs. Snatches of light danced from sconces stationed like torches at two-meter intervals along the curved outer wall. A breathtaking view of the Milky Way galaxy hovered above them, visible through the flat glassteel roof and providing the bulk of the illumination. Two automatons, also with white phlesh and dressed in dark blue suits, shuttled between guests and the bar across the room. Conversation filled the space.

“The Grand Lounge isn’t usually this busy,” said Magellan, raising his voice above the ambient noise, “but there are several conferences underway at the station, and it is happy hour.”

“I have a question,” Holbrook said.

“Of course, Captain Holbrook, please interrupt me at any time,” said Magellan, beaming with a broad smile. “The same for you, Commander Stephens.”

“Why in Hades would anyone build a station fifty thousand light-years from Earth?” asked Holbrook.

“An excellent question,” said Magellan. “Plana Petram’s extreme distance from Earth and its position above the galactic disc places it far from most of the mass in the Milky Way but still within the relatively dense portion of the galaxy’s supposed dark matter halo, making it an ideal platform for investigating the nature of that substance.”

Stephens let out a loud, derisive laugh.

“What’s so funny?” asked Holbrook.

“Nothing’s funny, Captain,” said Stephens. “This whole thing just keeps getting more ridiculous.” The captain stared at him, waiting for him to elaborate. “The only reason we’re out here, the only reason we had to spend three weeks traveling fifty thousand light-years is because of a joke, because some old, dead physicists didn’t have their heads on straight.”

“I still don’t understand,” said Holbrook.

“Commander Stephens is referring to dark matter,” said Magellan, “a concept physicists dreamt up four hundred years ago to explain why rotating galaxies don’t fling their constituent stars off into intergalactic space. Based on what they knew about gravity at the time they didn’t observe enough matter to keep a galaxy’s stars rotating around its core.”

“They called it *dark* matter because they couldn’t see it,” said Stephens, rolling his eyes.

“Get it? Dark matter supposedly bound a galaxy through gravity on a large scale with invisible particles that somehow didn’t clump in the centers of stars or accumulate around planets as they swept through their orbits.”

“Discoveries at this station were instrumental in disproving the theory of dark matter,” said Magellan, “though it took another fifty years for the theory to be fully rejected.”

“As they say, cosmologists are often in error but never in doubt.”

The voice came from behind them. The three turned to find a young woman standing in a crimson jacket over a black shirt, with black slacks and crimson leather-strapped sandals. She had dark hair pulled back in a knob with bangs across her forehead. Her eyes were the lightest blue, the color of ice. “Sometimes it’s hard to wrap your head around what was accepted as legitimate science in those days,” she said.

“Ah, Dr. Riesen, very good,” said Magellan.

“Dr. Rebekah Riesen?” asked Stephens, his mouth falling open.

“Is there some other?” she asked.

“You know her?” asked Holbrook.

“Yes ..., I mean no ..., I mean we’ve never met; I just know who she is,” Stephens stammered.

The captain extended his hand past his stunned executive officer. “I’m Captain Holbrook of the CentCom starship *Avenger*. And this is Commander Stephens.” Stephens came to his senses long enough to offer his hand.

“Nice to meet you both,” said Dr. Riesen. Stephens could only sheepishly nod in acknowledgement.

“You must be some luminary to render my executive officer speechless,” said Holbrook.

“I’m just a physicist,” said Dr. Riesen.

“Dr. Rebekah Riesen is the preeminent physicist of our time,” said Magellan. “She has received three Nobel-Wassermans in Physics, five Gold Clusters for distinguished astrophysics research, the—”

“That’s enough, Magellan,” said Dr. Riesen.

“She’s also The Prophet,” said Stephens.

“The Prophet?” said Holbrook. “Like in the Bible?”

“That’s a long story,” said Dr. Riesen, “one that we don’t really have time for right now.” She turned to Magellan. “We should head to the meeting. We don’t want to keep the commodore waiting.”

“Commodore Ahrens?” asked Holbrook, surprised. “You’re meeting with him too?”

“Indeed,” said Magellan. “And now that she is here, we do not have to make a stop at her apartment to fetch her. Lady and gentlemen, please follow me.” The aught spun around abruptly and headed across the Grand Lounge. The three humans followed, with Dr. Riesen walking ahead of the two *Avenger* officers. The four bumped and pressed against the other station guests as they worked their way through the throng of people.

“Why would Rebekah Riesen be in our mission briefing?” Stephens asked Holbrook in a loud whisper just audible above the din.

“You said she’s The Prophet?” asked Holbrook.

“That’s what they call her,” said Stephens. “She’s part of some crazy sect back on Earth. They say she communes with God or something. A Prophet relaying God’s secrets of the physical Universe.”

“You believe that?” asked Holbrook.

Stephens shrugged.

The humans followed Magellan to a set of three elevator doors at the far side of the room. When everyone arrived, the aught pressed the call button to the middle elevator. The doors whisked open and the four stepped into the car, a spacious, round cabin with a bright interior. The door slid shut, creating a sudden pocket of quiet.

“Level six,” said Magellan.

After a short elevator ride the doors whisked open. The party of four emptied into a quiet, dimly lit corridor lined with sconces flicking light onto the walls and low ceiling. Magellan led the three humans past several closed doors to the last one on the right, five meters before the corridor’s abrupt end.

Magellan pressed the entry buzzer and waited. The door slid open, revealing a small room much brighter than the corridor, its walls lined with white titanium paneling. A rectangular table sat in the center with a smooth, glassy top, surrounded by eight chairs. A CentCom officer sat facing the door on the table’s far side, the ends of his uniform sleeves braided in gold commodore ribbons. He stood as the four entered the room.

“Captain Holbrook, Commander Stephens, Dr. Riesen,” said the CentCom officer in a deep, booming voice. He had a thick chocolate-brown mustache flecked with gray, its bristles concealing the rim of his upper lip. Brown hair capped his head in a Roman military cut, with patches of gray at his temples. His eyes were dark brown, almost black, suspended over gaunt cheeks. The royal blue fabric of his uniform hung from his lean, two-meter frame.

A broad hand, its palm marred by an angry red scar, darted from the man’s right sleeve. “I’m Commodore Ahrens,” he said to the two military men as he reached across the table to shake their hands. “And good to see you again, Doctor.”



“Commodore,” said Dr. Riesen, nodding slightly.

Ahrens’s dark eyes darted to Magellan. “That will be all.”

Magellan gave a wide smile. “It has been a pleasure, Dr. Riesen, Captain Holbrook, Commander Stephens. Please let me know if there is anything I can do to improve your stay here on Plana Petram.” He leaned forward with a shallow bow and backed out of the room. The doors slid closed upon his exit.

“Take your seats,” said Commodore Ahrens, waving at the three empty chairs on the near side of the table while returning to his own. Captain Holbrook lowered himself into the middle one directly across from the commodore. Dr. Riesen took the chair to the captain’s left, Stephens the one to his right.

Holbrook forced a weak half-smile at Ahrens, who so far lived up to his reputation of having a no-nonsense style. When researching the man, the most charitable comment Holbrook could find was he thankfully kept meetings short, sparing others from too much time in his presence. Would Ahrens show any concern for his vessel having drawn this assignment? The odds seemed against it—the commodore was seasoned career military, decorated on multiple occasions for his service, which included two tours in the long-running Cygnus offensive. Still, Holbrook remained optimistic that Ahrens would be open to discussing possible alternatives to taking his ship so close to the galactic center. “How was your trip here, Commodore?”

Ahrens’s dark eyes grabbed Holbrook, threatening to swallow him like two tiny black holes. “Irrelevant,” he said. “No one likes to travel by sleeper. Those God damn capsules are little more than a casket. It’s not a problem when you’re in transit, but you feel like you’re suffocating during the awake periods at either end. I woke soon after I arrived, but I had to wait almost two hours for them to open the God damn thing.

“But as I said, all that’s irrelevant because I didn’t choose to come here, or want to come here, or even if I did want to travel over forty thousand light-years to a station more remote than an Oort Cloud miner’s balls are from sunlight it doesn’t matter. The reason I’m here, like you Captain Holbrook, the reason we’re here is ’cause of orders. We’re all just following orders.”

The door buzzed.

“Good,” said Ahrens, tapping the table’s surface. The doors opened, revealing a figure standing in the corridor’s gloom. “Come,” he said, beckoning with his hand. “Officers, Dr. Riesen, this is Tentek.”

Dr. Riesen, Holbrook, and Stephens each turned in their chairs enough to view the figure that had moved just inside the threshold. He was an aught two meters tall, skinny, with pasty white phlesh. He had a narrow face, almost as if it had been pressed flat from the sides, and cropped white hair sprouting from the crown of his head. His eyes were large white billiard balls that threatened to leap out of their sockets, with small nickel-colored irises and double-eyelids that softly click-clacked when they closed. His thin black lips cut a slit beneath the sharp point of his nose.

Stephens sprang from his seat and almost fell backwards over his chair. He fumbled past the captain and Dr. Riesen, nearly tripping over his feet as he backed deeper into the room. He stopped before reaching the far corner. Stephens quickly drew his electron pistol and aimed it at Tentek.

“Commander Stephens,” bellowed Ahrens as he exploded from his chair, “lower your weapon at once!”

“Sir,” said Stephens, his eyes wide and focused on Tentek, “this aught is from The Collective.” He studied Tentek, reassuring himself of his claim, then adjusted his grip on his

pistol. “They have a very distinct design.”

“Yes, Tentek is from The Collective,” said Ahrens. “Do you think I don’t know that? Do you think I’m some God damned cadet with his head so far up his ass that I don’t know I’ve invited a Collective aught to this meeting? Do you think I’m that clueless and stupid, Commander?”

Stephens remained frozen in place while Tentek stared back at him, expressionless, his double eyelids click-clacking softly.

“Put your weapon down and return to your seat,” said Ahrens.

“But what’s an aught from The Collective doing here?” asked Stephens. He kept his electron pistol raised.

Ahrens leaned forward, supporting himself on splayed fingers as he pressed the tips into the tabletop. He spoke calmly, bathing the room in his rich voice. “Supposing you follow my orders to lower your weapon and return to your seat instead of me relieving you of duty, putting you in restraints, and sending you in stasis to the detention planet, supposing you do what I just *God damned* ordered you to do and you remain in this meeting and sit there quietly without another impulsive outburst, supposing all of that happens just like I described, Commander, then you will find out why he’s here.”

“Paul,” said Holbrook, “please do as the commodore asked.”

Stephens gradually lowered his pistol but held it by his side rather than holster it. He made no motion to take his chair.

“Tentek, come take a seat,” said Commodore Ahrens, pointing at the empty chair to his left. The aught headed towards the commodore as Stephens worked his way back to his own chair, the two synchronized in their travel around the table. They simultaneously lowered themselves into their seats and remained with their eyes fixed on each other, Commander Stephens glaring at

the aught and Tentek's face placid, offering no expression.

"I apologize for Commander Stephens's ... overreaction," said Holbrook to Ahrens, "but I do share his concern. Aughts from The Collective are not allowed near CentCom operations of any sort, so I'm surprised to learn you invited him to this briefing about a mission I understand to be quite sensitive."

Commodore Ahrens sat back down in his chair. "All will be revealed, Captain," he said, pulling the front of his uniform jacket taut, "all will be revealed." He glanced at Stephens. "And if we're finally finished with all the bullshit, we can get started."

Stephens broke his gaze with Tentek and sank his eyes to the table.

"Good," said Ahrens. "As you know, the spatial and gravitational distortion around Sagittarius A Star makes any travel within two hundred light-years of the galactic black hole perilous. No vessel or probe that has entered that deformed space has ever returned or been heard from again. At least that was true until three weeks ago, when a civilian research ship was confirmed to have journeyed to within one hundred astronomical units of Sag A Star."

"Incredible," said Dr. Riesen softly.

"Not only did they survive," said Ahrens, "they navigated to a planet named Infernum located in the RD Sagittarii star system that sits twenty-three light-years from the galactic center, within the D-space around Sag A Star." The commodore tapped the table surface, summoning a large holographic image of a planet with violet oceans and gray landmasses mottled with yellow splotches. "These photos are from the research vessel, the *Adiona*." He swiped quickly through more images of planetary hemispheres to reach a set of photos taken from the ground. One showed an ashen landscape with yellow scrub brush framed by a ship's viewport, another a white boot against gray soil. A shot appeared of nine people in a control room, most with their heads

down at their consoles, the others looking at the camera with grim expressions.

“How did you get these photographs?” asked Dr. Riesen.

“It’s not uncommon for CentCom to have clandestine devices relaying intelligence from the field—”

“No, I mean how did you actually *get* them? It’s not possible to receive signals from within the distorted space around Sag A Star.”

“It’s not possible to receive *direct* signals,” said Ahrens. “This mission data was transmitted by a single-use, omnidirectional burst-mode broadcast device.”

Dr. Riesen’s eyelids flitted, the researcher falling into deep thought. “A data bomb,” she said.

“That’s essentially correct,” said Ahrens. “The device broadcasts a data payload in all directions by detonating a small nuclear charge encased in a tachyite shell.”

“But even tachyons with their faster-than-light speed are still affected by the warpage of D-space,” said Dr. Riesen.

“Most of the individual signals were lost, but a statistical few eventually reached our grid of listening posts. We didn’t receive everything the device transmitted, but we did get nearly all the mission logs intact as well as many photos and most of the sensor data.”

The commodore swiped through photos of rocky landscapes, most featuring a soaring mountain range and jagged snowcapped peaks in the background. Ahrens overshot the photos he sought, swiping back to them. The first showed a gray plain of smooth rock stretching to a line of blue metallic trees in the distance, meeting more trees in a grove to the right. The second looked down on an enormous hexagonal-shaped basin. The third, taken from inside the basin, showed rough gray terrain littered with small rocks and several tall mounds of soil. To the right of the

mounds sat two shorter silver domes.

Ahrens swiped forward to a photo where one of the silver domes filled the frame. The structure was large, about five meters tall based on the height of two research team members standing in front of it, one posing with his hand against the dome's silvery metallic skin. "When our CentCom analysts got these photos, the first things that stood out were these silver objects." He swiped ahead to a photo showing five regularly spaced, large semi-circular caverns in the basin's sheer cliff wall. "They were also very interested in these openings," he said, "or more precisely, mine entrances."

"Did I notice the silver objects have straight lines along their bases?" asked Dr. Riesen. "Can you swipe back to the previous photo?"

Commodore Ahrens brought the previous dome photo into view.

"There," she said, pointing near the bottom of the image, "the base is made up of three straight lines. It's not rounded like the top part of the dome."

"Very observant, Dr. Riesen," said Ahrens. "The silver domes have hexagonal bases. The best guess of our analysts is this structure was created by the Hex Men."

"Who?" asked Stephens.

"'Hex Men' is a nickname for an extraterrestrial race that may or may not still exist," said the commodore. "We call them the *Hex Men* because of their fondness for hexagons, a sort of calling card they've left wherever they've ventured. Their primary activity seems to have been the extraction of materials from celestial objects. We've seen evidence of their visits across many of the star systems we've explored. Our own solar system bears evidence of Hex Men activity, with several moons, including Earth's, showing six-sided craters. They also engineered the hexagonal weather pattern at Saturn's northern pole."

“The hexagonal shapes seen in the craters you’re talking about happened through natural erosion processes,” said Stephens. “And the hexagon at the top of Saturn is a natural result of swirling winds.”

Ahrens pursed his lips. “You have a Master’s degree in physics, is that right, Commander? I recall that from your file. You consider yourself a physicist?”

“Yes, and yes,” said Stephens.

“It’s funny,” said Ahrens. “I’m not a physicist at all, but the first time I read the theory of the hexagon on Saturn, I saw right through that bullshit explanation. I mean, what’s special in nature about the number six? The answer is, ‘nothing.’ There’s no weather pattern larger than the Earth itself making a series of perfectly spaced sixty-degree turns to meet back where it started, and even glow in the God damned dark. How could it?” The commodore shook his head. “Now it’s preferable the masses *believe* it’s natural, which is why you’ll find that explanation in every physics book out there. We don’t have all the answers on what the Hex Men were up to, or if they currently pose any threat to Earth. The thought is, and I don’t disagree, it’s better to push a phony story than to alarm the whole human race.”

“What is the hexagon in Saturn’s cloud tops then if it’s not natural?” asked Dr. Riesen.

“Probes flown into the region show each corner to be a tightly focused, almost pillar-like force structure radiating field lines to its neighbors. The pillars taken together are akin to sticking six poles in the ground and wrapping a fence around them. This hexagonal force field reduces the storm activity within its boundary.”

“What would be the point of such a structure?” asked Holbrook.

“Assuming this was another mining operation,” said Ahrens, “the only substance worth going to that much trouble to acquire would be liquid metallic hydrogen.”

“Liquid metallic hydrogen takes extreme pressures to form,” said Stephens. “If you tried to collect some, wouldn’t it return to its normal gaseous state?”

“Liquid metallic hydrogen is meta-stable,” said Dr. Riesen. “It’s like crushing carbon into diamond—when you remove the pressure, the diamond doesn’t revert to its original carbon form.”

Holbrook stroked his chin. “If the Hex Men were miners, do we know what they were mining on Infernum?”

“That brings us to the reason for this mission,” said Commodore Ahrens. “Based on an analysis of the research ship’s logs, we believe the Hex Men were mining a substance called Planck Matter.”

Dr. Riesen’s eyes grew wide.

“What’s Planck Matter?” asked Stephens.

“It’s a theoretical material that has never been seen in nature or created in any lab,” said Dr. Riesen. “Black holes compress an immense amount of matter into a relatively small volume by distending spacetime into small pockets. These matter-filled clumps of distended spacetime are called Planck Matter. No larger than grains of sand, each one holds enormous amounts of material. A clump the size of your fist can hold the equivalent mass of a continent.”

“But nothing can escape a black hole,” said Stephens, “not even light. If this Planck Matter forms inside, how can anyone get ahold of it?”

“Planck Matter escapes through quantum tunneling,” said Dr. Riesen. She turned to the commodore. “But drifting all the way from Sag A Star to a planet twenty-three light-years away seems incredibly improbable.”

“The RD Sagittarii star system contains a smaller black hole, in orbit around its massive



star,” said Ahrens. “The Planck Matter likely escaped from that black hole and was deposited on the planet. And that brings us to the whys of Tentek’s presence here.” The commodore gestured to the aught, who gave a slow nod to the others in the room. “He came to us with some important information that I will let him convey.”

The robot clasped his thin hands before him on the table. “The Collective intercepted the data blast,” said Tentek, his voice tinny and faintly metallic. “They reached the same conclusion about Planck Matter. They have outfitted a ship.”

“My God,” said Dr. Riesen.

“The aughts on that ship are tasked with collecting Planck Matter and returning it to The Collective,” said Tentek.

Dr. Riesen covered her mouth with her hand.

“What in Hades is the matter?” asked Holbrook.

The physicist turned to Holbrook. “With even a palmful of Planck Matter and the proper detonator, you could build an unthinkable large weapon.”

“How large?” asked Holbrook.

“Larger than the human race has ever built,” said Tentek. “The Collective wants Planck Matter for a weapon that could destroy the Earth. They see it as a sort of ... insurance policy.”

“When Tentek learned of this plan he relayed it to us,” said Ahrens. “It’s the reason for this mission.”

“Wait a minute,” said Stephens, incredulous. “He just marched in and supposedly ratted out his machine buddies, and you all just believed him? Everyone knows aughts can’t be trusted, especially not one from The Collective.”

“We determined early on that The Collective decoded the tachyon blast,” said Ahrens.

“Tentek came to us after that. We’ve separately confirmed an aught vessel left The Collective home world a day ago, on a course for the galactic center. They should reach Sag A Star in about eight days.” The commodore swiped the table viewscreen off and set his dark eyes on Captain Holbrook. “We can’t let the aughts obtain Planck Matter. We’re sending the *Avenger* to Sag A Star to stop them.”

“But Commodore,” said Holbrook, confused, “it’ll take two weeks for us to reach Sag A Star. By then it’ll be too late to intercept the aught ship before it enters D-space. There have to be ships closer than ours.”

“Intercepting them before they enter D-space is not the objective,” said Ahrens. “We can’t engage the aughts in normal space—that would spark an interstellar incident. It would touch off a new war.”

“But they’re trying to build a weapon to destroy the Earth,” said Stephens.

“*We* know that,” said Ahrens, “but the aughts’ll deny it. They’ll claim any other reason for their trip to Sag A Star. We’d never be able to prove otherwise.”

“We have this aught here,” said Stephens, pointing at Tentek. “From what you’ve told us he apparently knows the whole plan. We could dismantle him and read it right from his bubble memory. That would be proof enough.”

“That’s a brilliant idea, Commander Stephens, just brilliant,” said Ahrens as he folded his arms, his voice full of sarcasm. “We blow the Collective ship out of the sky and present to them, as justification, the disassembled remains of one of their own.” Ahrens’s cold dark eyes bored into the commander, who wilted slightly under their intensity. “I recommend you leave the strategic planning to people above your pay grade.” Stephens shifted uncomfortably in his chair, a sullen look on his face.

“As I was saying, we can’t intercept them before they enter the space around the galactic black hole. That’s why we’re counting on this mission to take place within D-space. No one on the outside will be able to see what happens. The aught ship will appear to be just another casualty of the hazardous region around Sag A Star.”

“But that will be the *Avenger’s* fate too,” murmured Holbrook, his eyes glazed and trained on the tabletop. He looked up, surprised by the sound of his own voice, his inner dialogue spoken aloud. “Sir, I understood we’d be traveling to the galactic center—not flying into D-space itself but operating in the still dangerous area just outside of it. That was based on the orders from Admiral Miller.”

Ahrens wrinkled his nose as if offended by a smell that had suddenly entered the room. “I spoke with the admiral right before hopping into the sleeper. He told me he made his orders clear and to the point because of the gravity of what was being asked. Those orders said you would be going *to the core*. I don’t see how anyone can get any more clear or to the point than that.”

“I guess the captain didn’t believe it was CentCom’s custom to hand out death sentences,” said Stephens.

“It’s not,” Ahrens shot back, “but it *is* our custom to do whatever it takes to keep humanity safe.” He returned his attention to Holbrook. “It sounds like you opted not to take your orders at face value. Perhaps you wanted to believe they were something else. If there’s one thing I’ve learned from all my years in CentCom it’s you should always assume the worst. That way you can never be disappointed.”

Holbrook sank into his chair and his head slowly drooped towards the tabletop. The world spun as the true reality of the situation came into sharp relief. They were going *into* D-space, not next to it. Directly to Sag A Star, exactly what he had refused to believe, exactly what Stephens

had tried to tell him. A one-way mission with no way home.

The commodore's eyes narrowed at the distraught captain slumping before him. "Thomas Holbrook the second, now he was quite an officer. Didn't know him, of course—I was barely out of grade school when he died—but his devotion to duty speaks for itself. He was a soldier, the kind of soldier the Republic needs you to be right now." Ahrens's voice softened. "Are you a soldier, Captain Holbrook?"

Holbrook glared at Ahrens from beneath his brows. He wanted to reach out and grab the commodore's neck.

"He is a soldier," said Stephens. "One of the finest I've ever served with."

"If you're a soldier, like your father before you, like your XO here attests, then you know a soldier's only job, his *only* job, is to carry out orders. That's the way CentCom works. That's the only way anything gets done. Carrying out orders doesn't mean doing a bunch of thinking about what might come afterwards, like your grand imaginings of a hero's welcome in your hometown and of banging all the girls who never gave you the time of day. That kind of thinking, that kind of preoccupation with something other than the task at hand, is all a distraction, and in this business, distractions get you killed.

"Your orders, Captain, are to stop those God damn aughts from getting even a milligram of Planck Matter. All that moping you're doing right now, all that will disappear once you focus on those orders. Your mind will be too preoccupied with everything you need to do to see those orders through to success. How to prepare your ship, how to prepare your crew, what contingency plans might need developing. None of that kind of thinking will throw you down in the dumps. In that sense, your orders are the secret to your own happiness. They are the key to your salvation."

Holbrook slowly lifted his head. Still glaring at the commodore he straightened himself in his chair. “You’re right, Commodore, about why I’m upset,” he said. “It’s because I *am* focused on what comes after. I’m focused on the loss of my ship, the loss of my crew. The loss of my own life.”

“Irrelevant,” said Ahrens. “Your worries, fears, and concerns, all those things are irrelevant. Your orders are all that matter.”

Dr. Riesen placed a hand on Holbrook’s arm. “The researchers on the *Adiona* believed they found a way out of D-space,” she said. “The aughts think it’s possible too, which is why they sent a ship to bring Planck Matter back from the galactic center. It seems the odds are with us that we can get back. We just don’t know how to do it yet.”

Holbrook slowly looked towards Dr. Riesen. “We?”

“Dr. Riesen has volunteered to accompany you on this mission,” said Ahrens. “Or at least I assume that’s still the case. I hadn’t briefed her on more than the travel to and from the galactic core. Besides finding the answer, she can provide her astrophysical expertise to assist you in preventing the aughts from acquiring Planck Matter.”

“Why would you sign on to a suicide mission?” Holbrook asked Dr. Riesen, his voice leaden.

Dr. Riesen squeezed the captain’s arm gently, meeting his despondence with a reassuring smile. “Because you need my help, Captain.”

“You’ll also get Tentek’s help,” said the commodore. “He’ll be joining you on this mission.”

“Coming with us on the *Avenger*?” asked Stephens. “Never.”

“Tentek can provide invaluable insight into dealing with the aughts from The Collective,” said Ahrens.

“I doubt that very much,” said Stephens. “It certainly won’t be any insight we can trust. And when the other aughts see their long-lost buddy Tentek they’re going to invite him over for drinks.”

“The aughts on the planet will not welcome me,” said Tentek. “They will know I am a traitor and will want to harm me.”

“Pretending for a moment you’re not a double agent, even if you’re captured, you’ll have a lot to bargain with,” said Stephens. “As the first aught to travel aboard a CentCom warship in over a hundred years, I bet they throw you a parade.”

Tentek remained expressionless. “Should I encounter my fellow aughts on the planet, I do not expect that reunion to go well. For this reason, I have installed an electromagnetic pulse bomb in my abdominal cavity. If captured, I will detonate that bomb and destroy all of my circuits. Not even my memory core will function.”

“Why wait?” asked Stephens. “I for one would like to see this so-called bomb of yours go off right now.”

“Commander!” said Holbrook.

“Sir,” said Stephens, “you don’t believe any of what this aught has told us here today, do you? It’s not feeding us secret intel from The Collective, it doesn’t have an EMP in its chest, and it’s not going to commit suicide the next time it sees its buddies.” Stephens addressed Tentek directly. “You haven’t fooled me, aught, with any of your words,” he snapped. “And as far as joining us on this mission, I can happily say the regs don’t allow you to set foot on our ship.”

“The exception’s already been approved,” said Ahrens.

Stunned, Commander Stephens struggled for a response as his mind filled with an image of the unthinkable: a Collective aught roaming the halls of his ship.

“The Joint Chiefs passed a resolution just for Tentek that overrides the general regulations against aughts on CentCom starships,” said Ahrens. “He will be accompanying you on this mission.”

“Like hell,” said Stephens under his breath.

“That’s an apt description of what your life will be like if your borderline insubordination continues,” said Ahrens.

Holbrook glared at Stephens, silently ordering his executive officer to stand down.

Stephens sulked. “I’ll talk to Lynch about rigging up a Faraday cage in the brig for our guest here,” he said.

“You just don’t get it, do you, Commander?” asked Ahrens. “You clearly have a burning hatred for aughts; that’s plain for everyone to see. However Tentek is on our side. An ally. And you’re to treat him with the same consideration and respect as you would any other guest aboard your ship. You will not lock him in the brig, and in fact you will allow him to move as freely about your ship as you would a normal civilian. That is an order.”

Holbrook sat frozen in his chair, sullenly contemplating the fate of his vessel and crew.

“Captain,” Ahrens said, standing abruptly, “good luck, and keep us apprised of your progress on your way to the galactic center.” The commodore thrust his hand out to Holbrook.

Captain Holbrook stared at Ahrens’s hand, regarding its wide palm and the jagged scar that cut across it. How many other men had the commodore’s handshake sent to their deaths? How many times had that angry red gash sealed the fates of entire ships and crews? Holbrook leaned awkwardly into the table from his seat and half clasped Ahrens’s hand, giving it a tepid shake.

“I will leave you to your preparations,” said Ahrens. The commodore nodded to Dr. Riesen and strode out of the room.

The world no longer spun for Holbrook, but his stomach felt queasy. He mustered the strength to speak, his mouth dry. “How soon can you be ready?” he asked Dr. Riesen in a weak, gravelly voice, still staring into the tabletop.

“I’m already packed,” she said.

*Already packed?* Of course she was. She’d planned to accompany them all along. “We’ll wait for you at the shuttle, then.”

Tentek stood. “I, too, am ready to leave,” he said.

“Meet us at the shuttle as well,” said Holbrook.

Dr. Riesen exited the conference room followed by Tentek, leaving the two *Avenger* officers still seated. Seconds after the door closed, Holbrook pressed into the tabletop to stand, his head drooping.

Stephens rose from his chair. He stared at the closed conference room door, shaking his head. “Captain,” he said, “we can’t let that thing aboard our ship.”

“We don’t have any say in the matter,” said Holbrook. “It’s been cleared at the highest levels.”

“For sure that thing’s a double agent,” said Stephens. “It’ll be feeding us misinformation and stealing secrets.”

Holbrook rubbed his chin. “Tentek, by far, is the least of our worries.”



# 10

“This way, Dr. Riesen.”

Stephens hadn't mustered more than those four words since leaving the research station. Was he, a former physics grad student, really that starstruck? He'd certainly never dreamed of being in the presence of The Prophet, a living legend, but that explanation only told part of the story. He'd worked up the courage to talk to the physicist several times but had been taken aback by the smile he caught on her face whenever he'd glanced her way. He could only guess at the reason for her seemingly high spirits. “First time aboard a CentCom starship?”

“No,” said Dr. Riesen, smiling even then as she looked at him. “I've been on several. CentCom has asked me a number of times to consult on physics-related matters.”

What else it could be? “It's just ... you seem extremely happy to be here.”

“I am.”

Stephens looked at Dr. Riesen sideways. “I mean, I'm happy to be on the *Avenger* too,” he said, “just not so much right now given we may not come back from where we're going.”

Dr. Riesen didn't respond. She had become engrossed in a list of crew announcements on a passing viewscreen.

“Tell me again why you volunteered to join this mission?” said Stephens.

“Let's just say I love a good puzzle. They don't come much bigger than figuring a way out of D-space.”

The journey to their potential deaths was just a big, fun puzzle for her? Stephens wanted to probe more, but their destination came into view. “Here we are,” he said as they approached

Sickbay.

The doors to Sickbay slid open, revealing Dr. Marsden in her white lab coat. “Here she is waiting for us,” said Stephens as they entered. “Dr. Marsden, this is Dr. Riesen, a new guest aboard our ship.”

“Nice to meet you, Dr. Riesen.” Dr. Marsden extended her hand.

“Likewise,” said Dr. Riesen.

“She’s a VIP, so be sure she gets special treatment,” said Stephens.

“How much of a VIP can she be if you’re the one showing her around?” quipped Dr. Marsden. She walked Dr. Riesen over to a medical examination table. “Dr. Riesen, please hop up here.”

Dr. Riesen pivoted, pressed the backs of her thighs against the lip of the table, and lifted herself in reverse onto the surface. The wide viewscreen mounted on the bulkhead above sprang to life.

“This shouldn’t take very long,” said Dr. Marsden.

“I’ve barely been aboard five minutes,” said Dr. Riesen, frowning. “Why’s an examination in Sickbay my first stop?”

“Standard procedure,” said Dr. Marsden. “Anyone who comes aboard for an extended period of time gets a physical scan. A full analysis of your physical condition means there won’t be any surprises while you’re with us. Medical surprises, anyway.”

Dr. Riesen studied the readout above her head, the screen populating with vital signs. “On other ships the first thing they do is get you comfortably situated in your quarters. This process feels very regimented.”

“This *is* a military vessel,” said Dr. Marsden. “But I imagine your next stop will be getting

settled into your new quarters. Please lie back.” Dr. Riesen swung her legs around and lay flat on her back. “Good,” said Dr. Marsden, tapping a side control panel. “Now relax. The table will take a couple minutes to perform the scan.”

Nodding, Dr. Riesen folded her hands over her belly and closed her eyes.

“The name Riesen sounds familiar,” said Dr. Marsden as she studied the initial results from the scan. “Isn’t there a famous woman physicist named Riesen?”

“That would be me, Doctor.”

“No kidding!” said Dr. Marsden. “Winner of the Nobel-Wasserman?”

“In the flesh.”

“You truly *are* a VIP then,” said Dr. Marsden, “which makes it doubly wrong for Commander Stephens to be your escort.”

Stephens feigned irritation at the remark.

“I’ve read some about you, then,” said Dr. Marsden, tapping at the table’s controls. “Tell me, what’s it like to be a female physicist?”

Dr. Riesen’s face grew dark. “You mean what it’s like being a mistake?”

Dr. Marsden looked up from the controls. “A mistake?”

“Yes, a mistake,” she said. She propped herself up on her elbows and glowered at Dr. Marsden. “That’s your real question, isn’t it? What’s it like to be a mistake?”

Stephens cut in. “I’m sure Dr. Marsden didn’t—”

“I’m sure Dr. Marsden can speak for herself,” said Dr. Marsden. “And no, that wasn’t the question going through my mind. I don’t even know what you mean about being a mistake. Physics is so male dominated I was wondering about the challenges of being a woman in that field. Being a medical doctor is not nearly as hard, though I do have a few stories of my own.”

Lying back on the table Dr. Riesen closed her eyes again. “Sorry, Doctor, I just get it a lot. It’s usually the first thing people ask me once they learn who I am. It leaves me walking around on the defensive.”

The doctor checked the scan’s progress. “Can I ask what you meant by ‘mistake’?”

“I’m from a line of genetically engineered humans,” said Dr. Riesen. “The ones who came before me were also named Riesen. The intent was all of us would be men. Obviously, someone screwed up in my case.”

“You mean a group of men, with hubris coming out their asses, performed a genetic procedure and it didn’t go the way they expected?” asked Dr. Marsden. “Surprise, surprise. *They* screwed up trying to control nature, but somehow *you* turn out to be the mistake.”

“I’ve got to get going,” said Stephens. “Dr. Riesen, you’re clearly in good hands. Someone will be by to show you to your quarters. In a couple hours the captain wants us all to review the logs from the *Adiona*. Cygnus Conference Room, Deck B.”

“What timeframe do the logs cover?” asked Dr. Riesen.

“A two-week stretch,” said Stephens. “The last entry was recorded a little more than three weeks ago, four days before we got our new orders.”

“Thank you, Commander,” said Dr. Riesen. “I will be there.”

Commander Stephens exited the room and climbed a nearby runway to Deck A. He wended his way through the corridors until he found Lieutenant Singh. The security officer stood outside a closed door with Tentek at his side.

“Hope I didn’t keep you waiting too long,” said Stephens.

“Fourteen minutes, thirty-seven seconds by my internal clock,” said Tentek.

“I was talking to Lieutenant Singh,” said Stephens.

“Uh, no, sir,” sputtered Singh. “I knew you’d be along eventually.”

“Is it customary for guests aboard your starship to endure such long wait times before being settled into their quarters?” asked Tentek.

“No,” said Stephens, “but neither is it customary for us to have an aught from The Collective on board. Let’s just say it’s extraordinary times.” He signaled for Singh to unlock the cabin. The door slid aside and the three entered the spacious guest quarters.

Stephens noted the queen bed replacing the more customary bunk, a typical concession made for guests. Did aughts even sleep? “Your comm will let you into all the places on the ship you’re authorized to enter,” he said curtly. “By the captain’s orders you’re a guest aboard this ship, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t any rules. The main one is you’ll check in with security three times each day.”

“Is that also customary for guests?” asked Tentek.

“Like I said, extraordinary times. I assume that won’t be a problem.”

“It will not,” said Tentek.

Stephens headed for the door. “Captain’s organized a listening party for the *Adiona* logs. He asked me to invite you. Cygnus Conference Room, Deck B, fourteen-thirty hours.”

“Thank you, Commander.”

“Don’t thank me,” said Stephens, “thank the captain. I still think you belong in the brig.”

Tentek cocked his head. “Then it is fortunate you are not in charge.”

Stephens pursed his lips and locked on to Tentek with a blank stare. He didn’t appreciate the attitude, not from an aught, not on his ship. “Lieutenant Singh, you mind giving us a moment?”

“Yes, sir—I mean no, sir,” said Singh. He quickly exited the room.

Stephens took several steps towards Tentek. “You may have fooled the others, Tin Man, but

not me,” he said. “I don’t believe for a moment you’re anything other than a spy for The Collective.”

“My name is Tentek, and I do not think this is the best way to start off our working together.”

“Working together?” Stephens scoffed. “You and I are not ‘working together,’ and we never will. Like I said, you’re here because the captain ordered it. If it were up to me, you’d be out an airlock.” He jabbed his finger at Tentek. “Just remember this, Tin Man: the captain runs the show, but I run this ship. You’re free to move around, but that freedom can be taken away in an instant. I have my eye on you and I’m looking for an excuse, any excuse to throw your ass in a cell. You so much as break artificial wind my way and you’ll find yourself in chains.”

Tentek cocked his head again. “My name is Tentek, and I doubt Commodore Ahrens would enjoy hearing you have suggested placing me in the brig, an idle threat in any case, as we both know doing so would bring about the end of your career.”

Stephens smiled. “A wise man once said, ‘You can do anything you want on your last day.’” He winked and headed for the door. “See you at fourteen-thirty hours, Tin Man,” he said over his shoulder.

The aught watched the commander exit the room and head down the corridor until the cabin door closed, dreading the voyage before it had even begun.