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Prologue



“This system’s Emperor is not pleased at our negotiation’s interruption. What is it, Commander?”

“Seven minutes ago, ship’s sensors detected an unidentified object at 330,000km off the port bow, closing and vectored for collision.”

“Communications?”

“No response to our requests for identification. We have detected no signal or energy bursts emanating from within. It is running silent, Captain.”

“Hostile display?”

“We jinked to port to get off the intercept course. It jinked to port. We jinked to starboard, it jinked to starboard. We repeated twice more at speed and both times it mirrored our maneuvers precisely.”

“Status?”

“Yellow alert. Ship’s personnel are on standby.”

“Size?”

“3.2 masses, Captain.”

She almost missed a step. A Guild War Frigate could destroy worlds. Whenever one dropped into orbit, planet-wide authorities became very attentive. That thing out there was three times bigger.

“It might be an intelligent droid or another species. My counterpart on that ship might also be wondering why we are not responding to their comm signals. These maneuvers may be an attempt to communicate.”

“The thought did occur to me, Captain. But why a collision course? And they are not slowing down.”

She stopped, turning around to stare into a void so vast it contained all probabilities. Many ships had disappeared into its maw. Only brief quantum messages remained of most. Frantic maydays, screams, then nothing. “Computer!” A gentle, directionless voice responded.

“Yes, Captain?”

“Time to intercept?”

“Two minutes, thirty-three seconds, Captain.”

She spun around, heading for the lift bay. “Arm all forward bow torpedoes. Do not lock on target, do not open hatches. Send a lift to this level for me.” Her arm snapped out, pointing to a small box on the wall only she and her 1st could activate. “Sound Battle Stations, Commander, then have the Emperor immediately escorted off the ship.” She stepped into a lift and again spun around. “I’ll meet you on the bridge.”

They never saw each other again.

Chapter 1



Communications, piloting, hangar bays, engineering. Weapons. Fingers lingered on the panel. A smile crossed her lips. Even after all these years, the fleet had kept her layout design for bridge officers. Her eyes narrowed on an unfamiliar button. Hologram. Though the layout had not changed, technological advances enhanced everything underneath. Admiral Stanton made a mental note to ask her 1st about it.

She looked up, gazing out the forward view. Nothing disturbed the maintenance gantry's stillness, gave no hint of the organized chaos the morning shift would bring. Unlike ships of an earlier age, the Achilles did not roll with the sea's waters. The U.S.S. Achilles, she corrected herself.

Two hundred years earlier, in the most spectacular civil engineering feat in human history, the entire population had moved to a massive tubular structure encircling the planet Jupiter and organized as the United Terran Guild. When its last residents left Earth, a funny thing happened on the way to the Globalist's dream of one human race.

Thirty years ago, T7, the seventh generation born off Earth, her generation, erupted in open defiance. Fueled by cultural respect and reverence for their ancestors, the Japanese members of T7 refused to abandon Nihongo as their mother tongue and the Chinese declared Mandarin their only language. Both rejected any attempt to make Swahili their official language. Confounded and flummoxed Globalists soon found themselves swamped by sympathetic fires enflaming Earth's youths. France's young shouted, "Liberté, égalité, fraternité, toujours." Americans demanded freedom of self-determination as guaranteed by their Bill of Rights. Kenyans, Nigerians, Ugandans decried the new colonialism.

As T7 aged and entered the corridors of power, their influence deepened and reached a grand compromise. In return for keeping the name United Terran Guild, the former nations of Earth regained their sovereignty. One immediate consequence? Proud Americans again placed the prefix 'U.S.S.' to all their starships.

Simone turned her gaze to one by one take in the Bridge's stations, trying to imagine the officers who would control them. Dating back to her great-great grandfather, the Stantons had instituted a grand tradition of naval service. As the first woman in the family to reach the rank of Admiral and command a starship, she expected her two daughters would continue the family's legacy. Five years earlier, unknown alien attackers killed one. Her other daughter, grief-stricken and inconsolable at the death of her older sister, cursed the family's military tradition and disappeared. It broke Simone. She resigned her commission and allowed her life to become one of quiet desperation and despair.

Two months ago, her communication panel brightened and blinked. Dispirited and morose, Simone touched the Accept button and the Commandant of the Interstellar Guild Academy appeared. They had unraveled the mystery surrounding her daughter's death. A newly identified civilization had destroyed the ship and begun making incursions into the Milky Way's Boundary Systems. Earth needed a Stanton to lead the defense. Simone stared for a long minute, then quietly said no before disconnecting.

She turned away, her mind an empty blank devoid of thoughts. Aimless pacing stopped in a hallway festooned with her ancestors' pictures and awards. Eyes rose to meet the silent gaze of her great-great grandfather. Simone looked away but his voice rumbled through her mind. "You are a Stanton." It repeated. Again, and yet again. "You are a Stanton." Shame filled her soul blasting away doubt. She hastened back to reconnect the communication channel.

Again, her fingers reached down to the Commander's Panel. The U.S.S. Achilles formed the latest class of warships. It had the power to eradicate entire systems and would lead four Achilles-class ships to confront this newest threat. Its space trials complete, only the final fuel and weapon loads remained. Tonight, the Ship's Officers would dock, and tomorrow crew members would begin arriving including its attached contingent of Marines.

Fingers switched to the seat, caressing its cushions. "We will do battle you and I, Achilles. I am confident you will acquit yourself well. Do not concern yourself with me. Take good care of my crew."

She spun around, exiting the Bridge. Beyond the sliding doors, her sentinel bodyguard awakened from its dormant state. In lock step, their footfalls echoed across silent corridors.

Chapter 2



Solona hated ambiguity. Funny thing because ending last year she had lived with it the previous four. Directionless, disconsolate, depressed. Lost. Gambling, drugs, drink, carousing became substitutes. And when she could no longer afford them, whoring. Propositioning an undercover led to a weekend stint in a dank cell overhung with the stench of urine.

On Monday before a judge, Solona's listless posture complemented her bowed head draped by limp, greasy hair. She pondered how and when to make her next score. Alongside her stood a just minted, court-appointed lawyer. Eager naivete oozed out her every pore.

The judge looked up from thumbing Solona's records. "You a graduate of the Interstellar Guild Academy?" Solona stood silent, unresponsive.

"Yes, she is, your Honor." her lawyer piped up.

"Look at me, young lady." Solona raised her head, unable to muster the energy to look defiant. "It says here you graduated near the top of your class. Because of your potential, I'm giving you a break. I'm remanding you to a Rehabilitation Center. If you stray one inch off the straight and narrow, if you break one rule or one regulation, if you do not cooperate, you will be right back here and I will impose a stiff jail sentence because you will have wasted a chance few people get. Do you understand me, young lady?" Solona looked past her into space.

"Yes, she does, your Honor." the lawyer answered.

The judge stared at Solona. A long moment lengthened. “Meanwhile, I’m ordering your return in six months when I will assess your progress. Or lack of.” She gave the lawyer, whose billable hours had swelled by two sentences, a look. “Hopefully, the cat will have freed your tongue by then.”

Four months later, the day’s counseling and chores finished, Solona walked in the bright sunshine of a Spring day. She entered a parlor opting for a childhood favorite: vanilla fudge. Outside, sitting on a bench, it brought no comfort, no good memories, no respite from the ache that seared her heart. She watched the cone drip to the ground, form a growing puddle.

A curious sound approached. Step, step, thump. Step, step, thump. The source, two shoes and a cane, stopped before her. Without looking up, Solona continued watching the drips.

“Having a pity party?”

“F off, jackass.”

“Nice language. Your sister didn’t talk like that.”

Solona looked up. A flood of memories burst through. Happy, joy-filled days with a family favorite. Sitting at his knee, listening with wide-eyed attention at stories of thrills and adventures. She smiled. “Hello, Uncle Solomon. How did you find me?”

“Have you forgotten? I’m an Expeditionary Marine. No one can hide from us. Not for long.” A hand emerged from inside his jacket. It held her arrest record. Bright red flushed her cheeks and she bowed her head. “What would your sister think?”

She dropped the cone, springing to wrap her arms around his neck. Anguish filled her wail. “Oh, Uncle Solomon. She was my rock, my anchor. Whenever I wanted to know what to do, I looked to her. What am I going to do without her? I can’t stand her not being here.” Solomon pulled away, his voice gentle, deliberate.

“Your grief is a mask, intended to hide you from the certainty of failure if you try to replace her. Whenever your sister spoke of you, she believed you would surpass whatever she accomplished. You will never achieve her expectation if you try to be her. Your sister died with honor. Every second you permit this to continue dishonors her and you. You are a Stanton. Honor your sister. Be yourself.”

“But what if I’m not who she thought I am? What if I do fail?”

“Oh, you will fail. Many times. You can prepare, you can project, and always, always have a Plan B. But if 36 things can go wrong, you can only anticipate 17 of them. Failure is inevitable. Succumbing to it is unforgivable.”

Solona turned the corner. Her ambiguity stemmed from not becoming a naval officer. She would be herself but not dishonor her family. Or her sister. With Uncle Solomon alongside, she had raised her hand, swore an oath, and joined the Expeditionary Marines.

Ahead stood Hangar Bay 2. She might fail. But when again meeting her sister, she wanted to do so on equal footing. She needed an insurance policy.

0130 ship’s hours. Besides her, nothing biological moved. A computer scan later, doors slid open to a darkened, cavernous bay. Solona glanced at her assignment sheet. “BM6183”. Her shout echoed and reverberated. Ahead on the left, lights flickered. Facing it, Solona looked up, awed by the Battle Mech’s sheer size. On an arm, a light began blinking yellow. Smooth, silent gears swiveled a 20mm machine gun toward her. When it centered on her chest, the now red light held steady.

“Authorization Code.” Solona’s recall did not hesitate.

“Alpha Charlie zero six seven niner.” A cascade of lights ensued before shutting off.

“Authorization Code and body scan confirmed. All systems nominal. Weapons load incomplete. Sensors and detectors online. Welcome, Lieutenant Stanton.”

“That voice will never do. Give me deep male but gentle.”

“Voice imprint 41 activated.”

“Perfect. Do you have a name?”

“Name parameter not activated.”

“Would you like one?” Seconds mounted.

“Yes. I would.”

Solona's eyebrow rose. Command had briefed her on the intelligence upgrades. Still, the response surprised her. Already its staccato machine voice had modulated. “Cid.” she answered.

“Familiar form of proper name Sydney.” Solona smiled.

“No. C-i-d, Cid.”

“Data link to Rodrigo Diaz de Vivar, Castilian knight in medieval Spain.”

“Swear to me that if I fall in battle, you will lead the squad and complete the mission.”

“Command logs updated.”

“No. Swear it.” For a moment, it stood silent.

“I swear, upon your death in battle, I will lead the squad and complete the mission.”

Chapter 3



"Before we begin let me thank Major Wild for not lighting that thing." Simone allowed a faint smile. Steely blue eyes that glinted, Wild's substitute for a grin, slow rolled toward her. His expression never broke, and he said nothing. Simone liked the terse man. She doubted he would ever waver under fire. Or could.

"I would like to welcome the Dean of the Guild Institute for Exoplanetology, Professor of Astrobiology, Li Yen Chou. Thank you, Professor for making the trip out to Trellion VI. I appreciate the inconvenience. On your left is my 1st, Lieutenant Gatimu Ndungu and on your right is my 2nd, Lieutenant Keesana Davis. Behind you is the taciturn Major Joachim Wild, Commander of our Marine contingent. You have the floor, Professor."

"Thank you, Captain. Congratulations on your demotion." Simone grinned, giving the Professor a slight nod. After a brief ceremony in which she assumed command of the Achilles, she also acquired the title of Captain. Though ranked an Admiral, naval tradition required the sole person commanding a ship, even a starship, be addressed as 'Captain'.

"With your indulgence, Captain, I realize this may be difficult, the tablevids have downloaded copies of the visuals we assembled of the unidentified object which attacked your daughter's ship."

Viewed from the port stern, a guild frigate steered a diagonal moving right-to-left. In the distance, a tan-colored square closed from an opposite diagonal left-to-right. As it neared, rough, bump-filled surfaces appeared. Its size began to dwarf the frigate which flickered then held steady as defensive shields enveloped it. Rotating frequencies caused the shields to flicker six more times in rapid succession, creating clear flight paths for missiles emerging from the bow.

Moments from penetration, the object morphed tubes at each impact point. Ion-plasma missiles entered, passed through the object, and seconds later exited the rear continuing harmlessly into the void. "I'm going to slow the visual so you can better see what happens next."

The object's forward half fragmented into huge chunks accelerating toward the frigate, overwhelming its shield with thousands of smashes, some half again as big as the frigate. The object itself crashed in, obliterating the craft as it hurtled through. In its final moments, the Gauss engines' magnetic cores exploded reducing the frigate to metal shards and vaporized tissue.

The object flew around, re-assembled itself, and flew back along its approach path, disappearing into a dot.

Silence gripped the room. A shocked Lt. Ndungu broke it. "Is this vid accurate?"

"We jumped sensors to locations intended to intercept the light produced by this incident. Computer-assisted analysis did the rest. There can be no mistake. What you saw is the light itself."

Simone felt the crushing weight of command and its loneliness seal her emotions within. She could show no feelings, no weakness. Eyes closed, she wanted to cry, to scream. Rank permitted neither. The vicious, breath-stealing pain she had kept at bay reignited. Again, and again, and yet again, her imagination flashed images of her daughter's final moments. Had she felt pain? Had she called out for her? The flames died away leaving her heart blackened, brittle. Sheer force of will opened her mouth. A flat voice emerged into the tomb-like silence. "Any analysis of that object?"

"We have some tantalizing leads. As you saw, it left nothing of itself, but we are analyzing the reflected light for clues to its molecular structure. Meanwhile, we've approved upgrades to every starship's weapons system to calibrate for proximity explosions rather than impact. Yours will be complete in the next day or two." Simone strained not to sound harsh.

"What good will that do? We just saw it fly through a Gauss engine explosion like tissue."

"That's why the preliminary results of our light analyses are so intriguing, Captain. We're confident once its molecular structure is solved, and it will be, a recalibration of our ion plasma will rupture the structure's bonds at the atomic level. At an ever-accelerating rate, the structure will collapse to a pinpoint and disappear into quantum soup. Moreover, we will have a window into their industrial capabilities which will help devise a strategy to defeat them. All starship captains and troop commanders now have this visual. Standing orders are to fire on sight or execute evasive maneuvers. We are confident the object cannot outrun our frigates or cruisers."

"What if it's not manufactured? What if it's biological?" Keesana asked. Professor Chou's head did a slow nod.

"Indeed. Because of my specialty, it is why the Director asked me to head the commission. Thorssen's Theorem may apply." Keesana's face turned quizzical.

"For 150 years, humankind used radio to search the galaxies for any sign of advanced intelligence. When our technology permitted, we scanned the electromagnetic spectrum. For the past fifty years, we have monitored the quantum channels for any communication other than our own. The universe remains silent.

"We have since expanded into fourteen systems beyond our own. Seven billion humans, 20% of us, live outside the Solar System and a single cosmological event can no longer make us extinct. Within the Milky Way, we have found abundant microbial life, but discovered only three sentient species, none of which has technology.

"This most recent contact, impressive as it may be, does not technologically outclass us. It is, in fact, quite revealing. Without provocation or warning, it attacked us. We can only conclude it is a prevalent tactic, that regardless of how savage or brutal the universe may be, is used essentially among equals. That object and its creators did not imagine they might be attacking a superior civilization.

"Ever since our culture made Science Fiction a popular genre, the presumed bias has been that any extraterrestrial contact must be with a more advanced people."

"Surely, that is correct, Professor." Ndungu interrupted. "Vast portions of the universe are billions of years older than our systems."

"They are, Lieutenant. But the same dynamic on Earth may apply universally. When we reach the inner systems, all we may find, like Egypt, Greece, and Rome, are dead, extinct relics time has reduced to archeological museum pieces. No

matter where or how we look, the universe remains silent. Thorssen's Theorem holds. It is, we, who may be the most powerful species in the Universe."

Chapter 4



"Almighty, Almighty, Whiskey5 on station 5 by 5. Request position check."

"Roger, Whiskey5, stand by."

Solona glanced at her radar display watching the rearguard Mech pull up a quarter kilometer behind, its pilot a blonde whose eyebrows matched her roots. "Everything okay, Raven? You were running a little ragged back there." A giggle blurted through.

"I had to pee."

"Well, next time put the Mech on auto-pilot."

"Yeah, but then you'd know I'm peeing," she giggled again. Flatline, who could sleep anywhere, anytime, keyed in.

"I didn't know droids had bladders. Something new?"

"I'm no d..."

"Whiskey5, Almighty. Position confirmed. MCV 21km due North. Acknowledge."

"Roger, Almighty. MCV two one km due North."

They had halted at a forest's edge, standing among the treetops. Major Wild's Mobile Command Vehicle had broken down and HQ had tasked them to provide security until the Recovery Team arrived. "I don't like it, Lieutenant." Ghost voiced in. Off duty, the question of her Point man's whereabouts always went unanswered.

Before them an open expanse of barren, cracked rock loomed. Beyond, a massive ridgeline of mesas towered over the horizon. No telling what those mountains hid. Past that, lay the crippled MCV. Ambush city. She didn't like it either.

"You okay, Kanga?" Her last name was Rew.

"Never better, Lieutenant. My weapons board is full green. HooRah!"

Solona nodded and smiled, regarding Kanga on her left flank as a great comfort. One less thing she had to worry about.

"Okay then. We have no time for detours. Don't count on adjusting or bracketing fire while crossing. Any nearby artillery units will have the expanse zeroed in, so we won't have a heads up or warning. Be alert for my Jump command.

"Raven, if anybody goes down, and you are sure no one is on our six, stay and provide support. The rest will continue to the Mesas and jet over them. We've got no time to waste. Once we do, put missile lock on Air-to-Ground for any surprises hanging around. Okay people, give me a system check."

One by one they called in nominal. Turbo engines began to whine and the Mechs shook as restraining bolts remained locked.

"Full throttle, Whiskey5. We're go on my mark. 3, 2, 1, Go!"

In a synchronous jolt, 75-ton Battle Mechs charged across the open plain. Thunderous thumps in lock step shook the ground heralding oncoming freight trains. Solona, left hand on the throttle, right on the weapons board, felt the power vibrating up through the carbon steel structures. She laughed. Trade this for a Naval Bridge Officer in cushioned comfort? Never!

She surveyed dials and gauges, confirming everything green then looked up in time to see Ghost, out on point, sink into the ground. The intercom burst to life with his screaming voice. "I'm in quicksand, going down by the foot. Jet pods choked."

Solona cooled, dead calm. Slowed the squad to a quick walk. Overhead a whistling sound announced death on the wing. An explosion 30 yards in front of Ghost sent shards of blasted rock clattering against their armor plates. Bracketing fire? "Sonar, Cid. Give me a boundary image of that quicksand." Another round blistered the air, exploding 50 yards past Ghost. Adjusting fire! A salvo loomed.

"Kanga, Flatline, we're jetting out of here. Raven, anybody on your six?"

"Negative, Lieutenant."

"Ghost, bail out. Raven will pick you up."

Hellfire descended from the sky. Like black geysers, the ground erupted heated rock and metal shard killers. Right behind, shell bursts released anti-personnel shrapnel shredding anything hit. Ghost could not stay in or get out.

The command channel crackled to life. Desperation laced the voice. "Whiskey5, MCV. Whiskey5, MCV. We're taking fire. Artillery and mortar. Do you have an ETA? Come in, Whiskey5."

Solona glanced at the mission clock. "ETA four minutes, MCV. Over and out."

She leaned to the side, looking down on Ghost, halfway into the mire. "Ghost, turn your jet packs on full stand by. Swivel your 20mils down and fire away. Raven pull up and fire yours into the quicksand around Ghost. Make an air pocket. Jet out of there, Ghost."

Solona looked ahead, dismissing the thought she might lose two crew instead of one. Her board lit up like a Christmas tree. A missile two kilometers on their 10 o'clock, lifted and turned toward them as afterburners kicked in. Kanga's voice, cool as ice, crackled through the intercom. "I've got missile lock. I've got tones. Fox 1 away. Fox 2 away."

Two missiles trailing vapor fumes rocketed toward the threat. It executed wild evasive maneuvers, causing one to miss. The second turned it into a harmless fireball. On they flew.

"MCV, MCV, Whiskey5. ETA three one seconds."

"Roger, Whiskey5."

"MCV, what's your status?"

"1 KIA, 5 for MedEvac. Down to small arms. They're walking a line of mortar fire to us, over."

"MCV, do you have radar targeting?"

"Roger, Whiskey5. Sending uplink."

Solona's radar screen flickered then refreshed with seven x's blinking red. "Flatline, Kanga, release your weapons boards. I'm going to slave missile targeting to Cid." She pictured Kanga frowning but the intercom remained silent. "When we arrive on station, Rail gun, Mini gun, 20 mils, your choices."

They hurdled the last mesa line with jet fuel pods flashing yellow. Below them a shallow basin opened surrounded by low-lying, sparsely forested hills. Two vehicles belched smoke and flames, men and women sheltered behind the MCV, mortar rounds whistled and exploded. X's flashed steady green.

Missiles blasted from their casings rocking the mechs. Kanga and Flatline landed on the flanks with 20 mils and Minis spitting metal-jacketed death. Solona dropped before the MCV, Rail gun swiveling for targets, its single-shot thud, thud, thud distinct amidst the mayhem. Everything it hit disintegrated. In less than two minutes, only gun barrel smoke moved.

Solona flipped to intercom. "Raven, Ghost, status please." Raven's voice buzzed her headpiece.

"Ghost burned up his jet fuel lifting out. We're climbing. ETA two one minutes."

Screens, windows, and dials went black as cockpits opened. They clambered out the simulators drenched in sweat. Except Kanga. She emerged not a hair out of place.

At the hangar door, Major Wild waited. They saluted and Solona released the crew to the showers. His steely gaze locked on her. "Good solution to the quicksand problem." Solona still seethed.

"I had nothing, Major. Should have never allowed that situation to develop."

"Mech warfare is a delicate balance between human instinct and machine intelligence. A lot is going on in any battle. Learn to trust your Mech. That's what auto-pilot is for."

He spun around and walked away. Solona watched him disappear into the crowded corridor. "Yeah." she muttered. "But then you'd know I'm peeing."

Chapter 5



From the journal log of Li Yen Chou
Professor of Astrobiology
Dean, Guild Institute for Exoplanetology

A star may be designated as a number with an HD or HR prefix, as well as an actual name. For example, HD 219134, HR 8832, or Gliese 892. The Henry Draper Catalogue (HD) is an astronomical star catalogue published between 1918 and 1924, giving spectroscopic classifications for 225,300 stars.

The Hertzsprung-Russell Diagram (HR) is a graphical tool that astronomers use to classify stars according to their luminosity, spectral type, color, temperature and evolutionary stage.

Today I authorized final installations of the communication systems needed if Captain Simone Stanton's expedition to the outer boundary systems is to have any chance of success. What Albert Einstein once described as "spooky action at a distance" (known as Quantum Entanglement) is what allows us to defy the enormous distances of our universe. It occurs when a pair (or group) of entangled quantum particles instantaneously affect one another—regardless of the intervening distance—between the entangled pair.

For example, if one particle in an Earth laboratory is given a clockwise spin, its entangled partner at the other end of the cosmos will assume a counterclockwise spin. Effectively, transmitting 1's and 0's. Instantly.

I think back to the efforts of Juan Lin, lead author and physicist at the Science and Technology University of China at Shanghai who published a paper almost three hundred years ago in which his team shattered the previous separation distance of 100km by demonstrating entanglement at 1,203km. Now we can message across galactic distances.

The USS Achilles, built in space and engineered to withstand the accelerative forces of interstellar travel, has a gross weight of 1.23 million long tons. By comparison, the aircraft carriers Earth once used to sail oceans had a gross weight of 110,000 long tons. Although its Gaussian engines can power atmospheric flight, descending into an atmosphere will trigger, because of its mass, a catastrophic structural failure.

As we prepare to face an alien civilization whose first act against us was a hostile one, I wonder if centuries of technological advancement by the descendants of a homo named habilis will be enough.

Simone struggled to remain still. Her Chief Engineer stood seven feet away keeping a sharp eye on technicians monitoring load gauges and flow dials. Fleet had ordered their departure from Trellion VI to HD 219134. She had never heard of it and looked it up. When they jumped into the system, nothing dispelled her regarding it as the galaxy's armpit.

The spaceport orbiting the star's single planet looked decrepit, worn. Obsolete. But transporting ion plasma through multiple jump gates made it unstable and getting it here from Jupiter HQ required only one jump. Still, tension filled the room. A leak, a line break, a miscalculation, an inattentive moment, could result in an implosion reducing everything to a quantum pea.

A calculated risk, since Professor Chou and her staff had worked day and night to puzzle out that object's molecular structure and upgrade their plasma torpedoes. It still lurked out there and Simone wanted her crew to have every advantage when they found it.

Without warning, the dials and gauges dropped to zero. The Chief Engineer turned around wearing a relieved grin. "Transfer complete, Captain." Simone let out a held breath.

"You and your crew are a blessing, Chief. You've done your job. Now I've got to get us the hell out of here before that rickety claptrap collapses on us."

Impatience again set in on the 43-story magnetic lift to the Bridge. A technician making last-minute adjustments snapped to attention. "Captain on the Bridge." Everyone else nodded acknowledgements. No one rose. Bridge Officer display boards had priority over protocol and social courtesies.

"As you were."

Radio chatter from every station drifted toward her. She swept into her seat, gazing at the one unrecognized person Lieutenant Ndungu told her would replace the transferred veteran. Her gaze shifted to the view window. Fools, she thought. They're venting ion plasma. Her impatience deepened. "Helmsman." He spun out of his seat.

"Yes, Captain?"

Simone tried not to stare. He could not possibly be over sixteen. Was the Guild Academy sending her to potential war with a child? She forced a smile. "What's your name, Lieutenant?"

"Ronald Eisen, Ma'am"

"Did you just graduate, Lieutenant Eisen?"

"Yes, Captain."

"First assignment?" Again, he repeated yes.

"How much time do you have on an Achilles class ship?" His expression brightened.

"920 hours, Captain."

"Simulated?"

"Yes, Captain."

Simone squirmed. The knot in her stomach tightened. She had once been a fresh-faced graduate. Had she looked that young? Her Captain at the time turned to his 1st questioning the use of someone so young. "Youth will be served, sir." The Captain's steady gaze had fallen back on her.

"Yes, when guided by experience."

Her 2nd interrupted. "Captain, I have the Port Master on an unsecured band."

"Carry on, Helmsman. Put him through, Lieutenant." A voice channel opened. Their vid system had to be inoperative. A serious safety flaw.

"Greetings, Captain. Your transfer authorizations are in order. I've released the guide ships to take you out of the berth." No need for speaking to her directly. He probably fished for information.

"Thank you, sir. I'd like to get underway immediately. Your berth is venting ion plasma." His gasp confirmed color had drained his face. Without saying goodbye, the link disconnected.

"Helm, have the guide ships linked in?"

"Aye, Captain."

"Sound ship's release, Lieutenant Ndungu." Radio chatter swelled across the bands. "Board check." One by one, the Bridge stations confirmed green across their boards. "Let me know when you confirm the hold lines decoupled, Helm." The young man's hands flew across the board. Simone kept one eye fixed on the venting ion plasma.

"Hold lines decoupled, Captain. Gantry gates clear." The Achilles floated free. At least the sensors said so. Simone took in a breath.

"Take her out, Helm. One fifth Gauss astern."

"One fifth astern, aye Captain." Her right middle finger searched for the Command Override button, caressed it when feeling its raised 'CO'. The ion plasma continued to vent.

Her 2nd's board began displaying red dials. Alarms beeped. "What is it, Lieutenant Davis?"

"I'm getting reports a guide ship's propulsion has stopped working. The Helm's board lit up."

"Confirmed, Captain. It's drifting."

"Time to clearance, Helm?"

"47 seconds, Captain."

She considered increasing the withdrawal speed. Unwise given the limited room. Her Helmsman's head half-turned toward her. "Captain, it's drifting toward us. The AI may decide to ignore it, if it considers the mass differential inconsequential. A damaged hull may cause a jump gate to deny entry. Request permission for manual override."

Simone's eyes shot toward her 1st. With great competence and sole authority to approve bridge assignments, he remained fixed on the board displays. She felt certain he had heard. The knot in her stomach tightened further. "Very well, Helm. Switch to manual override." Her eyes remained fixed on Lieutenant Ndungu. No reaction.

Lieutenant Eisen gave the starboard thrusters a short, coordinated blast, nudging the Achilles toward the drifting guide ship. Simone's eyes widened. Eisen maneuvered the ship downward before giving the starboard thrusters another short burst. Simone's finger stiffened over the Command Override button. The young graduate released a few forward and aft bursts before a single port thruster blasted the guide ship, reversing its momentum away from the Achilles. Three short bursts of the forward thrusters turned the Achilles toward open space. "We're clear, Captain."

She released a held breath. "All ahead, Helm. Get us the hell out of here." Lieutenant Ndungu turned toward her, a sly grin etched across his face. She only had time to give him a sharp look before her 2nd called out. "Captain, I have a high-priority message marked classified from Fleet HQ."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. I'll take it in my quarters. Lieutenant Ronald Eisen, you have the Helm. Lieutenant Ndungu, you have the Bridge."

Her superior's visage filled the screen, a flashing dial indicated an open quantum channel. "Greetings, Admiral. I've received confirmation the ion plasma upgrade is complete. Everything well?"

"Yes, sir. We're underway but still in HD 219134 space."

"I have a completed analysis backtracking that object's flight path. We have reduced its origin point to one of three planets in a little explored, remote system here in our galaxy. The coordinates are attached to this transmission. In it you will also find authorization codes for HD 53712's jump gate. The Asahikawa is already on station awaiting your arrival. Once through the gate you are to rendezvous with the other three ships, be in command of the group, and proceed to investigate what, if anything, is going on. If possible, establish contact but you are authorized to take any and all actions to defend yourselves and eliminate any threats to the United Terran Guild. Good luck and God speed, Admiral."

"Thank you, sir." The channel closed.

As Simone turned away, the screen flashed a message request from Lieutenant Davis. "Captain, HD 219134's spaceport has imploded. It's gone, Captain."

Chapter 6



From the journal log of Li Yen Chou
Professor of Astrobiology
Dean, Guild Institute for Exoplanetology

In a previous journal entry, I wrote of the critical role Quantum Entanglement (QE) has had in human communications across the vast reaches of space. But for more than two centuries it remained a laboratory curiosity because of a stubborn question. How to get half of an entangled pair to a constellation millions of light-years away. In 2133, the brilliant physicist, Annaliese Gottlieb of the Max Planck Institute, invented the Magdetometer which could envelope a magnetic field of reversed polarity within another magnetic field, thus creating a weightless pocket. It remained a classroom study until three years later when her colleague Jürgen Hauss, a neutron star specialist, made an inspired connection.

Neutron stars occur when a star exhausts its fissionable material triggering a catastrophic chain of events that result in a massive Super Nova explosion. The blast creates elements like hydrogen, carbon, argon oxygen, among others, and is how the universe seeds itself with the ingredients necessary for life. If the star is of moderate size, a red or brown dwarf will result. If it is a massive star, it will continue collapsing to form a black hole. Anything in between will leave a neutron star.

The size of a small city, neutron stars are tremendously dense. A teaspoon of neutron star material weighs a billion tons. At the surface, the strength of its magnetic field is 200 billion times that of Earth.

Jürgen Hauss used Gottlieb's formulas to, with exquisite precision, work out how to manipulate a neutron star's atomic repulsive and degeneracy forces which prevented it from becoming a black hole. Decreasing these forces allowed further collapse, increased density, and thus a stronger magnetic field. At an exact level, the magnetic field becomes strong enough to open quantum space but not so strong it rips through space\time and into a black hole.

Twenty-three years later, in one of the great Civil Engineering feats by a civilization that counted pyramid builders among its ancestry, seven massive drones maneuvered into position around a neutron star. Using scaled up Magdetometers they created weightless pockets on the surface and began mining. When the drones returned, they had extracted 3,273 cubic meters of neutron star matter held in weightless suspension. Earth's moon now became the jump gate construction center of the Solar System and where the first gate went into orbit.

More as a civilizational vanity project, Earth's first interstellar cargo ship, loaded with a paired gate, jumped to Alpha Centauri. Two months later, the cargo ship returned. Weeks of worldwide celebrations ensued. Humanity had opened gateways to the stars.

One problem remained: travel between gates. Each gate needed 2.43kg of neutron star material to open quantum space. Research and analysis reduced that amount to 0.76kg kg for the newly designed Gauss engines housed by the Achilles-class ships just coming off production lines. Gauss engines generate magnetic fields which pull, not push, ships toward stellar objects (suns moons, planets). Under constant acceleration, simple gravity permits a top speed of 0.5% the speed of light (3.353 million mph, 5.396 million kph). Within local space, standard nuclear engines power the ships.

Space, local and interstellar, is riddled with magnetic lines from all manner of stellar objects. A ship's AI, once provided destination coordinates, can sort out relative strengths and direction lines to use for navigation. Like the winged creatures of Earth, humans have become birds migrating across the galaxy.

Lieutenant Ndungu turned from his displays. "We've picked up the Asahikawa on our sensors, Captain."

"Distance?"

"13,000km."

"Signal our approach, 1st."

Slow seconds piled up before a voice channel burst to life. "Greetings, Admiral Stanton. Forgive my rudeness but we're a little busy at the moment." The link disconnected.

Lieutenant Davis leaned back, both eyes on her displays. "Captain, I'm picking up unusual activity around the jump gate. The Asahikawa and something unidentified."

"Time to arrival, Helm?"

"36 seconds, Captain."

"Yellow alert, 1st." Interior lights dimmed reducing the Bridge's target profile and increasing view contrast.

Radio chatter swelled across Control Stations as departments announced confirmations.

HD 53712's jump gate grew in the viewport. Everyone stared. Before it, a gigantic, sponge-like tentacle writhed and twisted. One end spewed yellow fluids and liquids, the other ended in a suction cup reaching out to grasp the Asahikawa. Five short-range laser turrets burned into the thing, vaporizing it. The Asahikawa moved astern, clearing a firing line for the Achilles.

"Lasers only, Gunny. Ranged to target. No missiles. We need that gate."

"Aye, Captain."

Seconds became minutes. Nothing moved or emerged. Lieutenant Davis broke the silence. “The Asahikawa is signaling, Captain.”

Captain Morisu appeared, his demeanor calm and unruffled. Only a slight accent laced his idiomatically perfect English. “Been spacing for 17 years, Admiral. Never saw something like that.” Simone smiled.

“Yes, well now it’s a dead something, Captain.”

“I’ve heard all kinds of things drift into jump gates. Not sure if it was an arm, leg, or face. The gate’s magnetic field must have sheared it right off.”

“A shot across the bow, Captain. A warning we need to be alert for anything.”

“Indeed. Shall we enter?”

“I’ll take lead. Give me two minutes and a clear lane. If anything is amiss it might be a hasty exit.”

“Roger that, Admiral.” Morisu de-linked.

“Line us up, Helm. Transmit authorization codes, 2nd.”

An improper authorization code would create misaligned ship and gate magnetic fields. Even an Achilles-class Battle Cruiser would be crushed. An effective defensive barrier. Simone glanced at her panel. Proving himself no hot shot fighter pilot, Lieutenant Eisen had the AI firing thrusters as the Achilles aligned dead center and halted.

“Boards.”

“Operations, green.”

“Weapons, green.”

“Helm, green.”

“Comm, green.”

“Ahead one fifth Gauss, Helm.”

“One fifth Gauss, aye Captain.”

Simone imagined all the new crew members glued to available view windows, gaping at the massive structure. It still awed her. Like travelers from Africa’s interior sailing down the Nile and seeing the four gigantic statues of Egypt’s greatest Pharaohs at Abu Simbel, an alien civilization coming upon a gate would have to be impressed if not intimidated by beings able to create such structures. Still, veterans would be eating, playing in the game simulators, or snoring. In truth, passing through a gate qualified as a non-event.

She watched the ship’s bow puncture through, and finger-drumming minutes passed before the Bridge pushed past the ring. No elongated warp, no distorted waves, no shaking, rumbling, or tremors. The other side looked like space.

“We’ve jumped, Captain. The Achilles is at the far end of Andromeda.”

“Clear for the Asahikawa’s passage, Helm. Ahead two fifths Gauss.”

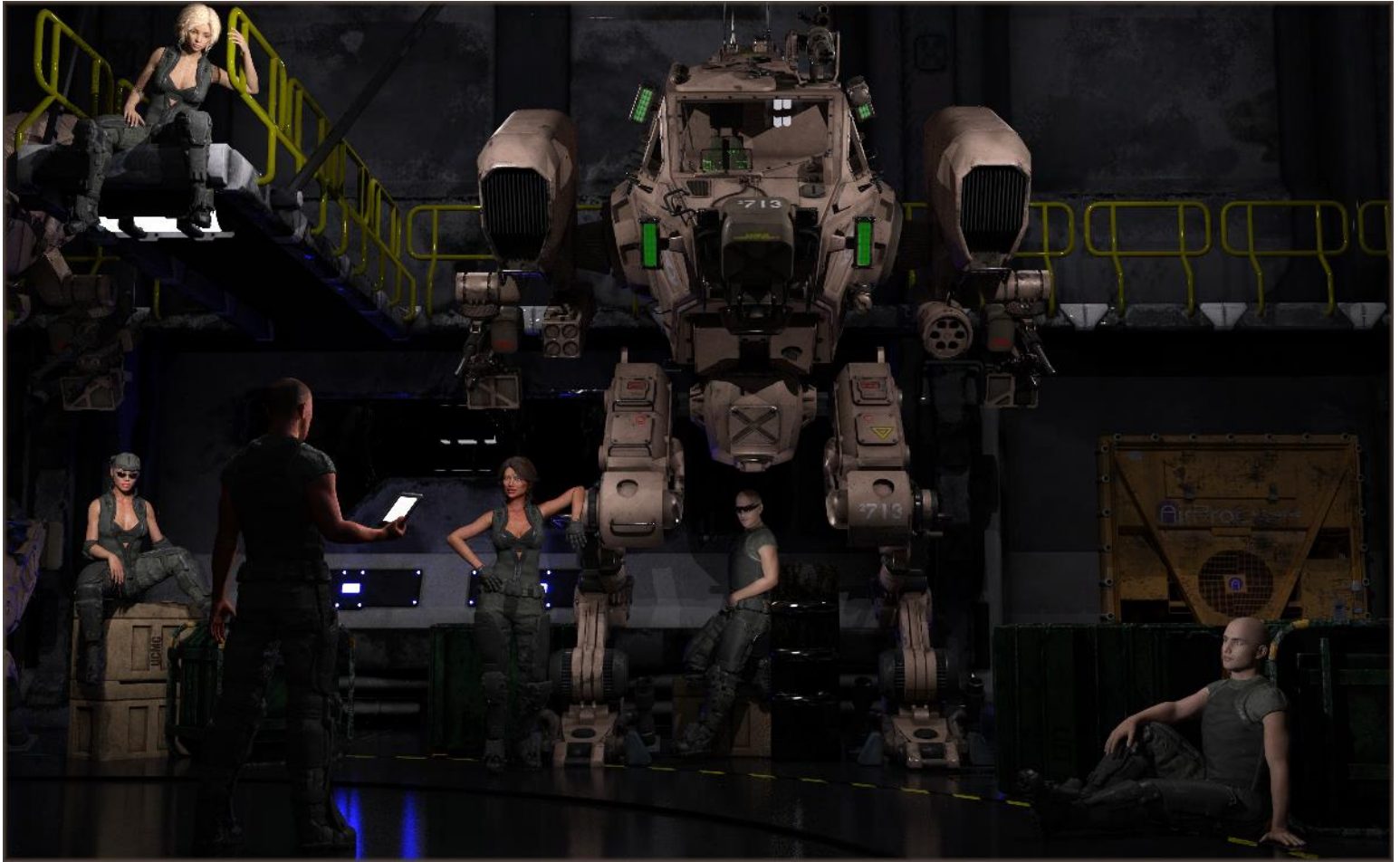
They had emerged above the system’s solar plane, none of its five planets visible at the distance but far ahead, its Red Dwarf twinkled and glimmered. Simone turned toward her 2nd, waiting. “The Asahikawa’s through, Captain.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant. Signal them to take a position 2,000km off our starboard.” The formation had no tactical importance. But since the days of ancient Greece, an army’s right flank represented a position of honor and trust. Captain Morisu would understand that. “Gunny, weapons on standby, full sensor array. I don’t want a mosquito sneaking up on us.”

“Aye, Captain.”

In synchronized fashion, two Battle Cruisers from Earth tilted their bows toward a child of Andromeda. Ahead a rendezvous with three more Achilles-class ships awaited. Deeper still, five planets orbited in silence.

Chapter 7



Cast of characters counterclockwise from top left:

Raven - whose eyebrows don't match her hair color. Mech Pilot, rear guard
Kanga - last name Rew. Mech Pilot, left flank
Major Joachim Wild - Commander, 713th Expeditionary Marine Battalion BMR, (Attached)
Lieutenant Solona Stanton - Squad Commander, Whiskey5, Mech Pilot
Ghost - off duty, no one ever knows where he is, Mech Pilot, Point
Flatline- can sleep anywhere, anytime, Mech Pilot, Right Flank

"At ease."

Major Wild waited as the squad assumed more casual postures. "Congratulations, Whiskey5. At 97.6, you graded out tops on the Simulators. Second place at 93.1 went to Battalion squad, Zulu7."

Hated ambiguity again enveloped Solona. Zulu7 had a couple guys more talented than her squad members but she had driven the crew hard to make their whole greater than the parts. She had even sent Raven to charm one of the software techies into a few customized tweaks. Switching to Tactical now allowed Cid to coordinate the shifts

and movements needed to maximize covering and support fire while keeping firing lanes clear of one another. Mech pilots hated letting go the throttle but the squad had come to trust their machines' maneuvers, allowing them to concentrate on target acquisition and weapon selection.

Coming out first provided a sense of satisfaction but she wanted no part of a heightened profile. With a crew of over 11,000 plus an attached Marine Battalion, she doubted simulator performance grades reached the Achilles' Captain, but it made for a sense of unease to have her name floating about.

"We still don't know which planet you'll be landing on. The fleet remains at standoff distance analyzing the system's five planets. Three have breathable atmospheres but Air Filtration helmets will be required. By tonight their filters will be recalibrated to accommodate all of them. One planet has a low magnetic field and therefore very high radiation levels. I've confirmed our radiation gear is checked and ready for load out if we go there.

"Whatever the case, standard drops will bring us to the surface to secure landing zones for the drones bringing the Mechs. That means to create LZ's you'll have to be real Marines for a while, people. You're scheduled for live fire Assault Rifle and sidearm shooting twice a day until we receive final deployment notices." Solona glanced at Kanga. Her face had lit up. "I suggest you use the spare time to rest up."

Raven giggled. "No problem, sir. Don't let Flatline's open eyes fool you. He's already asleep." Smiles and grins flashed. Flatline gave Raven a smirk followed by his own sheepish grin.

"That's it, folks. You're released and off duty now. Ghost, don't forget we can go at any minute. A word, Lieutenant Stanton."

Wild stood for a moment, jaw muscles twitching as he slid an unlit stogie from side to side. Steel blue eyes locked onto hers. "I saw those software updates you installed." The silence deepened and he let Solona stew. "If you had asked me beforehand, I might have said no. Relax. I'm having them standardized on all the squads. Initiative is synonymous with being a Marine. But I'll be more inclined to say yes if the next time you ask first." His eyes twinkled. Wild's way of grinning and granting approval.

"Yes, sir."

"During my last briefing with the Captain, it dawned on me you have the same last name and a very strong resemblance." He stood silent. Solona had no better response.

"Yes, sir." Seconds mounted.

"Anything I should know?" Solona squirmed.

"If you demand an answer, Major, I'll give you one, but I much prefer to drop the issue. I just want to be a Marine." And honor my sister, she thought. Wild's eyes narrowed, boring into hers. Solona stood straight, returning his gaze.

"I like to know my junior officers. I don't need some crazy Lieutenant making decisions that might jeopardize the lives of the men and women in my Battalion and therefore the mission." Solona stood straighter, her words measured, sober. Deliberate.

"My squad is my only priority, sir. I would give my life for them." Wild chewed his cigar.

"Good enough, Lieutenant. But let's not let it come to that. Dismissed."

Glints and flashes flickered on the Conference Room's main display before Professor Li Yen Chou's familiar face burst through. Across the top, four smaller windows showed Captain Morisu of the Asahikawa, Captain Rodrigo Boncé commanding Argentina's Córdoba, Captain Amalie Pederson commanding the Ludvig Holberg of Denmark, and Captain Richard Davies commanding the HMS Agincourt of Great Britain.

In the room with Simone sat her 1st and 2nd along with Major Joachim Wild. Introductions complete, Simone turned the teleconference over to Professor Chou.

"Thank you, Captain. Let me begin by saying the object that attacked us is not, repeat, not artificial or manufactured. It is biological and our laboratories have reached this conclusion to a certainty. The implications are enormous. How is a biological entity able to travel through space and survive? How intelligent/sentient is it? And, of course, where did it originate and what are its intentions? We hope your mission can shed some light on this but since we now know it is not dumb machinery, we urge the utmost caution."

"Will the ion plasma upgrade still work?" Simone asked.

"Yes. It works at the atomic level and is what led us to suspect the object might be biological."

"Do the Astro-Physics people have an answer to my communications problem?"

"They have, Lieutenant Davis. I understand you wanted to know if they could detect any radio or electromagnetic radiation emanating from the system's opposite side?"

"That's right."

"They had a few observation platforms behind this system and detected nothing that might have been blocked from your perspective."

Simone decided against asking if the initial analysis, the object had originated here, might be wrong. For a week now they remained just beyond this Sun's Corona boundary with passive and active sensors scanning everything. They had detected nothing that could be regarded as a communication signal. Now that the Professor had confirmed its biology, the conundrum deepened. They had to be communicating. How?

Whatever the case, Simone sensed the Moment of Command had arrived. Every soldier understands they had not joined a musical quartet or sewing circle. From the moment they raised their hands and swore an oath to serve, each one understood their lives might be forfeit. No Commander of honor and integrity needlessly throws away the lives of soldiers. And yet, a decision must be made. The mission must be accomplished. In doing so, grief and despair might enter the lives of loved ones, family, friends. Innocents all.

"That's it then." Simone declared. "All this skulking and probing is getting us nowhere. We need to go in there, get on the ground, and see what's going on. Anyone have a better alternative? No one did. Captain Davies spoke up.

"Admiral, I would like to volunteer the Agincourt as part of the lead element."

"Consider it done, Captain. Captain Pederson and Captain Boncé will maintain a 15-minute interval behind us and be the Reserve Force. Captain Morisu will join us and take position on the right flank. If there is anything else...?" Simone paused for a response. "Good. We all have things to do. Major Wild, a moment please."

Room cleared, the Marine declined an offer to sit. Steely blue eyes remained alert, focused. "Major, forgive me for not having more time to help you prepare. A measure of the confidence I have in you and your Battalion. If anything, your actions have strengthened my confidence. Is there anything I can do to better assist your efforts? Is there anything you need?"

"No, Captain. But thank you for the offer and your consideration."

"Can I consider the Battalion mission-ready for any contingency?"

"We're ready right now, Captain."

Simone leaned back in the chair; admiration formed a smile accompanied by a slow nod. "Any questions for me?" Wild stood before her, his stance one of a proud and disciplined soldier. A warrior. An unlit stogie slid across his mouth. His gaze did not waver.

"No, Captain."

Chapter 8



Already Solona sat heavier in the seat. She glanced at the Tactical Board's altimeter: 70km. Across all bands, radio chatter filled the Armored Troop Transport's interior. A finger tap slaved the board to the drop ship's external sensors. Her screen flickered before displaying three other drop ships in front of hers, aligned with computer precision, descending toward the planet's horizon. Beneath the first, atmospheric flames had already ignited.

Ghost broke into her helmet's intercom cutting off the radio noise. He grinned at her. "Orbital insertion in 30 seconds, Lieutenant. Should I wake Flatline?" She returned a wider grin.

"No. This way he'll be good and rested when I give him the 2am watch. Raven, I'm getting static in my helmet's left ear intercom. Anything you can do?"

"How's that, Lieutenant?"

"Perfect, thanks."

It felt like being in old, comfortable jeans. Three ATTs sat inside the drop ship's fuselage facing backward toward the exit ramp. Zulu7 sat nearest the ramp, restraining bolts locked in place, with Oscar6 occupying the middle. Every Marine had to be ATT qualified. Mech pilot candidates had to qualify on all three stations: driver, comm, and weapons (twin, turret mounted, HE cannons).

Fleet radio traffic swelled. The drop ship began to jolt and shudder, shake and jitter. Above the radio din and structural knocks, the pilot's cool voice rose. "We're in the pipe, 5 by 5."

They continued in free fall as afterburners rocketed the ship into a steep dive, minimizing the vulnerable window they travelled in, sending their stomach pits through the floor.

"G-force slam, ten seconds." Raven shouted into the cacophony. Solona turned, smiling to see Flatline, eyes shut, fumble for his G-suit's switch. Powerful thrusters blasted beneath them, flattening their dive. Gravity reasserted itself with a vengeance, crushing them into the seats. Ungodly grunts squeezed past straining necks to assist their pressure suits, preventing a blackout from the blood rushing to their ankles. With another thruster blast, gravity crushed them deeper into the seats. Everyone closed their mouths and locked their jaws.

A bone-jarring smash stopped their flight. "Ramp down." the pilot announced. Vehicle restraint bolts synched to the ramp banged open. "Status, Raven."

"Green across the board, Lieutenant. Full gain, no movement or anomalies."

"Weapons on standby, Kanga."

"Roger."

Solona pressed her TacBoard screen to see Zulu7 leap off the ramp, crash to the ground, and spin off dirt and dust as it wheeled toward its perimeter point. Ghost punched engine start. Oscar6 sprang forward, bouncing to the ground, once, twice. Its rear end swayed left and right before the wheels bit letting it race onward trailing a dust cloud. Their ATT roared out the fuselage, flying off the ramp, digging for traction. Solona keyed the broadcast button. "Olympus3, Olympus3. Whiskey5 on the ground."

Seven drop ships took flight, lifting to altitude before rocketing back into orbit. Twenty ATTs stopped at pre-programmed points to form a 3,000m circumference. Once Solona declared the Landing Zone secure, drop ships would bring the Mechs down from orbit. Her group would comprise three squads of fifteen Mechs with five ATTs containing Marine infantry in support.

Earth-centric assumptions informed the LZs selected across the planet. Like humanity's emergence from a landlocked African interior to settle around the Mediterranean basin, other species with access to water would learn the economic superiority of sea trade compared to land. The exchange of goods and ideas accelerated the advance of civilization and technology. Their LZ, designated H9 on their coordinate maps, sat 15km from a huge river, 700km in length. Solona would explore the area to its head while a similar group from the Agincourt would be behind them moving up from its mouth.

Like soldiers of every epoch, the Marines waited. Solona switched from intercom to broadcast. "All rim units. Move to position." Five ATTs containing the group's ground support Marines motored to their perimeter points, forming a five-point star on a circle measuring 5,000m. The pre-defined points cleared firing lines and placed each ATT in the group within range of support fire from the others. When the dust cleared in the shifting breezes, they radioed green on their radar and sensor displays.

"Olympus3, Olympus3. Whiskey5 on station 5 by 5. LZ H9 secure. Acknowledge."

"Roger, Whiskey5. Standby."

Solona leaned forward, eyes widening at seeing an alien world for the first time. The system's red dwarf Sun cast nowhere near the light its younger, yellow cousins did. At early morning, it looked dark, like an overcast Earth day, heightened by the oddity of a sky filled with the Milky Way's brighter stars.

Plentiful plant life ranged from dark gray to black to purple. On Earth, the red and blue portions of the light spectrum permitted more efficient photosynthesis. Plants rejected the less capable green light, reflecting it out thus providing their green color. Here, the low-light environment forced plants to absorb all the available light, giving them a dark, other-worldly appearance. In the distance, dwarf, undernourished trees looked like purple bushes.

The ground had a yellowish tinge, strewn with crushed rocks between which sprung a low-cropped, black, glossy grass. Solona marveled at the truly alien sight.

"Whiskey5, Olympus3. Standby for Major Wild." Exchanged encryption codes crackled.

"Lieutenant Stanton?"

"Yes, sir."

"Change of orders. You and the Agincourt group will bivouac in place for the night. I activated links to the ship's video and reading materials. Any questions or problems?"

"No, sir."

"Good. Right now, we're looking at a tentative time of 0630 to drop the Mechs. We'll confirm."

"Yes, sir."

"Olympus3 out."

Groans accompanied her relayed news. Along with waiting, it's what soldiers did. Solona gave Raven a pointed look. "You bring your collector equipment?" She giggled, keeping her head steady while her eyes shifted toward Flatline.

"I don't want to say in front of him."

"It's okay." Flatline said. "I'm asleep."

Solona turned away, shaking her head. It would be a long night.

Simone shifted in her seat. Her right hand held a read device, her left a steaming mug of coffee. She sipped, careful not to burn her mouth. "How much longer do you think it will take?"

"It's a massive amount of data, Captain. At least four more hours." the Navy scientist stated.

Major Wild had not liked delaying the Mech drop. "If you're concerned about an unexpected attack, Captain, what better reason could there be than to have Mech pilots in their Mechs."

The image of that yellow object smashing through a frigate stayed her hand. What chance would a Mech have? Besides, if they had to, extracting ATTs would be a straightforward process. The much bigger Mechs more problematic. Time might be of the essence.

The scientists had scanned every square meter of the planet's surface. Real time results either showed movement or not. Energy emanations or not. The subsurface scans needed analysis of the huge data dump a depth of 100m produced. They had discovered anomalous structures that hinted at continuing deeper into the substrata. The rescan, calibrated to a 1,000m depth of an entire planet, uplinked a data stream that had choked the computers. The analysis continued to churn. Simone felt confident the scientists understood the stakes. A call for all hands on deck had gone out.

"Very well, Lieutenant Commander. Please keep me informed."

"Will do, Captain."

Be it the vagaries of battle or the fog of war, fate had entered the fray. AI analysis had already made the connection between the yellow tinted ground and the yellow/tan object. The report lay inside an overworked Junior Grade Lieutenant's inbox. The crushed rock and gravel terrain Lieutenant Stanton's group sat atop evidenced recent weight pressures. The low-growth grass, fresh grazing. Three Battle Cruisers continued in orbit. Along with the Mechs.

Chapter 9



Solona rose from the depths, swimming through sleep, stroking hard, the surface no closer. Breathing became difficult, she had to breach or suffocate. With a start she awoke, eyes blinking, shaking off cobwebs. Raven had a hand on her shoulder. "You need to see this, Lieutenant. We've got movement."

Her eyes shot toward the Tactical Display. 0547 local. Still 45 minutes until their Mechs dropped. One hand flicked on her radar, the other gave Ghost's intercom a crackle. He too woke with a start. "Up and at 'em, Ghost. We may have to pull a hasty exit. She glanced toward the rear. Flatline, awake and alert, had begun pouring coffee into their cups.

Her eyes widened at the display. Across the entire horizon, a slow, amorphous, undulating mass moved toward them. Some bobbed into the air and back down. She tapped an individual. Radar measured it at 63m across and 61m high. Its square shape sounded an internal alarm. She tapped a few others, some 12m across, others 100s. With their range at 26km, visual zoom remained inactive.

"Signal all units Red Alert, Raven. Have them acknowledge via the TacBoards. I want the voice channels clear for my commands only. Kanga, weapons on standby." Raven began transmitting.

In unison, the mass stopped its forward advance. Are they communicating, she wondered? Solona scanned her monitors. No power emanations, nothing on radio, nothing quantum.

Visuals. She needed visuals. Flipping the radar for uplink, she switched to broadcast, keeping one eye on the display and the other on her much-needed coffee. "Olympus3, Whiskey5. Need visuals on transmitted coordinates."
"Roger Whiskey5, standby." The mass stopped.

Major Wild, alert and focused, clicked in. "We're tracking and analyzing this, Whiskey5." Her display flickered then zoomed into crisp focus. Round shapes, oblong shapes, bulky shapes, bent and curved shapes, still as stones, hugged the ground and stretched into the distance. Solona stared, trying to make sense of it. Behind her, Kanga leaned left and Flatline bent forward, eyes fixed on Ravens display. The mass resumed its unhurried pace.

"Whiskey5, I'm sending a priority link to Professor Chou. We're goi..." Wild stopped speaking. Everyone stared. As if riding an expanding updraft, the blobs began rising funnel-like, merging into one another and forming a rough square shape that swelled by the second. In less than a minute, the object Earth had sent their most advanced fleet to find, hovered 500m above a Marine platoon.

"Whiskey5, you have a reading on that thing?" "Rog..." In seconds, the object closed the 26km distance to 7. Solona looked out the view port and checked the readings again before looking out once more. She stared. 7km away and the object filled the sky.

"Whiskey5, come in." Spherical bumps appeared on the object's surfaces, throbbing and pulsating. Just like the object that had plowed through her sister's frigate. Insight poured into Solona. "Whisk..."

"Cut the transmissions!" she screamed.

Half-dressed, Simone's head snapped toward her display. It flashed red and the ever-early Lieutenant Ndungu's name blinked. "Captain Stanton."

"Captain, we have a developing situation. The object has found us. It's confronting a platoon of Marines in their ATTs. The Lieutenant in charge has cut off communications. We have linked Professor Chou to a live data feed."

"Where is Major Wild?"

"At his comm center."

"Immediate maneuver to geostationary orbit, First. Have the Agincourt and Asahikawa assume positions 10km off our flanks. Signal Major Wild to meet me on the Bridge. Weapons on standby, First. I'm on the way."

Lift doors opened, sweeping Simone onto the bridge. Major Wild snapped to attention. "Captain on the Bridge."

"As you were."

She marched to Ndungu's station. "Object status, First."

"Unchanged, Captain. We have it on full scan. No power emanations, no signals. It's just hovering mid-air." Simone turned around; head bent downward. A hand fingered her chin.

"Hovering? No power emanations? How the hell can it do that?" She moved toward Keesana's station which displayed Professor Chou's image. "Did you hear this, Professor? Any ideas?"

"This feed is live throughout the entire Institute, Captain. We're analyzing it. All hands are on deck."

A luxury I no longer have, Simone thought. My last analysis left those Marines without Mechs, their lives hanging by a thread. Ndungu interrupted. "Agincourt and Asahikawa on station, Captain."

"Thank you, First. Gunny?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Arm two bow torpedoes. Target lock on my command only. Triple check the firing solutions, Gunny. We have zero room for error."

"Aye, Captain."

Head down in reflection, she walked back to Major Wild, looking up to meet his unwavering gaze. “Any good reason I can’t communicate with my ground forces, Major? They have a front row seat to all this.”

“She’s my best Squad Leader, Captain. If she cut off communications, she had good reason. I’ve refrained from signaling her. When and if she can, she’ll signal us. So far, whatever her reasons, it has worked. That thing hasn’t attacked.”

Before Simone could respond, everyone turned their heads at Keesana’s, “Quiet everybody.” Her face a concentrated scowl, one hand pressed an earpiece, the other raised the volume control. In the stilled room, a faint tapping sound rose.

Simone and Wild leaned forward. After a moment, they turned to one another with surprised expressions. “Morse Code!” They leaned in again, translating in harmony. “Olympus3, Olympus3, Whiskey5. Come in, Olympus3.”

A broad grin brightened Simone’s face. “That officer was paying attention at Academy Signaling. When this is over, I’m putting her in for a Battlefield Citation.”

“Roger that, Captain.” Wild grinned back.

Chapter 10



Professor Chou turned from the hologram projector, listening to the urgent whispers of an aide. Her gaze shifted, studying another display. If anything, her tone became more somber.

"As I indicated, Captain, we had six spectrum mass computers analyzing the stool samples your brave Lieutenant sent us. The sixth just completed its analysis. The results are extraordinary and will form the basis for decades of study. In fact, it will revolutionize biological engineering as we know it.

"Evolution requires three ingredients. One, a reproductive mechanism capable of producing variation. Without variation, an organism cannot adapt to environmental changes. If the changes are extreme enough, the organism goes extinct, evolution ends.

"Second, an organism needs an environment. Variations in an organism allow it to exploit new and different environments. Our whales began their evolutionary journey as four-legged, terrestrial dogs.

"Third, evolution needs time. Because environmental changes occur over millennia, this usually is not a problem. Evolution on Earth never had a need for rapid variation, and thus, never developed it. When external changes occur rapidly, like meteor strikes, evolution has no chance to adapt. Species, like the dinosaurs, go extinct.

"What is the biggest environment an organism can exploit? This object, this creature, is evolved, and perfectly adapted to its environment: the vast and limitless expanse of space itself.

"We have concluded, to a 95% certainty, that the planet you now orbit is not its home world. When we find it, and we will, we believe it will be a very large planet, thus giving it a strong magnetic field, that will orbit very close to its sun giving it rapid seasonal changes. These two environmental conditions set the stage for an organism able to exploit them. Nature evolved what we are beginning to think of as dynamic DNA.

"The closest thing we have on Earth are the fish, reptiles, and insects able to instantly change their colors and patterns to camouflage them. Over time, because of the swift seasonal changes, this organism developed a malleable exterior that could harden into shields when solar flare activity of its nearby sun increased beyond the planet's magnetic field's ability to deflect.

"Now the more astounding characteristic. Any life form evolving beyond plants must be able to move. Some travel on land, some on water, some in the air. At some distant point in its evolutionary past, nature experimented with the planet's strong magnetic field. Like Earth's electric eels, this organism can generate a magnetic field. It can do so as easily and reflexively as bending a pinky. Over time, what may have begun as an ability to dodge, hop, or leap, allowed it to move great distances at great speed. A tremendous advantage for a creature on a world subject to the radiations of solar flares, and when arriving at some distant point, able to harden its exterior for further protection.

"Something, however, exerted further protective pressures. Like herds packing together against predators, creatures with malleable exteriors found great advantage in melding together. Combined with an ability to travel along magnetic lines, the leap to space became inevitable."

"How does it breathe in space?" Captain Morisu, linked from the Asahikawa's bridge, asked.

"Well, keep in mind that though its DNA is mechanically like ours, it has huge dissimilarities. For example, what we believe are its chromosomes number 91 pairs. Humans have 23, whales 40, dogs 38, ferns 630. Though we have great confidence in the intelligence of spectrum mass computers, and we had six linked in parallel, the models that emerged contained unavoidable assumptions.

"Nonetheless, they detected what we believe are specialized organs that act like storage balloons for air. Moreover, once they are in magnetic flight, like gliding, very little energy is required and their biological systems enter a kind of hibernating state also requiring minimal, if any, energy intake."

"How does it generate a magnetic field?" Morisu continued.

"Unsure. Computer results are ambiguous. It may have specialized organs or it may be biochemical. Electricity can be generated biochemically and, if in motion, will create a magnetic field. Once we have both a live and dead specimen, we'll be able to gain a better understanding."

"Is it intelligent?" Simone asked.

"In a relative sense, yes. We suspect more than a dog. Somewhere on the level of a porpoise, whale, or elephant." She paused for more questions. None came.

"Let me finish by providing a heads up on the mission change we're finalizing right now. The exterior shell of that creature represents a revolution to our industrial materials processing. It can not only withstand high-intensity solar flares and the radiation levels of interstellar travel, it is also hard enough to penetrate a battle frigate's armor plating without leaving a dent while also able to increase and decrease its size at will and be malleable enough to form unbreakable bonds with similar material. Its military implications are self-evident.

"We want to protect this species at a standoff position until we can get properly configured drones to follow up our research."

Irony of ironies, Simone thought. What had started out as a hunt and kill operation had morphed into species protection. "Keep in mind, Professor, this creature did attack and destroy a guild frigate."

"Understood, Captain. That is why we recommend a standoff distance until we can better understand its behavioral patterns. Meanwhile, if left no choice, we remain confident it has no defense against ion plasma torpedoes.

"One more thing, Captain. Everywhere we look in nature, irrespective of the life form, a predator/prey dynamic exists. These creatures are not predators.

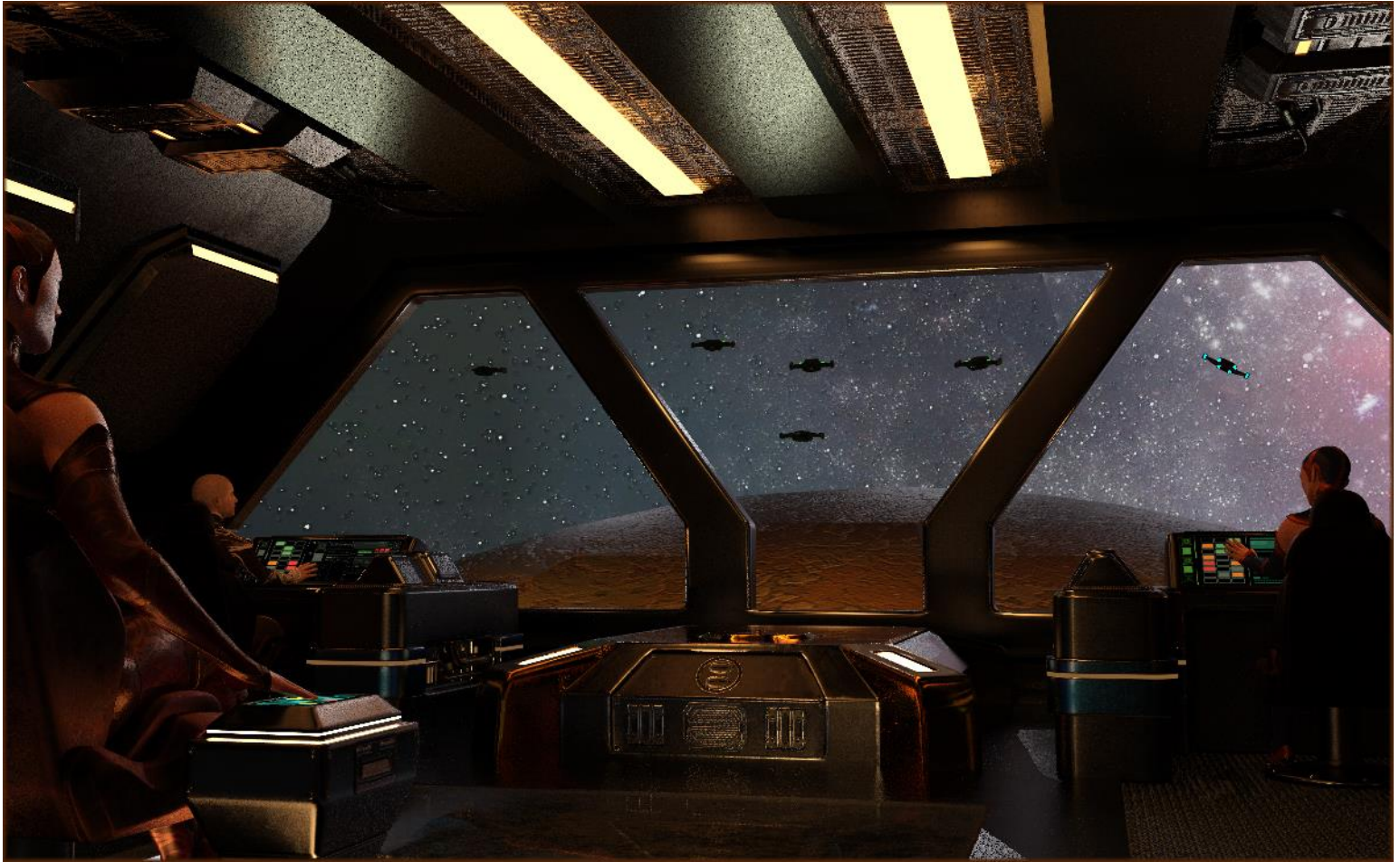
Three days later, the reality affecting soldiers of every age had taken firm grip. Long periods of tedious, boring inactivity interspersed with moments of heart-stopping mayhem.

A 2nd Lieutenant stood night watch on the Achilles Bridge, struggling to keep his eyes open. A beeping sound straightened him. Wide-eyed, his comm officer turned in her seat. "Sir, the creatures are rising en masse out of the atmosphere."

The forward view zoomed to an enormous line of yellow/tan objects rising in a continuous flow from the planet's surface and out into space. Her voice tight with tension, the Weapon's Officer broke in. "Sir, I have nine unidentified objects, 230,000km off the port bow, with power emanations, closing at speed."

"Shields, Gunny. Sound Yellow Alert, 1st. Power up and engine hold, Helm." Without hesitation, his finger pressed Captain's Recall.

Chapter 11



"Is it possible they don't see us?" Simone asked.

Ten thousand km's above the rotational plane, five guild warships stood silent, synced to the planet's languorous orbit. All eyes remained glued to the drama playing out below. Aboard the Achilles' Bridge, a pin drop would have echoed.

"Sensors indicate nothing radiating toward us, Captain." Lieutenant Ndungu responded.

"Lieutenant Davis?"

"All broadcast channels clear, Captain." Keesana declared.

Simone's finger moved to Major Wild's intercom link. "Yes, Captain."

"I have good reason to believe our visitors' sensor capabilities are not up to par. With your people on the other side of the planet, now may be a good time to resupply. Given the uncertainty, it may be a while before I risk lifting them off the surface. Don't want Marine-filled Drop ships running about during a laser fight."

"Are you anticipating hostility, Captain?"

"Don't know what to anticipate, Major. Just being prudent."

"Understood, Captain."

Ship's sensors showed no slowing of the creatures, nicknamed Magnethons by the scientists, flowing up from the planet's interior. At the space/atmosphere boundary they turned and already stretched to the distant moon,

continuing past, heading for the interstellar void. Between the moon and planet, nine powered ships darted in and out of the stream. Whenever they did, a Magnethon slowed, dropping away from the moving mass. Another ship would swoop in, hook the disoriented creature, drawing it through opened doors and into the interior before closing again. No one could discern any selection pattern except those captured could fit into the ships. And as the culling continued, the Magnethons never merged in defense.

With what passed for excitement in his normally unflappable voice, Lieutenant Ndungu broke the silence. "I've uncovered their capture mechanism, Captain. They may be less technologically capable than we thought. The puzzle was why my scans of the electromagnetic spectrum could not find what frequency they used. They're using static magnetic fields which have a frequency of zero. It enables them to precisely place a magnetic burst into a creature that leaves it paralyzed and disoriented. Because the creatures also utilize static magnetic fields, they don't 'see' the ships."

Simone settled into her seat, eyes fixed on the continuing theater played on a grand scale. She could not escape the vision of natives riding nimble ponies on the vast plains, driving stampeding buffaloes, singling out those who did not keep up. Sounds of whoops and war cries filled the air.

"Lieutenant Davis, has this been on continuous feed to Fleet headquarters and the Science Institute?"

"Aye, Captain."

"1st, now that we know how they're transmitting, can we key into them?"

"I've been trying to hail them, Captain. Problem is what would they recognize as a signal? Their comm people might be banging their receivers thinking it random noise."

Here I am, Simone thought. Like the beginning, when the Egyptians and Canaanites, the Sumerians and Enembaragesi faced one another, two civilizations, two cultures had again come into contact. Three irreducible facts stood fast. Her responsibility for the lives of the men and woman under her command was absolute. She would not sacrifice them on the altar of philosophical hopes and noble dreams.

Another civilization had entered the Milky Way. They, of course, did not regard it as an 'invasion', but neither could they be allowed to think their prerogatives here limitless. Peace needed two equal partners. Human history made it clear. Those civilizations unable to defend their way of life became extinct.

She had her orders. Protect the Magnethons. Time to say, hello.

"Lieutenant Davis, signal the other ships to Red Alert but hold their positions. Gunny, weapons on standby, full shields. Helm, all ahead to that moon. Orbit it from behind and let's come up in front of those ships between them and the creatures. With only one of us, maybe they won't get nervous. 1st, sound Red Alert."

Lieutenant Eisen's hands did not shake as they moved across the board. Within a minute, the Achilles swooped into the moon's gravity well. Neither did his voice. "We're in the pipe five by five, Captain. Coming around in seven seconds."

Like molasses, the moon's surface rolled beneath them until giving way to the horizon beyond. As it did, nine ships formed dots across the main view screen. "Captain, they're slowing." Ndungu declared. Four broke away, two each assumed positions on her flanks.

"Full stop, Helm. 1st?"

"Scans complete, Captain. Chemical propellants and explosives detected. Nothing plasmonic, nuclear, or high-energy. Magnetic power drives not on our level. They have no penetrative capability, Captain."

"Confirm full shields, Gunny."

"Full shields confirmed, Captain."

"They've stopped, Captain." Ndungu added.

"Gunny, you tracking nine targets?"

"Nine targets, aye Captain."

Slow seconds became long minutes. Simone's low voice carried across the Bridge. "Just our luck first contact is with the most patient people in the universe." Chuckles and grins eased the tension. Gunny brought it right back.

"Captain, their magnetic drives are powering up."

"Confirmed, Captain." Ndungu vouched.

"Evasive action, Captain?"

"Hold position, Helm."

Magnetic bursts from nine ships blasted them. Lightning fast computers analyzed the incoming waves, reversing shield polarity as each struck, deflecting them away. Perhaps in disbelief, another salvo launched. Five kilometers away, bright guide lights blinking, an untouched Achilles held its position.

Simone sat back, crossing her legs, determination etched across her face. "Well. Let's see if the word 'futile' exists in their vocabulary." Gunny's voice rang out.

"Missile launch, Captain."

"Lasers on auto, Gunny."

Particle beams sizzled across the vacuum, leaving ionized molecular wisps in their wake. Too fast for the eye to follow, swiveling turrets burned through missile after missile. Micro-second bursts exploded some, others severed in half scattered into orbital debris, falling toward the moon's surface. One ship's missile, blasted in its tube, exploded a hole that began venting gas and shattered metal. It turned, limping back toward the planet. Five kilometers away, bright guide lights blinking, an untouched Achilles held its position.

The standoff ended when one ship lurched forward. Leader or sacrificial lamb, Simone wondered? Contact or deception? On it came. "Four kilometers, Captain." Gunny called out. Simone decided on two kilometers. Beyond that she would consider it an absolute threat.

"Load two torpedoes, forward bay, Gunny. One armed, one not armed."

"Aye, Captain."

"1st, blink all ship's lights once. Don't know what they consider a warning but surely they'll understand lights are non-lethal." The ship continued.

"Three kilometers, Captain."

"Fire unarmed torpedo. Five meters over its head, Gunny." The shields flickered.

"Torpedo away, Captain."

It zoomed toward its target, the distance and speed leaving no time for evasive action. Five meters above, it continued out to the stellar void. "It's accelerating."

"Lock on target, Gunny."

"Two kilometers."

"Fire when ready."

From the forward bay, a matte black assassin roared out its tube, angry red thrusters closing the gap. At intercept, a brief spherical flash brightened the area. In the blink of an eye, the roiling energies shrank into the nothingness of quantum space.

In unison, the seven remaining spacecraft turned, hurtling back toward the planet abandoned by the Magnethons. Norway's Ludvig Holberg signaled her board. "I have a vector intercept, Captain."

"Hold position, Captain Pederson. I want them to return and tell others what they have seen. Maybe next time they'll be more reasonable."

Simone let out a long-held breath. Later she would reflect on the lives she had sent to the quantum void but right now she felt great relief everyone on their side had emerged unscathed. She needed a break. Maybe she could wheedle a piece of cake or pie from the Chief Steward along with some coffee.

"Lieutenant Ndungu, you have the bridge. I'll be in the galley and then see that everyone gets a 30-minute break." Three steps from the lift, Ndungu's voice stopped her.

"Captain, the eight ships have dropped into orbit around the planet, descending to the surface. They're landing, Captain."

Simone froze mid-step. The Marines!

Chapter 12



Simone closed her eyes and breathed deep. Under her breath she vowed never again to send Mech Squads anywhere without their Mechs. If they could not go in with their Mechs then they could not go in. Another slow breath and she opened them to view her display board. Nothing she could do to change either phenomenon shown. Best just to factor them in.

The unidentified ships had not only landed on the planet, but had done so right at sunset, within 500km of the Marine encampment, and with storms rushing up from the south pushing a dense cloud cover over everything. Coincidence? They still had sonic, infra-red, and thermal imaging but a lack of visuals raised her unease.

A finger press linked her to Major Wild's intercom. "Yes, Captain."

"Major we need a plan to get the Marines up here or their Mechs to the surface. Our visitors have landed 500km west of their position. Let's do this before they decide to make pests of themselves." A flat tone matched Wild's impassive expression.

"Mechs already landed, Captain. You ordered me to resupply them."

"I see you have a rather expansive interpretation for 'resupply.'"

"Forgive me, Captain. I thought you understood. To an Expeditionary Marine, 'resupply' means weapons, bullets, or both." His eyes twinkled. "Food comes later." Wild paused. "But we did send some chow to them."

Simone strained to keep a stern face. Good order in the ranks had to be maintained. Still, she felt a sense of relief. Modern society missed no opportunity to advance the notion people could do nothing without elites and experts telling them what to do and how to do it. Major Wild embodied that classic American spirit to roll up the

sleeves, tighten the belt, and get on with it. Without waiting for someone to tell them. Initiative and ingenuity still lived.

"What about the vehicles?"

"The last ones are on board and already being washed and prepped, Captain." She did not want to let him off the hook so easy and raised an eyebrow to give him a long, hard look. The edges of her mouth formed a grin.

"Well done, Major."

She disconnected, switched views on her display, confirmed Gunny still tracked the nine ships, and rose from her chair. "Lieutenant Ndungu, you have the bridge. I'll be in my quarters. Notify me immediately of any change in status."

"Aye, Captain."

Inside, she splashed cold water on her face, poured some coffee, and linked to the other five ships. "Captains, while we have a lull, I'd like your insights on how we should proceed. My intent had been to let them go and tell others what they had witnessed. That we should instead be reasoned with. However, the opponent also gets to vote. They chose to land and are a little too close to the Marines for my comfort although I'm beginning to think whatever is on those ships is unaware of that. We have, in the interim, reinforced the Marines with their Mechs and I'm confident they can now hold their...one moment please.

"Captains, I've just been informed by my Bridge the alien crew members have left their ships, headed for a large forested area between them and the Marines."

Richard Davies, commanding the HMS Agincourt, opened a channel. "Captain, I understand you wanted these other-worlders to be witnesses for what they had seen. Frankly, they're aliens. We don't even know what they look like. Trying to guess what or why they might do something is just that. A guess.

"If they have achieved space flight, then I'm sure someone will come looking when they don't return as scheduled. I say, destroy their ships from orbit. It will diminish their ability to do mischief and give us time to better assess exactly what we're dealing with. The lesson will not be lost that we destroyed their ships, not them."

"Thank you, Captain. I will take it under advisement."

Kreeln, last to emerge, stepped off the carrier and joined the others. Together they turned toward the distant forest, marching in silence, shocked to their core. As the Spiritual Leader, Kreeln had counseled Unison and for that they needed a forest.

No one could shake the vision of their Lord Minister, honor bound to lead, disappear along with an entire carrier. As if they had been nothing more than parc. Worst of all, Metal Wearers had done it. How could Jawen permit such a thing? To His faithful?

And so, they walked to the forest. They would come to Unison humble and with humility. Perhaps then Jawen would forgive their arrogance and permit them Unity with which to face these metal-wearing barbarians.

The air hummed and whooshed. They turned in time to see a metal casing burst from the clouds, striking a carrier. It flared into a fiery sphere then with a whoomp flashed into nothing. Others, trailing vapors in their wake, struck the remaining carriers. Within seconds, nothing obstructed the view. Silence descended over the exposed ground. Only bent grass gave evidence anything had been there. As one they turned and raced for the forest, squawking and trilling in panicked flight. Only Kreeln stood his ground.

"Those of the Feather!" he shouted. "Those of the Feather!" They stopped, widened eyes darting in all directions, anticipating more metal casings. "Are we so deep in our time we trill and chitter like frightened and fearful nestlings? We are Attractors. To us has been given the power of Unity. Is your faith in Jawen so weak? You

shame our Bepores who triumphed over their Metallars. We will walk to Unity and through our humility prove our faith that we may be permitted Unison."

Solona struggled to stay focused as they pushed past the trees. To the naked eye, the trunks looked like bark but they bent like rubber. Stranger still, other trees lifted themselves by the roots and moved aside before digging back down to embed themselves once more. It gave her shivers every time she saw it. The evolutionary biologists would have a field day with the data Cid transmitted. Combined with the soft, mossy ground and radio silence, Whiskey5 moved through the woods like a whisper.

Two km's from the coordinate the Achilles vectored them toward she opened her intercom. It made no sense to speak in a low voice, but she did. "Hold position, Ghost, and let us close up. I'll take point."

"Come on, Lieutenant." Ghost hissed with urgency. "The situation is completely unpredictable. The squad is better off exactly where you are."

"Hold position, Ghost. I'm taking point and that's it. If it makes you feel better, follow just behind me."

Trees began to thin and beyond lights flickered through the leaves and branches. A small clearing loomed. Solona halted and Whiskey5 pulled up. Ahead, in the flood of their lights, figures lay on the ground forming a circle, face down, heads and arms pointing inward. She estimated 40, maybe 45 in all. One stood up, stepping away to face them.

A short tunic draped its body made of a light, glittering, gossamer-like fabric that fluttered and rippled with the slightest breeze. Below it, bare thighs extended covered in feathers before giving way at the knees to a reptilian, scaly surface, terminating in clawed feet. Its torso, also covered in feathers, had leather straps crisscrossed over its chest bandolier-like with jeweled circlets riveted along their lengths. Large, baggy sleeves hung along its arms bare of any feathers and from which three-fingered, clawed hands with opposable thumbs extended. Its large, round head, covered in a feathery fuzz, had two black, circular eyes slit down the middle with irises that widened and narrowed. Two owl-like ears, stiff, upright, twitched beneath feathered wisps. A yellow beak extended from its face, hooked at the end, reminiscent of an eagle. When it blinked, a translucent tissue-thin fold slowly rolled down before rising again even slower. All in all, an imposing figure.

Its arms angled upward, and its chest feathers began to fluff and shiver. Cid opened a channel. "Lieutenant, a magnetic field has enveloped us. It is probing insi..."

Screens, devices, and boards went blank. Radios and intercoms fell silent. Cid became a frozen, metal heap.

Chapter 13



From the journal log of Li Yen Chou
Professor of Astrobiology
Dean, Guild Institute for Exoplanetology

Magnetic fields are invisible lines of force generated by natural phenomena such as a planet's magnetic field, lightning, and human activity which on Earth is mainly through the use of electricity. Because they are also an example of electromagnetism, data (like holograms, visuals, messaging) transmit along magnetic lines at the same speed as light, i.e., 299,792,458 meters/second.

Professor Chou turned away to bend down. Her hologram flickered and wavered. An aide exchanged whispers which grew more urgent as Chou asked, "Are you sure? Are you sure?" She straightened again, steadying the image, her expression equal parts astonishment and wonder. "I have two extraordinary developments, Captain. The mass spectrum computers finished their analysis of the magnetic field surrounding the Marines on the surface. Its source

are the aliens. They have tapped into the planet's magnetic field and are channeling and directing a portion. We detect no mechanical devices being used. They are doing it through their bodies.

"Secondly, the computers detected low-frequency pulses throughout the magnetic field. It is how the aliens are communicating with one another. We can hear down to 20hz. Whales down to 7hz and it is how they can hear one another across oceanic distances. These pulses are just above 1hz. The spectrum computers have automatic algorithms for sending alerts to our telescopes and listening dishes. When they recalibrated their frequencies, galaxies across the universe lit up. Mother Nature has selected one of the Universe's most ubiquitous forces as its communication mechanism of choice. We are an evolutionary anomaly."

The Achilles Bridge fell silent. Simone shook herself. Time enough to reflect on the enormous implications. Right now, she had Marines on a knife's edge. "Anything else, Professor?"

"Everything here has come to a stop. All the networks are carrying the feed. I think every vid screen across the world is tuned in. The aliens are communicating at the speed of light: 300 million m/s. That means their brains are processing at the same speed. We communicate at the speed of sound: 300 m/s. For better or worse, this young Lieutenant is representing humanity at first contact. She's going to have to have her wits about her. Good luck, Captain."

The link disconnected. Simone turned to Major Wild. "Is this the same Lieutenant that tapped Morse code?"

"Indeed it is, Captain."

"What's her name?"

"Stanton, Captain. Lieutenant Stanton."

"Stanton huh. Good name. What's her first name?" Wild's expression went blank.

"Solona. Lieutenant Solona Stanton."

"So...So...Solona?" Simone froze in place. Lungs refused to breathe. She felt her cheeks drain to white.

Heavy fog had rolled in ahead of the approaching storm. Solona looked down to make sure she had solid footing on the top rung. She had no desire to make a grand flop her introduction. Five steps from the bottom, having avoided a fall, she went for the entrance. Solona pushed off to make a graceful two-point landing.

Kreeln watched the metalwearer clamber out. Nimble, he thought. Like an agile bruku. And brave to come out its casing. Or foolish? Either would become apparent. He scanned her entirety. What could he identify as dangerous? No, he would not match its bravery. Or arrogance. Within the Unity, Jawen protected. It stepped closer. Revulsion swelled at its metal. His feathers fluffed and fluttered.

Solona's gaze switched to its clawed hands and feet. She shuddered. A full meter taller, it had to outweigh her by at least 100 kilos. A formidable opponent. And it's beak. Definitely, a meat eater. Solona stopped guessing how close would be rude. Her uniform's metal components pressed against her resisting further advance. Even the loose change in her pocket. She stopped, looking for any sign of a device. How did it do that?

The metalwearer stopped, again impressing Kreeln. Had it understood or did it mask its power? The other casings remained stilled within the Unity and made no attempt to break out. Why? He had witnessed the ease with which they had extinguished the Leader and his carrier. Kreeln clacked his beak in satisfaction. Jawen! Against the might of Jawen, what could metalwearers hope to do?

Its beak snapping shut startled Solona. A warning? The enormity of the moment threatened to overwhelm her. How old was it? How old its species? Had it once been a boy a girl? Did it play? What? What were its cities like, its language? Did they have democracy, vid screens, holo gaming rooms? None of the above, she thought. How could

she communicate with it? Think, Solona, think. She looked about. The sparse ground had only stones and plants. Stones!

She reached down, plucking a handful. Did it read left to right, right to left, up and down? She shrugged, bending down to place one stone before it, then looked up to nod her head up and down. With one finger she scratched a '+' sign, placed two stones on the ground, and nodded again. Three more stones followed an '=' sign before she stood up, nodded, and waited.

Kreeln studied the ground scratchings before his eyes rolled upward to take in the metalwearer, who bobbed her head up and down. Disbelief crowded out other reactions. He summoned the Deepest in Time who rose to stand by him. "What do you see on the ground? The Deepest needed only seconds.

"Either the childish numeration of a nestling or a primitive attempt to communicate."

"I concur. If I had not seen their capabilities and carriers, I would ignore it."

"I counsel caution, Lord Kreeln, but let us join the play to see what it reveals."

Another Gorlaun rose, gathered six stones, and handed them to Kreeln. He bent down, placed three stones on the ground, scratched the Gorlaun minus sign, placed two stones after it, duplicated the metalwearer's equal sign, then placed one stone. When he rose, the three bobbed their heads up and down.

Solona stared in astonishment. The clever response indicated they had more than understood. None expressed anything vocally but had left no doubt of their synchronized collaboration. Good. Now for 'no'. Combined with 'yes', o's and 1's would be established. And hopefully trust.

Slow and deliberate, her hand unholstered the sidearm. She grabbed it by the barrel, looked up, and shook her head side-to-side, no. She grabbed it upside down by the handle and again shook her head, no. A few more variations followed before Solona assumed a proper grip, curled a finger around the trigger, and nodded up and down. Pointing toward a large stone, she fired, shattering the rock. Bending down, Solona placed the automatic on the ground, made a show of pointing it away from the aliens, then stepped back, bowing with arms spread.

"I counsel restraint, Lord Kreeln. The metalwearer cannot know how repulsive such a brazen display of metal is." said the Deepest in Time.

"I concur, Lord Kreeln. I have seen this physical mannerism before. Among the Bruul, it is an act of supplication and humility." the aide added. "And let us not forget our own recent experience with arrogance. It is an opportunity, Lord Kreeln."

"Very well. You may resume your places." A slow blink closed Kreeln's eyes. Then another even slower. He did not have a hard decision to make. Enemies beset Gorlaun from every direction. The ruthless Cracmlan, the savage Sakliere, the devious Marjlns. And the innumerable, insufferable Aentii who did nothing but nip at their toe claws.

The Bepores had bequeathed them worlds upon worlds. And their beaksore. The Gorlaun had searched long and hard for an ally. None had proved trustworthy. Now, in this out of the way, uncharted backwater, while harvesting Gwarlni, the source of their wealth and strength, they had uncovered a race that not only encased themselves in metal but wore it.

Kreeln shuddered. Jawen only knew how the Gorlaun could overcome their repugnance. Still, he had seen their weapons and carriers. Kreeln suspected much more lay beneath the air. So be it. He would show this metalwearer the power of Unison. And his trust.

Solona waited. Confused by their behaviors. They did not have any. Or at least did not show any. How did they communicate? Not with sound. At least nothing she could hear. She would not allow impatience. Her sister believed she would out do her. Well then, she would wait. Without warning, two aliens retreated to lay once again face down and stretch their arms inward. The third locked those eerie eyes on her. Solona suppressed a shiver and remained impassive. Her heart pounded so hard she thought it would burst its moorings. But preventing her eyes from widening proved impossible.

The gun rose in the air and pointed toward her. She watched it cock and the trigger pull back. Eyes closed, she

stepped back in reflex. A second later she heard the blast but felt nothing. An ominous sign. Bad wounds so traumatized the body it felt nothing.

She opened her eyes to see the bullet suspended before her. It dropped to the ground. Beyond, the alien nodded its head up and down.

Simone had no time to bask in the glory of having a family again. No time for the joy of finding her daughter. Lieutenant Ndungu turned to her, his expression drained of color. "Captain, my sensors have picked up at least 5,000 objects 800,000km aft, moving under power, on an intercept course, less than 25 minutes ETA."

Simone rose from her seat. "Gunny?"

"Confirmed, Captain. I cannot track all of them until the Gaussian engines engage."

"Full power, Helm. Bring us about. Keep only life support. Lieutenant Davis, alert the fleet. Lieutenant Ndungu, sound Red Alert."

Simone strode toward the forward view window, staring into the void beyond. An armada approached. Come ahead. And learn the fury of a mother bear defending her cub.

Chapter 14



Solona stooped to lift the spent bullet. Events had shoved reflection aside but now it banged the door. Her gaze lifted, eying the being before her. With only the briefest demonstration of a device never seen, it had grasped its functionality in seconds. Without touching the weapon, the alien had operated it with the deftness of a sharpshooter. It could infer, foresee, and predict. Pointing the weapon at her and firing proved it. She marveled at a biological power capable of stopping a bullet mid-flight. Earth faced, and would have to reckon with, a formidable rival, ally, or enemy.

Enemies? Solona stood at the intersection point of two galactic civilizations. She shook off the implications lest they overwhelm her. So far, so good, she told herself. The alien understood she could have killed it and it had deliberately declined to kill her.

Reflection banged harder. The enormity of their communication gap struck. Yes and No translated well to 1's and 0's but data exchange did not begin to address the complexity of language. How could she convey the concept of 'why'? Their respective body languages had no common reference point and indeed the aliens might not have one. Even so, she had made a conscious effort not to smile. A race with no teeth might consider it a threat.

Before Solona could solve Babel's Tower, the prone aliens rose as one, moving at a walk/run out of the woods. Her automatic, still suspended in the air, turned to allow an easy re-grip. Solona's eyes widened hearing the safety

click. The Leader's head swiveled upward, staring at the sky. After a moment, his gaze returned to fix hers. Arms spread from his sides and rose before lowering again. It nodded once, twice, then became a still, unmoving statue.

Solona could not escape the thought it had just communicated something. What? Their custom for signaling goodbye? She did not want to duplicate the gesture and appear stupid if it meant something else. And now it just stood there, as if waiting for a response, irises narrowed to slits, moving her to unease. Think Solona, think.

Her head snapped to where the others had faded into the woods. The direction led to their ships. Slow and deliberate, her gaze swiveled back. Of course! Its ancestors had feathered flight. The gesture conveyed imminent takeoff. Solona nodded in return. The leader turned to melt into the trees. Behind her, Mech lights lit and turbines whined as they powered up. Her helmet's audio crackled.

"Lieutenant Stanton? Solona? Can you hear me? Are you alright?" Solona fought down her emotions.

"Yes, mother. I'm alright. Listen to me. Can you track the group moving away from my position? Specifically, one individual who is closing the distance to the others? An interminable pause ensued. Solona shook with impatience.

"Yes. We are tracking both."

"Mother, that one individual is their leader. You must maintain a lock on him. They are about to takeoff. Unless he attacks, and I suspect he won't, do not fire on him, mother. Repeat. Do not fire on him."

"Takeoff is not possible. We destroyed their ships."

"Nonetheless, they are about to take flight. I have connected with their leader. Do not underestimate them, mother." Another interminable pause. This time the voice held no motherly concern.

"Roger, understood, Lieutenant Stanton. Stand by for extraction."

Kreeln and his clerics emerged from the forest, stopping halfway across the clearing. Wisps still smoked from strewn wreckage as three Battle Carriers rocketed from orbit, vectored to their position. Armed escorts leapt out even before touching ground, racing toward them. The Commander stopped with a bow. "Lord Vicar Kreeln. Lord Magistrate Boorlum sends greetings and his sorrows for the Lord Minister's death. We are to escort you to the fleet's Prime Carrier where he awaits your pleasure. The attack will commence once you are aboard."

"Very well, Commander. Lead the way."

"Lord Vicar, we have achieved orbital escape."

Kreeln released his restraints, striding toward the carrier's forward viewport. "Do not rejoin the fleet, Commander. Do you have unidentified carriers on your locator?"

"Indeed, Lord Vicar. Five at standoff distance."

"Maneuver toward a position between them and the fleet."

"Lord Vicar. I have orders to escort you to the Lord High Magistrate aboard his carrier." Kreeln turned, torso feathers ruffling, letting the silence build. The Commander wilted, signaling his pilot.

"By your wish, Lord Vicar." Kreeln turned toward the viewport.

"Link the viewport to the Prime Carrier, Commander. Inform the Lord High Magistrate I wish to speak with him."

Events had prevented Kreeln from appreciating the full impact of the Lord High Minister's death. Gorlaun had long ago dispensed with the corrupt bureaucracy and sclerotic inefficiencies of large congressional bodies. Two persons, elected by the Gorlauni, ruled Gorlaun. One, the Magistrate, made and executed policy. The Minister, if in

agreement, funded the policy. Both served 6-year terms with three years separating the respective election cycles. On election, both had to agree to a Lord Vicar, responsible for upholding the cultural and historical traditions of Gorlaun and who could declare any initiative by the other two, incompatible with established customs.

Kreeln had no doubt, the Lord High Magistrate would move with alacrity to fill the power vacuum. Against invading aliens, Gorlaun's entire confederation would unite behind him.

The viewport swiped to opaque then glimmered as the Lord High Magistrate came into focus. Morlbur's expression twisted, prepared to shout and accuse. He stopped, realizing Kreeln had harnessed the sea of magnetic lines they floated within to attune the entire fleet to their conversation.

"Lord Vicar. You have not rejoined the fleet. And have placed yourself in a rather unorthodox position. A dangerous one. Explain yourself."

"I am not here to explain myself, Lord Magistrate, but to explain your situation. I counsel the immediate withdrawal of the fleet." Pregnant silence.

"Mind your place, Lord Vicar. You may advocate for the customs and practices of Gorlaun but you may not question my actions and policies."

"The customs and practices of Gorlaun will fall away to nothing if we cannot defend them. You have no idea the power you face. Turn the fleet around, Lord Magistrate, and return home. Or you will have no fleet left with which to defend Gorlaun."

"You refer to the metal carriers beyond?"

"Indeed." A deeper silence ensued.

"I cannot let the killing of a Minister go unanswered. That, is, Gorlaun practice."

"I, my priests, and crew performed Unison on the planet below. Jawen has sent the allies we have searched for."

Morlbur trembled and shook. Torso feathers ruffled and fluffed. He strained for composure.

"Alliance? With things encased in metal?"

The words hung in the void. Morlbur's eyes narrowed to slits, boring into Kreeln's. "Let all be witness to the blasphemy a Lord Vicar espouses."

"We are beset on all sides by enemies intent on erasing our existence. The winds have blown far since our people have known peace. We yearn for it. Jawen has heard and answered. Ours is not to die like Boorlken at the feet of those Jawen has sent."

"Let those who remain true to Gorlaun's customs follow me to face these unspeakable killers and not shame the traditions of our Before." The link terminated.

With Morlbur leading, five hundred elite carriers separated from the fleet. Kreeln's head swiveled across the viewport to the metal carriers. One advanced to face the battle group. One. Ignoring the ominous portent and confident of the odds, Morlbur accelerated. Kreeln turned to his priests. "Many Gorlauni are about to die. Let us remember this day that we may pass it to our Afters. The moment of our greatest courage was our greatest stupidity."

Simone's control panel blinked red. Lieutenant Ndungu's calm voice carried across the Bridge. "Five hundred ships advancing to intercept, Captain. Their weapons systems are active."

"Gunny, do you still have that one ship locked out of our firing solutions?"

"Aye, Captain."

"Expand the lock to include its two companions."

"Lock expanded, Captain."

Simone tapped across the panel, linking in the other four Captains. "Remain at Red Alert but hold your positions. I want to make as clear as possible the futility of continued fighting. Should anything happen to us, Captain Morisu will assume command. If we lose three ships, the remaining two are to retreat to our system and anchor the defense of Earth. Any questions?" Not a one. Captain Morisu keyed in.

"God speed, Captain Stanton. Good luck."

"One quarter Gauss to 10,000km and hold for maneuver, Lieutenant Eisen. Shields up, lock on targets, Gunny. Fire on my command, thereafter, fire at will. Message fleet headquarters, Lieutenant Davis. We advance on the enemy. Battle stations, Lieutenant Ndungu."

Turrets swiveling, tubes opening, the Achilles flashed forward. Simone did not wait for an enemy salvo. "Fire at will, Gunny."

Shields flickered as the Achilles' bow spit six torpedoes, then six more and six again. From starboard and port, torpedoes rocketed past the shield boundaries turning to follow behind bow missiles now seconds from targets. Aft tubes fired salvo after salvo creating a third wave closing on ships evading the first.

An AI, programmed with diabolical accuracy, laser-targeted ships maneuvering for evasive action. Bolts of red light sliced open ships, severed others into separate halves, disemboweling interiors into the airless void. Shattered ships spun out of control into the planet's gravity well, spilling live and dead occupants behind them.

All the while, plasma wisps marked where ion torpedoes had reduced entire ships to quantum molecules. Some missiles plinked against the Achilles' shields pockmarking it with impact points that glowed and faded. Most fell to defensive turrets swiveling with wild abandon as bolt after bolt seared missiles into exploded debris.

Simone watched the torpedo count descend toward zero. She needed to give Munitions time to reload. "Maneuver into the fleet, Lieutenant Eisen." Now the Gorlauni faced the added complexity of firing at their own even as the Achilles, surrounded by targets, brought all its lasers to bear. The fusillade became a light show of death as the decimated fleet raced toward disintegration.

Reload complete, tubes opened to release their assassins. Like Cheetahs on the open Savannah they raced after ships fleeing for survival. For the briefest of moments, a cloud of ignited quantum plasma flashed brilliant, marking the passage of life into nothingness.

Turrets stopped. Tubes sealed. Around the Achilles, nothing moved. Nothing had escaped.

"Cease fire, Gunny." Simone kept a wary eye on the massive alien fleet still at standoff distance. If they advanced, she would have to withdraw to a support position and let the remaining Battle Cruisers carry the fight.

"Captain, the one ship I have locked out is coming about and advancing." Simone flipped a switch, noting its slow, unaggressive stance.

"Take it off lockout, Gunny, but do not target."

At 2,000km it stopped. Everyone stared as it began to nod up and down. "What the hell? What are they doing?" Simone asked.

Behind her, entry doors whooshed open. Solona stepped onto the Bridge. "It wants to communicate. Nod back, mother."

"Lieutenant Eisen?"

He turned. Puzzlement etched his face as he pondered how to make an Achilles-class Battle Cruiser nod. A light went off and a grin lit his eyes.

"Aye, Captain. One nod coming up."

Chapter 15



Solona placed the comm unit on the side table, leaning back into the chair, staring at the ceiling's pipes and wiring. Exhaling a loud breath, her eyes welled. The message line's official court notification had set her heart pounding. "You have exceeded my wildest expectation. You can be proud of what you have accomplished. I certainly am and accordingly have ordered your court case permanently sealed." She had stared at the presiding judge's signature, recalling drug induced euphorias. And the men.

It did confirm what she had begun to suspect. Anonymity had vanished. Every ten minutes, networks across the system splashed her picture. Where could she go and not be recognized? Solona wanted to be remembered but felt indifferent to fame or celebrity.

Fleet Headquarters, in response to a massive media swell, shut off all communication with the Achilles and the Marines sent a PR team from their Communications and Public Affairs Office to groom her for the onslaught when she returned to Jupiter in three days. She frowned recalling one media specialist saying she would teach Solona how to smile. The frenzy had reached ridiculous.

A hunger pang hinted at food. Good idea, she thought. Being among normal people in the galley would help. The doorbell rang. Solona stood rock still in the doorway taking in Admiral Simone Stanton, Captain of the U.S.S. Achilles, her mother. Simone gave her a shy smile. "Hi, Solona. How are you?"

"Gr, great, mom. And you?"

"I'm fine." Her smile broadened. Seconds passed.

"Oh my gosh. Where are my manners? Come on in, mom. Please."

Solona rushed about gathering things lying about, stuffing them into any drawer. She turned, facing her mother again, one hand behind her back.

It's okay, it's okay, Solona. I wear them too." Solona giggled.

"Yeah. I guess."

Each looked away, Simone at the room, Solona at the floor. Both smiled as they caught one another's gaze again. "Well, you've had some excitement."

"Yeah. Aliens. Who would've thought?" Frozen smiles faced one another.

"It's good to see you, mom." Simone cleared her throat.

"I brought something with me."

She retrieved her comm unit, tapping on its screen before holding it out. "It's the citation for tomorrow's ceremony. I wrote it myself and wanted you to see it before anyone else."

For exceptionally meritorious service and flawless standards of personal excellence in an uncertain and unprecedented situation for which no guidelines existed, 1st Lieutenant Solona Stanton is recognized for actions consistent with the highest and most honored military traditions.

Lieutenant Stanton's deep intelligence, sharp wits, superb adaptability, and astonishing capacity to improvise reflect both her commitment and attention to detail as well as her character and integrity.

Lieutenant Stanton's technical and tactical competence led to a bridge being formed between two galactic civilizations whose impact will be felt by all for centuries to come.

As a result of Lieutenant Stanton's unswerving commitment to duty, honor, and country, she is immediately promoted to the rank of Captain, entitled to and richly deserving of, all the benefits attached thereto.

signed:

Admiral Simone Stanton

Captain Commanding, USS Achilles

Solona could no longer see the screen through welling tears. She looked up to a smiling Simone. "I meant every word." The doorbell rang. Wiping her eyes, Solona stepped over to open it.

"Surprise!" In poured her crew, hugging and backslapping. The door closed to reveal a quiet Simone. Ghost straightened and cried out.

"Ten Hut."

"No, no, no. At ease." She smiled at the group and looked at Solona. "We'll talk. Good luck tomorrow." Before anyone could react, she exited the room. Solona stared at the closed door then thrust her hands outward toward the crew.

"Stay right here. Give me a minute. I'll be right back." She burst through the door looking down one empty corridor then the other. "Mom?" Simone stopped and turned.

Hair flying behind her, Solona raced down the hall. Simone opened her arms. Long, deep moments ticked and tocked as they clung to one another. Sobs rocked Solona's body as the dam burst. When she pulled away, Simone's

gentle fingers wiped a cheek. She recalled a time opening the front door to find her bawling daughter holding a scraped knee. Her cries intensified when Simone tried to clean it. She stood up, arms akimbo.

"Do you want me to make it stop hurting?"

"Yeah."

"Are you my brave girl?"

"Yeah."

"Then you have to stop crying."

Solona's voice trembled. "I wasn't awkward inside, mom. It was guilt for all the days, weeks, months, and years I spent hating you. It consumed me." Her voice broke. Tears flowed. "I realize now I had to go through that. It allowed me to reclaim all the love I have for you. I love you, mom. I'll never be able to explain how deep it is."

"I love you, Solona. I always have. With all my heart and soul. You are my very brave daughter."

"Oh, mom." Solona straightened, smiling through tears. "But now I am also a Stanton."

Epilogue

Simone had no idea how prophetic and portentous her citation's words would be. The meeting of two galactic civilizations reverberated for centuries. Slowly at first, Gaurhani culture reached into every corner of human society. Earth's swamped theirs. Both societies underwent tremendous upheavals.

Most prominent, the historical curiosity of ancient Rome's failed experiment with two Consuls underwent an intense re-examination once the Gaurhani variation became known. Its organic ability to check the prerogatives of the other sounded the death knell for sclerotic, wasteful, corrupt legislative bodies. Within a century, they disappeared. Freed of the politicians' unquenchable thirst to impose, restrict, and limit, human ingenuity exploded.

Gaurhani intellects, however, proved most astonishing. And revealing. Once Earth's computers deciphered the Gaurhani language's system of magnetic pulses, cultural exchanges swelled.

At first, Earth could not send its massive accumulation of literary works to Gaurhani fast enough. A Gaurhani could absorb a full-length, translated novel within seconds. But during Gaurhani's first official visit to Earth, a reporter asked the Chief Diplomat if he had a favorite book. His response threw Earth's astrobiological community into a furor. "I thought the Wizard of Oz a delightful tale and hope to visit Oz during my stay here." His answer to the follow-up deepened the bewilderment. "Why would you write about something that does not exist?"

Having no access to higher order sentience for comparison, bias had clouded the analyses of Earth's scientists. Like people, intelligence came in all shapes and sizes. Nature had evolved an ability to communicate across extended distances and absorb huge quantities of data at the speed of light. It formed a massive component of the Gaurhani brain that crowded out everything else and came with a price. The Gaurhani mind had no imagination. They could only process the 'what is' of reality not the 'what might be'. They made logical inferences with aplomb and effortless ease, but the leaps of imagination that fueled human creativity proved beyond them.

Two centuries passed. Connections and links between the two peoples strengthened and deepened. The Gaurhani marveled at human technology and viewed it as almost magical. Exposed to Earth's dizzying array of sciences, the now legendary Gaurhani capacity for logical inferences rocketed. Coupled to humanity's boundless innovations, a golden age of technological wonder and prosperity ensued.

With mastery of nuclear fusion, power availability became global and so cheap residences at all municipal levels no longer paid for it. Everybody carried personal communicators that could open gates to anywhere or place an individual within a magnetic bubble that levitated onto a magnetic line for any distance at speed. Both planetary empires leaped past Kardashev Type I civilizations zeroing in on Type II statuses.

But neither world took note when a young Gaurhani bioengineer arrived on Jupiter to begin post-graduate studies. Six months after absorbing humanity's accumulated knowledge of genetic evolution, he began writing his research thesis. A logical inference struck. He deduced a way to re-wire the Gaurhani brain. A mind capable of absorbing near limitless amounts of data now had a limitless imagination.

Within two generations, humanity no longer faced an advanced civilization but a species of superior beings.

The End

Author's Note

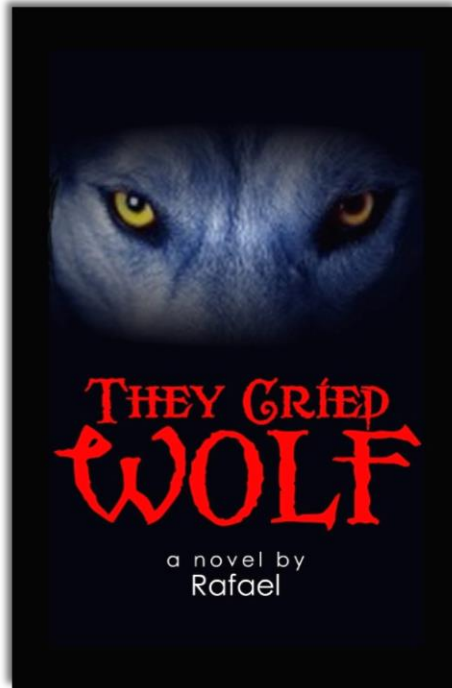
As a storyteller, I endeavor mightily to create vivid worlds filled with characters that enthrall, excite, and entertain. As a novelist, I strive to bring you the reader moments to ponder and reflect on the human condition. I pray *Descent* succeeded on both counts.

If you did find *Descent* a grand adventure, please scroll further. I have crafted my full-length novels with equal care, imagination, and take great pride in making them inventive, unique, and non-derivative. And do come visit me at

<http://www.readersofrafael.com>

We love having guests. Finally, in a world of instant on and instant access, reading takes time. Thank you for giving me yours. It is a precious resource.

Rafael



Along with a stunned nation, Diego Constance gapes at the newscast. A frantic evacuation escalates, as a virulent contagion dissolves Midwesterners by the tens of thousands. It confirms the staggering betrayal he's uncovered. His boss, the President of the United States, is responsible. Masked by an engineered calamity, the President has maneuvered a panicked congress into granting him dictatorial powers. A psychopath has slipped past the American electorate.

Despite legal constraints, Diego remains the President's weapon of choice against national security threats. Killing however takes a toll and makes for a lonely life. Without family or friends, Diego longs for an end to his solitary existence. But first his scarred soul must once more descend into a violent darkness.

A despot grips freedom's throat. With each passing hour the stranglehold tightens. Whatever the cost, tyranny cannot stand. Diego steels himself. The bloodlust swells. He will confront the most powerful, the most guarded man on earth. Diego's cunning, hardened by a brutal lifetime, guarantees nothing.

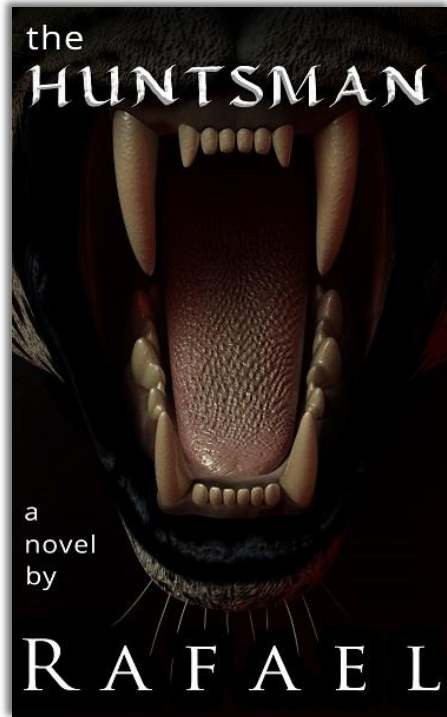
What no one knows, not even the President...the Executive Assassin is a werewolf.



Lauren Danielle Carson's hours old Presidency has just crashed and burned. A classified report details what many have long conjectured. During her first term, a unified Africa will surpass the United States as the world's preeminent superpower. Her legacy will be the President on whose watch America joined history's also-rans.

Desperate to reverse a decades-long decline, committees, panels, experts, meetings, storm sessions fill her days and nights. Every effort to forestall the inevitable reaches a dead end. Slowly, inexorably, options diminish. When one remains, she faces the horrific, the unthinkable.

Fate has intertwined two mirrored lives. She is white. He is black. She leads a nation. He conquered a continent. Her story is the present, his lies in the past. He begins as a brutal warlord and ends up beloved and cheered. She begins beloved and cheered and ends up a despised outcast. She will destroy his achievements and, in the act, destroy herself.

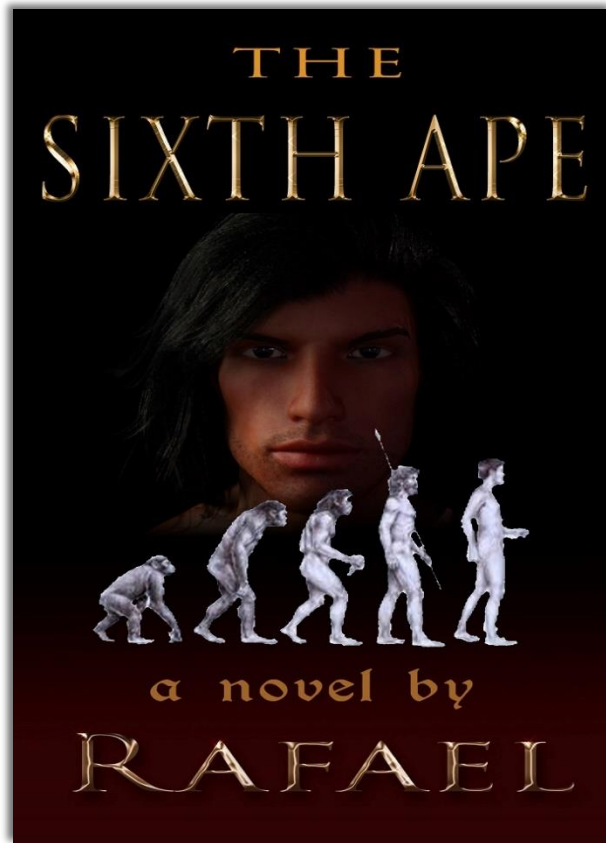


Millennia ago, Sorkens desperate to escape the Milky Way's savagery, settled into our nondescript, out-of-the-way star group. Unaware of Earth, a shockwave spreads across their world when humanity ignites its first wormhole.

Miranda Logan, star zoologist, cannot imagine the coming vortex that will sweep away her sheltered life. Led by a brutal crime lord, vicious warfare erupts among factions determined to control mankind's gateway to the stars. All are oblivious to what an electro-magnetic beacon blaring across the galaxy implies.

Panicked, the Sorken Council re-authorizes a long-forbidden wormhole to send a Warrior Priestess. Before galactic wolves track the scent, she must destroy the device and everyone possessed of its knowledge.

Fate however has other cards to play. The Sorkens will discover Earth's dominant life form has a trait unique in the galaxy and Miranda will face her own revelation: the Huntsman too seeks the device.



Preeminent biologist, Philippe Krause, only wants to share his discovery with the world. The world has forced him to become a killer. The day he looked up from a microscope knowing DNA had revealed the secret to genetic immortality, he began plans for a press conference to announce the discovery, and his desire for all humanity to have it at no cost. No future generation would ever know old age or disease.

His naivete lasts ten minutes. The moment he makes such an announcement a veil of secrecy will descend on him so black light could not escape. The government that controls mankind's DNA, controls the world. They will stop at nothing to obtain it.

But Philippe will not be denied his dream and so begins thirty years of preparation. He will de-fang the world's major powers, Great Britain, Russia, France, China, the United States from any ability to move against him by first destroying their clandestine strike forces. The stage is set. For the first time in history, the most powerful men ever to exist are about to appear: four genetically altered assassins.

Note: This novel can only be obtained, at no cost, through the website. Please visit the Library page of <http://www.readersofrafael.com> for details.

