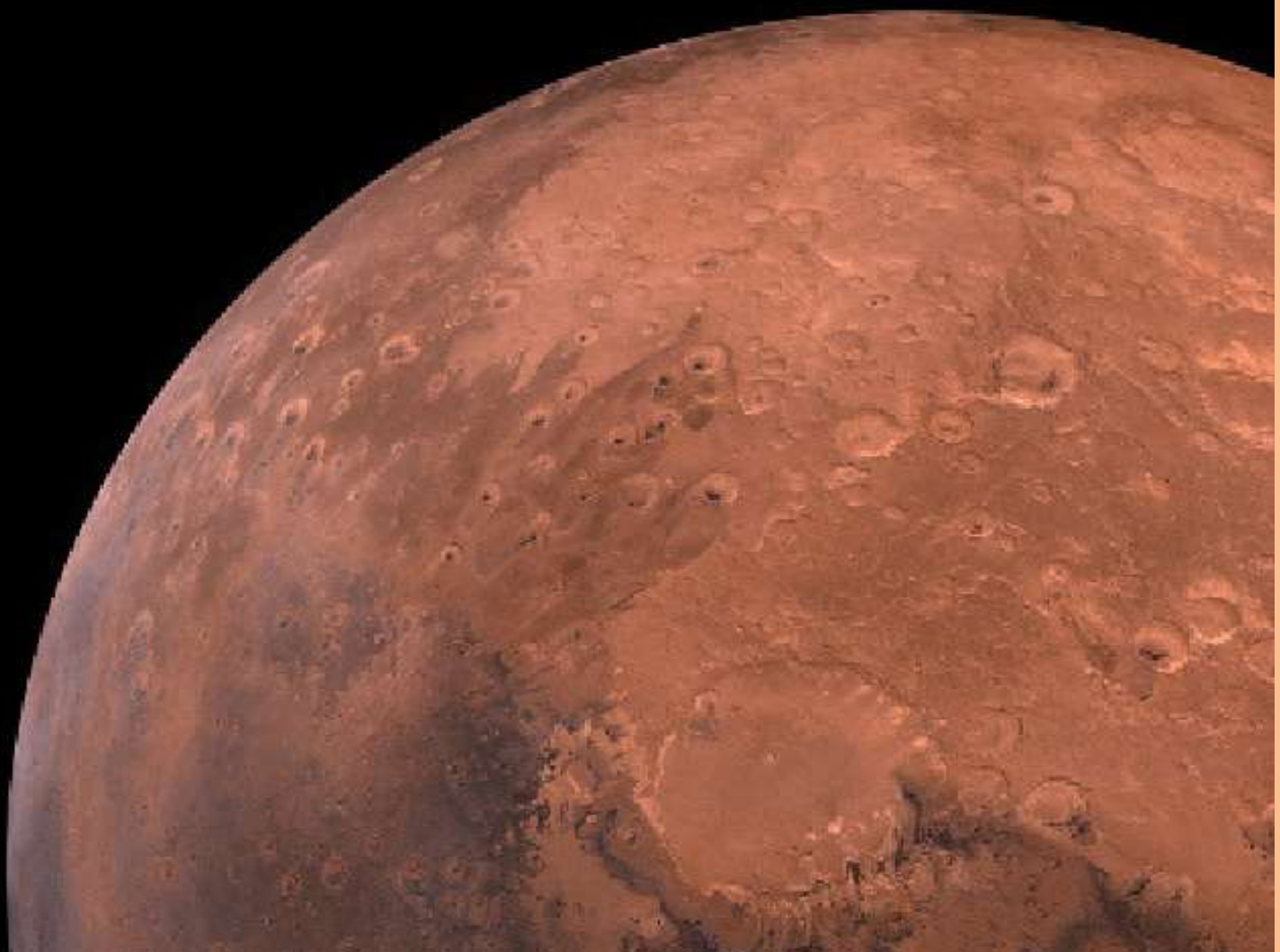


THE LOST TRIBES

This is a full length novel of a Navy Petty Officer and his space adventures.

By Phil Smith



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Part I

1. The Face of Mars

Stax was hypnotized by the beauty of the valley before him. He kicked at the rock, sending it down the cliff wall. Its descent spurred others to follow in its wake, turning what was initially a single item into a sizable slide. He soon lost sight of the soundless cavalcade and its journey to the valley floor. His eyes moved over to an ancient river bed, which once carried precious water to the valley. Who knows, he thought, perhaps the canyon was once a large lake. He turned, walking dangerously close to the crest of the escarpment, making his way back toward the camp. It was one of the most beautiful days he had yet seen on Mars. The temperature was a high 22 degrees Celsius. He bent down, running his fingers through the fine red laden soil. Iron oxide granules varied in size from a tiny pinprick to a pebble.

Everything about this dusty red landscape, the towering volcano, and its bottomless gorges so captivated Stax. Born and raised in New Zealand, his father American, Stax followed in his dad's footprints and joined the Navy. He often forgot about schedules, responsibilities and his own duties. Admittedly he encouraged this escapism, partly due to his Kiwi upbringing. Now, a New Zealander knew how to relax, he thought. But then his attitude also had something to do with the continuous hounding the officers gave him. Even now he was hesitant to leave his dreamworld state not wanting to ruin the mood he had created for himself. Oh, the great outdoors. That's what he loved about Mars, like New Zealand, beautiful and unspoiled.

He then thought about their return trip which would be in a matter of days. Their study of the great Chasm had also come to an end. The ship would make one last stop at the pyramid mountain face and then head back to Earth. Sometimes Stax wished that his stay would never end.

Taking time to adjust his breathing mask, his heart sank as he noticed that his communications unit was off. The exec. would be furious with him.

Quickly switching it on, a blast of cursing hit him, "Wildson where in the sam-hell have you been?"

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That reminded him of another reason why he hated the Navy so much. No one ever had enough vocabulary to speak more than two words without the insertion of a derogatory remark. "I must have lost track of time, sir. I'm returning to the ship now." He signed off hoping there would be no further reply. In the light Martian gravity, it would take him a quarter of an hour, perhaps, to return, that is if he ran. But at that moment, he felt the ground give way beneath him. Within seconds, face down, he found himself lying against the newly formed chasm wall. His heart pounded heavily as he waited for the red dust to settle. He could see the edge above only meters away. Reaching up caused him to slide further. The thought of the eight-kilometer drop sent a chill through him. He lay now thinking instead of acting. One moment, he was in just a little trouble for being late but now he was in a lot of trouble. His hand was near the communications unit. If I could only reach the switch, he thought. Laboriously he brought his hand toward the switch which sent him sliding a half meter. Lightly he pressed the button, "Base, this is Yeoman Wildson."

"Why haven't you returned Wildson?" A reply came.

"I'm in trouble, sir," Wildson spoke softly fearing that he would start sliding again.

"This had better be good, Wildson. You're already in trouble again with Commander Owens." Major Williams seemed to smile through the communication unit enjoying Wildson's misery.

"I've had a bit of an accident. Part of the canyon wall gave way and I'm now lying against it. Every time I move I slide just a little further down," Stax said trying to keep calm.

"Tell me your exact location." The Officer was more serious now.

"I'm near the look out. You'll see the depression of a fresh slip. I'm a couple of meters over the side."

"We're on our way," the reply came.

Stax waited. Minutes passed. He tried to think of anything and everything except where he was.

"Do you hear me, Wildson?" Commander Owens called. He, along with several officers had arrived.

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“I hear you sir.” Stax was aware that someone was moving up to him from the opposite side.

“I’m right behind you,” the Lieutenant then said. “Stay very still.”

Stax felt a click as the Lieutenant attached a rope to his utility belt.

“Okay, the rope is connected to him now, Commander.”

Stax felt the upward tug pulling him over the top. Moments later he was sitting on the ground relieved from being out of a potentially fatal situation.

“How are you, Wildson?” The Commander was obviously concerned.

“I’m fine now sir,” Stax replied.

“After you get back to the ship and get cleaned up, see me in my office,” he ordered.

“Yes sir.” It would be another telling off.

He received his dressing down that evening and was assigned extra duties on top of the extra duties he had already gotten from a previous incident. He stood at attention while Captain Owens expressed disappointment in his work, appearance, attitude and just about everything else about him.

“I didn’t want you on this expedition in the first place Wildson,” he heard the commander say for at least the 100th time. “I did everything possible to keep you off but the political powers wanted it differently. You’ve been nothing but trouble. You’re a disgrace to the uniform you wear. I don’t understand how you ever passed the psychological test for this trip.”

“But sir...”

“You speak only when given permission, Wildson! And you don’t have permission. I can’t demote you or toss you over board, but I can make life hell for you and I can work you till you drop. I promise you that after returning to Earth, I’ll do everything possible that my rank affords me to punish you for the endless trouble you’ve caused everyone on this ship. Now proceed to Engineering, Major Williams will have a number of off watch jobs for you to do. You are dismissed, Mr.!”

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“Yes Sir!” Stax did an about face and left the Commander’s quarters. The Commander was correct, his hands were tied. He couldn’t do anything to him now as long as he didn’t do any kind of treasonable act. He had read the regulations and so far the Commander had never brought that point up, yet! He was happy about that, but if Stax pushed him far enough who knew what he would try.

“Bad this time, hey?” Julie looked at Stax sadly.

“I hate that man. He can’t ever acknowledge anything that I do or the help that I’ve given everybody since this trip began. I’ve collated thousands of pieces of information, gone out of my way to help the scientists whenever they’ve needed help,” he carried on while Julie stood listening.

“But admit it, you’ve done some stupid things haven’t you?” She laughed.

“Well, possibly a few,” Stax also smiled.

“More than a few. What about that unauthorized walk just before the ship was preparing to take off?”

“But none of the officers ever let me out of their sight. I hate it here,” Stax defended himself.

“You knew it would be like this. Just by the fact that you’re an enlisted person. All the rest are Naval, Army or Air Force officers.” Julie continued, “What was your job description again?”

“Yeoman, 2nd Class,” he answered the question that had been asked a thousand times by her and others.

“You’re a Yeoman. You’re not supposed to be walking outside or making passes at the women officers or scientists,” Julie smiled again, “but I have to say one thing, you have a knack for upsetting the Commander. What did you do this time?”

“Well, besides falling off a cliff, I told one of the Lieutenant’s where to stuff it. And it wasn’t his sock,” Stax said as his anger started to rise again.

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“Why did you do that? Surely, you weren’t able to do that back on Earth were you?” she asked.

“Not on your life. They would have put me in the brig. No, they probably would have court-marshaled me and then put me under the prison,” Stax said.

“Then, why do you do it here?” Julie asked.

“Because they treat me like trash. I’m supposed to be part of a mission, just like everyone else. But in their eyes, I’m nothing but a misfit. They hate me and I hate them. You people are the only ones that appreciate anything that I do. At least most of you.”

“Well, I’ve got work to do. Try to stay out of trouble. It’ll all soon be over.” Julie walked away.

“Try to stay out of trouble,” Stax mimicked. “Now she’s talking to me as if I’m a little kid.”

“Yeoman Wildson, report to the Chief Engineer, immediately.” The blast came over the loud speaker.

“Oh no,” Stax said hurrying down the corridor. As he rounded a corner, he ran smack into Lieutenant Looves, the Lieutenant that he had told off earlier. “Sorry Sir. I didn’t see you, sir.”

“That’s because you weren’t looking where you’re going, Wildson,” the Lieutenant said, brushing out the wrinkles from his suit.

“Yes sir; I mean, no sir.” Stax stood at semi attention until the officer walked away. After the officer was out of sight, he took off again. He then came up to the Chief Engineer’s door, knocked and waited.

“Enter,” the voice said from inside.

Opening the hatch, Stax stepped into the office.

“You’re late Wildson. The Commander released you twenty minutes ago. Where have you been?” The Chief demanded.

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“I bumped into one of the civilians who wanted to know about some reports,” he lied.

“You should have excused yourself. They’ve now been informed that they are to refer any questions they have about your duties to an officer,” the Chief said.

“I wasn’t aware of that, sir.” Stax said angrily.

“You’re aware of it now. We’ll be leaving in a couple of days. Your duties are hereby changed to cleaning the entire ship with this tooth brush. You will stand no more watches, you’ll have nothing to do or say with any of the civilians unless specifically ordered to do so. Do you understand those orders, Yeoman Wildson?”

“No sir, I don’t understand.” Stax replied back.

“What do you mean Wildson? Can’t you hear?” the Chief asked.

“I hear perfectly, sir. I just don’t understand?” Stax said evenly.

“Your smart mouth has already got you into more than enough trouble. If we had a brig on this ship, you would be in it now. But since we don’t, keep your mouth shut, do what you’re told. Do you understand that?” The Chief Engineer was becoming upset.

“I acknowledge your order but I don’t understand it.” Stax still wouldn’t back down.

The Chief silently gazed at Wildson with open hostility. He slowly placed the tooth brush on the desk in front of Stax. “Take that brush and clean the corridor. Do not use any water. Do it now Yeoman Wildson.”

“Yes sir.” Stax took the tooth brush and did an about face and left the cabin.

He went about his cleaning, centimeter by centimeter. For two hours every officer chewed him out with the exception of the Air Force Major. Captain Lake hardly had ever said anything to him. Obviously word had gotten out. Most of the civilians only nodded as they passed except for one or two.

A trip of a life time, now turned into a trip of misery, just because some gun ho officers couldn’t see past the bars on their shoulders. Once the ship leaves Mars, they’ll probably try to do everything they can to me, he thought. But, then again, this expedition was the first of its

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kind. They would all return as heroes. No, they would reprimand, perhaps bust him one pay grade or even toss him out of the Navy. And that's what they wanted anyway. He resumed his cleaning until he heard the summons to report to the supply officer. Probably more cleaning to do, he thought to himself.

"Yes Sir, you called for me?" Stax asked the Army Colonel in charge of all equipment on the ship.

"You've got a reprieve from your cleaning," the Colonel said with a smirk on his face. "You are to accompany Miss Timon back beyond the Face to recover some drilling equipment. You are to dismantle the equipment loading it onto the rover and return promptly. Is that understood Yeoman Wildson?"

"Yes Sir," Stax replied keeping his voice balanced afraid the Colonel might change his mind especially if Stax seemed too eager.

"You're to leave immediately."

Stax left the room, glad to be given another chance to leave the ship.

2 The Storm

Wind blew dust mercilessly down upon the back of Stax's head. The colossal mountain pyramid stood before him, and then in the next moment, gale force winds beat down upon him. Within seconds it recast the day into a red oxide night. He'd left Julie in the Rover in order to collect the drilling equipment as instructed. The rolling rocky hills easily enticed him to drift off into his own dream world. But now the red darkness blanketed everything. The more he considered the situation, the madder he got. He'd messed up again. A simple little walk and now he found himself face down in the red Earth, barely able to see his hands against the sand smeared glass plate of his mask.

As he rose up off the ground, the wind fought his every move. Tiny iron granules hit with a nail like strength against his clear pressure suit. He knew that the suits weren't meant for these extreme conditions. Unless he found shelter soon, his blood would slowly start to boil as granules bit into the thin neoprene covering.

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It has to be close but where, he swore to himself. “It must be close,” this time he spoke aloud, but only the storm with its wind-tossed sand carried any sound. He could be a hundred meters or even a meter from the Rover and not see it.

All the interesting moments on Mars immediately flashed through his mind. They had done some amazing things during the last thirty days, the Tharsis Bulge, the Caldera, the Poles and now the celebrated Mars face. Politics had forced the expedition to include it in their schedule. It was that picture the space administration released years ago. It turned out only be a rock, a kilometer square pyramidal shaped mountain scarred by years of wind erosion.

Well, Mars had certainly been a great world in its day, one of water, an atmosphere, even vegetation, but now it was an airless, wind swept dust bowl.

The gusts continued to increase. Pebbles were now being hurled through the air at what he thought to be bullet like speeds. Each time he was hit, a heavy sting would result.

He slogged ahead stumbling as the wind shifted. He had several days water and rations in his utility belt and the air recycling would last for at least a week. “I’ve got to find some kind of shelter, a rock face would even help,” he thought aloud. At that moment the wind shifted again. It tossed him face down again as it hit from behind. The drifts were becoming deeper and he only managed to get up. Balancing himself by keeping one foot ahead of another he kept himself upright but after several more steps he stumbled again falling across what he thought at first to be a rock. It was too soft, and then he realized that it was a body instead. It moved. Placing his mask against the person’s own mask, his worst fears were confirmed, Julie.

Seeing her eyes blink in surprise, he asked, “Why didn’t you stay in the Rover?”

There was no sound as she spoke but he could read her lips which said, “...looking for you.”

The situation had just got far worse. He deserved to die for his stupidity but Julie didn’t. “We’ve got to find some kind of shelter,” he yelled at the top of his voice.

Her face reflected agreement.

Before moving, Stax took a short cord from his utility belt and tied it between himself and Julie. They walked, supporting each other from the gusts of wind at their backs. Stax’s

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strength dwindled, both from fighting the winds, helping Julie and toddling through the ever deepening sand. With every effort came an urge to stop. Then the decision was made for them. They had run up against a rock face.

“This has to be the mountain pyramid,” he yelled but wasn’t sure whether Julie had heard or not.

Leaning around to Julie, he placed his mask against hers, “Let’s try to get down into the sand, it may give us some protection.”

Her lips formed the words, “Okay.”

Stax then found himself and Julie sinking into the sand. It rose up to their waist and then their necks. Stax knew that his strength couldn’t last much longer. He grabbed at the rock face to no avail. With what little strength he had left, he pulled Julie’s mask up against his, “I’m sorry Julie,” he said as they sank beneath the red sand.

3 Demois II

Captain, it seems like we have a Storm coming in.”

“How soon Mr. Harris?”

“Uh,” he hesitated, “It’ll be here in fifteen minutes, sir.”

“Fifteen minutes,” his surprise was evident. Cutting the communications circuit with the metrologist, “Commander Owens? Sound general quarters.”

“A drill, sir?” The Executive Officer questioned.

“No, it’s not a drill,” the captain then added to the order, “Have everybody return to the ship.”

Bells rang throughout the ship, a well-practiced drill that everyone was used to. “This is not a drill,” the voice of Commander Owens was loud and distinct. “General Quarters, General Quarters. Department heads, make sure that all personnel are accounted for.”

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“Meteorology,” the captain’s face appeared on the small viewer. “What’s the status on the storm now and why wasn’t I notified earlier about it?”

“We’d been following the slight rise of wind, sir, for some 30 minutes but didn’t consider it a danger. Then within seconds the wind increased considerably.”

“What’s the speed of those winds, Lieutenant?” The Captain said, irritated with the Lieutenant’s attitude.

“In excess of 200 knots, Captain, and still increasing,” the Lieutenant said.

The Captain abruptly cut the communication unit again, “Commander Owens, is everyone accounted for?”

“No Sir. Miss Timon and Yeoman Wildson were sent on a task to recover drilling equipment beyond the mountain pyramid. We just contacted Miss Timon in the Rover and she says that Yeoman Wildson is overdue.”

Wildson again, Captain Spenser said to himself. “Have her go out and look for him.” He signed off. Of all the commands and situations he’d had, there had never been another person to tax him like Stephen Wildson had. Such trouble makers were always dealt with on lower levels. The first expedition to explore Mars had to be stuck with somebody like Wildson. He just didn’t have time to baby-sit this fellow anymore. Like everyone else on the expedition he was a professional sailor. Oh, he held degrees in other areas like geology and management but commanding was his business. This was supposed to have been a historical landmark in space exploration. But they wanted an enlisted person to come along. The Captain shook his head. The guy certainly had turned out to be more trouble than he was worth. That was for sure.

“Commander Owens?” the Captain called.

“Yes Captain.”

“Upon Yeoman Wildson’s return, have him assigned to his room, under house arrest,” the Captain ordered.

Minutes later, the storm struck like a battering ram. The camp outside the ship was gone in a matter of seconds. Day changed into a red night.

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“Captain Spenser? Just an update as to what’s happening outside sir. Winds are up to 275 knots and steadily climbing,” Lieutenant Harris reported.

Captain Spenser felt a shake throughout the ship. “Engineering,” the captain’s face appeared on the screen where the civilian engineer stood. “Chief, how much stress can the hull take from something like this?”

“Captain Spenser, the winds don’t really pose a problem. It’s those rocks that are blowing about that’ll cause us trouble,” the Chief Engineer said.

“Thanks Mr. McBride, keep me informed, will you?”

“Yes sir.”

The crew even at battle stations was no doubt studying the storm in one capacity or another. They had done this throughout their time on Mars. But mission controllers hadn’t expected this storm at all. They had supposedly timed their arrival and departure from Mars well ahead of the storms. This was an unknown factor in the equation which he certainly didn’t like.

According to Lieutenant Harris’s last update, the storm’s strength was beyond what anyone could have imagined. The ship was raised and then thrown down. Captain Spenser was thrown to the deck. The ship rolled carrying the Captain with it.

Bells rang. “There is a hull breach. There is a hull breach. On with your breathing masks,” the Captain heard the Chief Engineer yell out over the communication system.

The Captain quickly grabbed for his mask placing it on his face, then proceeded to put the rest of the Martian suit on which protected everyone from the rigors of the atmosphere.

“All departments, report in,” he ordered.

The ship was battered again. Lights went out and there was a momentary loss of the circulating fans. Red emergency lamps lit up.

“All departments, report in,” he repeated the order but no response came. The Captain grabbed some warmer gear for he could already feel the chill in the ship. Opening his cabin door, a red twilight presented itself. Red dust had entered the ship from the breach. He proceeded down the tilted corridor pushing against the bulkhead to keep himself balanced. In some offices,

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papers were thrown everywhere. Already a red tint had covered everything in sight. Several of the crew were trying to clear fallen equipment from critical computer consoles.

“Report in. Are there any injuries?” The Captain asked.

“We’re Okay, sir,” the officer answered.

“A few scratches but that’s all.”

The Captain made his way to each of the other departments. No major casualties, thank goodness, he thought. Wildson and Miss Timon hadn’t reported back in.

Something had caused the ship’s support to buckle but that was all that was known as the storm picked up. Rocks could still be heard hitting the hull. It wasn’t over yet.

4 The Mountain Pyramid

The Chamber was pitch dark at first. As their eyes adjusted, Stax and Julie saw each other as dim shadows within that darkness. The sand hole had filled in after they had sunk down into the empty cavity. He helped Julie to stand up out of the sand.

“I’m so glad to see you Stax,” throwing her arms around him weeping inside her breather mask. “I thought I was going to die out there.” She still held onto him.

“Why didn’t you stay inside the Rover?” Stax said with one arm patting her on the back.

“About ten minutes before the storm came, I was asked to go and look for you. By the time I got to the drilling site, the storm had started. I couldn’t see anything and then lost all sense of direction. The winds forced me down. I couldn’t even get up. It was so terrifying Stax.” She continued to cry.

“Well, we’re safe now; at least for the moment,” he said to reassure himself as much as Julie. “There seems to be more light down there,” he pointed.

“You don’t think we should stay here?” she asked thoughtfully.

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“Well, we can’t go back out into that storm even if we could make our way up through the sand. And besides the chamber doesn’t look natural to me,” Stan said moving off in the direction of the light.

“Wait up, if you’re going, I’m going as well.” She grabbed his arm moving along with him.

“You know you’re right, this chamber isn’t natural,” she said rubbing her hand over the wall. It’s been cut out, but how is that possible?” She faced him.

“Hey, don’t ask me. I’m only the enlisted man. I’m not supposed to know these things,” he replied, “but it’s easy to put two and two together.”

“What do you mean?” she asked bewildered.

“We’re inside the pyramid mountain and it no longer seems that it’s just a mountain,” he said continuing to think about the ramifications of what he had just said.

The further they walked the less sand they saw and the more light. The chamber had narrowed into a tunnel with a slight incline. This continued to increase until they came to a corner. Walking around it, both stopped cold. There they saw steep stairs leading further up into the mountain. There was no longer any doubt about the structure of the cave. Stax felt the carved stone stairway which was rough but even enough.

“Well, shall we proceed?” he said.

They walked together up the steps. Typically sized with the overhead being just over seven or so feet. The stairs leveled off into a larger cavern. A pink haze permeated it. The top of the ceiling could not be seen but Stax estimated that he could now see at least fifty meters upwards.

He bent down and brushed his hand over the floor. “Feel the floor, Julie.”

“No more than several millimeters of dust. Smooth as a baby’s behind. The place is obviously airtight otherwise there would be more dust. Stax, this is big. We need to inform the Captain about this, now.”

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“What’s the hurry? We’ve got plenty of air and water. The storm is still on the outside, so we aren’t going anywhere else, and besides, the Captain will probably lock me inside my room for the duration of the trip anyway. This will be the last straw after the trouble I’ve caused him and everyone else.”

“Well, remember. You’ve been a bit of a pain especially to the Officers. Even though it was supposed to be a mixed civilian and military project, we were told that the Captain was very Navy,” she said.

“It was also supposed to be an exploration of Mars where one yeoman was elected to be an equal crew member, not necessarily an enlisted 2nd class nobody and treated even worse by most of the military types,” he said angrily. “I have a job just like them. I’ve been treated like unnecessary baggage the whole trip. Uh, I can’t believe how egotistical they have been.” The more he talked, the madder he got. “Anyway, I’m going to enjoy myself now doing a bit of exploration of my own. What we’ve discovered here far outweighs anything we’ve seen or done on Mars.”

“You’re correct there,” she replied. “Well come on explorer Stephen Wildson. Let’s see what else is here.” She walked off toward the light.

Stax was consumed by the vastness of the place. Something was curiously nagging at the back of his mind. It was a familiarity that he couldn’t quite put his finger on. “Hey Julie, what does this place remind you of?” He said still looking over the place.

“It’s certainly big enough. Ten ships the size of ours could fit into this place,” she answered.

“That’s it! Can’t you see it?” He asked, taken back at his own discovery.

“See what, Stax?”

“Why, it’s a hangar of some sort,” he said pleased with himself.

“Well, that could be, but how would they enter the place? Plus, we’re quite away up in the mountain.”

“There must be doors somewhere,” he replied.

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“Look at this,” she called out, having ventured off to the very end of the hangar.

“There’s a narrow opening in the wall here. Let me see if I can get through it.” Turning her head just right, she managed to slip through. “You try now,” she said from the other side.

Stax eased through the opening. Unlike the dull pink of the place they were before, this place was totally dark, in fact pitch black. Bending down again and touching the floor, he discovered that there was even less dust.

“Let’s try our lights,” Julie suggested, already pulling hers out. “It’s like the other chamber.” She cast the light one way and another.

“It’s cleaner here, much less dust and warmer also.

They came to a halt as both lights revealed a ramp. “Well, well,” Stax said, “This gets more and more interesting.”

“You check it out. I’ll resume looking around the cavern.” She moved off into the dark. “Hey Stax, look at this.” Shining her light upwards revealed a structure that was at least four meters off the floor.

Moving up the ramp, Stax kept shining his light around. “This place is beginning to give me the creeps,” he said climbing up. Holding the light as far in front of him as he could, he barely saw the hatch way. “Hey Julie, there’s some kind of hatch up here.”

“Be careful,” she said still trying to determine what kind of structure she had found.

“Hey, it’s a ship!” Both spoke at the same time.

“It’s seems to be crystalline in shape,” Julie spoke up after their initial reaction. “I think we should try to return to base, Stax and let them know what we’ve found.”

“Not on your life. This is too good to be true. We’re going to be famous and this is going to get me out of a possible lynching from the Captain.”

“Okay, but it’s your neck, I’m along for the ride,” Julie started up the stairs.

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Stax waited for her to reach the landing outside the ship. “Let me see if there’s a lever somewhere to open this thing.” But when he touched the hatch, it simply opened forcing Stax and Julie to move back. Both stood and stared as lights came on not only outside in the hangar but inside the ship.

Stax headed in but Julie grabbed his arm holding him back. “Come on, where’s your sense of exploration? That’s what we came to Mars for isn’t it?” He entered the ship. Wow, look at this,” peering down the corridor.

“Wow, look at this,” a reply came from inside the ship. Being a female voice Stax wasn’t immediately frightened.

“Who’s there?” Stax asked.

“Who’s there?” the voice mimicked.

“I’m Yeoman 2nd Class Wildson. We’ve come from Earth, the third planet out from the sun,” he replied. Stax was mimicked yet again.

A silence came and afterwards a statement, “You are the Overseer! I am at your command.”

“Stax? This is really getting out of hand. Let’s get out of here.”

“I think maybe you’re right. Let’s get back to the base. We’ve seen enough.”

5 Starship

The storm had indeed abated. The sand rover was demolished when they found it. Stax and Julie started to retrace their route back to the ship. Easy enough, but all signs of the drilling equipment had disappeared as well. Stax looked up at the mountain pyramid and knew that the secret it contained would change his life for ever. Stax was excited about the discovery but disappointed that he would have to share it with the Captain and others of Deimos II. They would take charge of the discovery and he would be pushed back into the shell that people were always trying to force him into. They would just say he stumbled across it while lost in the storm instead of giving him the recognition he deserved. Stax’s bitterness rose. All the excitement he had just experienced was about to be dashed apart.

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“How much air do you have left, Julie?” Stax checked.

“Oh, a few hours yet, plenty enough to make it back to the ship,” she replied.

“Julie, they won’t believe any of this,” Stax said solemnly.

“They’ll have to believe both of us, Stax,” she said.

“We’ll see,” Stax replied

Coming around a deep red hill, they saw what was left of their camp and ship. It was all but destroyed. The ship lay half buried in red dust, its back broken into three separate sections.

The Chief Engineer and three other officers stood against the bulkhead of the ship. Its 30-degree tilt made it difficult for them to stand. The Captain and his officers no longer had the spit and polish look about them. Rather they were now a dust ridden and motley looking group with bruises easily seen through their clear protective suits. Each had their breather mask tightly fitted around their face using their communication units to discuss their present situation.

“The sum of it is, the ship’s finished,” the Captain said, staring at the officers before him. Each of them understood the implications. “We have another twenty four hours of battery power, maybe forty-eight hours of air left once we lose the batteries. We have food for another three months and water for several weeks.”

“Water and food we can ration, but nothing else, life support has totally failed,” said Yelvin Greersky, the Russian life support specialist.

As the Captain began to respond, another officer stuck his head around the door opening, “Sir, the Wildson kid and Miss Timon have returned. Seems like they survived the storm. They said that they need to see you immediately.”

“Tell them that I will attend to them shortly,” the Captain replied evenly.

“Captain, are your orders still standing in regard to putting Wildson under arrest in his cabin?” the Commander asked.

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“No, I suppose not. He can’t do any more damage than has already been done,” the Captain said.

At that moment Stax stuck his head in the door, “I’m sorry sir but it’s really urgent that Miss Timon and I talk to you as soon as possible.” Stax tried to be polite.

The Captain’s face grew stern but then Julie stuck her head around Stax, “Captain, you really need to hear this, it may be our only chance to survive.” Julie had mustered all the courage she could to stress the importance of it to the Captain.

“Okay, Yeoman Wildson, you’ve disobeyed orders yet again in disturbing us, so now talk.” The Captain only allowed the interruption because of Miss Timon’s insistence otherwise he would have chewed Wildson out.

“Sir, we discovered some kind of craft. I think it’s some kind of spaceship. It about ten times as big as Deimos II.” Stax paused for effect.

“What are you carrying on about Wildson?” the Captain looked hard at Stax.

“It’s true, Captain. It’s a ship inside a hangar in the upper part of the pyramid mountain,” Stax countered.

Stax and Julie explained what had happened to them and their find.

The Captain stared at the two for some time. “If what you say is true, it could be our only chance to survive this situation.” The Captain ordered Commander Owens to take several people to investigate. “Miss Timon, are you up to returning to this place and showing exactly where you found the ship.”

“Yes Captain but I think that should be Stax, I mean Yeoman Wildson since it was he that discovered the ship.”

“I have other things for Yeoman Wildson to do,” the Captain said.

Stax was given several things to do and then later received orders to help with a food and water inventory. The Captain had made it known that Yeoman Wildson was never to be without an Officer at his side. This deflated Stax considerably but he had expected it. But after

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he had arrived at the place they were sorting the food and water out, he was ordered to return to the Captain.

“Yes sir, that’s correct, we think it’s the ship’s computer sir. It won’t allow us to enter more than a meter or so inside the ship. It says that it needs instructions from the Overseer.” Stax overheard the communication through his own communication set as he neared the room.

Stax entered and leaned against the bulkhead waiting to see what the Captain wanted.

“And Captain, the ship has breathable air. Miss Timon mentioned that the computer called Wildson the Overseer.”

“What do you know about this Yeoman Wildson?” the Captain turned to him.

“It’s like we said before sir, the ship seemed to come alive when the hatch opened. A voice was repeating everything I was saying and yeah, I remember, it said I was the Overseer.”

“Well, get over there and see if you can talk to it,” the Captain ordered.

“Yeoman Wildson is on his way,” the Captain closed.

After half an hour Stax walked up to the hatch entrance.

“Overseer, I am at your command,” the alien voice said.

Stax felt the air blowing against him as he stood at the open door way. Enough air was being produced to fill the whole of the hangar.

“Well get on with it Wildson,” the Commander said, obviously upset at the hindrance.

“Uh, let these people enter please,” Stax said but not really sure what was expected of him.

“At your command,” the voice replied.

After everyone entered, Stax decided to follow as well since he had not been told to do otherwise. He was enjoying himself. The officers still hadn’t bothered with him becoming more and more occupied with the ship itself. Interesting, the spaceship wasn’t really that alien, Stax thought. But then, he wasn’t really sure what he was expecting out of an alien space ship anyway.

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The consoles were ultra-modern with a curious alphabet, similar to some Cyrillic languages of Eastern Europe. Lighting seemed to come right out of the walls. The exterior of the ship was very strange. He first thought, in seeing it up close, that it was made up of reinforced polished granite. At the hatch entrance the thickness looked nearly half a metre. Stax was close enough to overhear the Commander and Chief Engineer discussing whether or not the crew should come over.

“I think we should advise the Captain to wait,” the Chief Engineer told the others.

“We only have another thirty six hours of air left in Deimos II,” the Commander said concerned.

“But sir, we still don’t know anything about this ship, whether we have water or even how to get it out of this place,” the Chief Engineer continued.

“Why don’t you just ask the computer voice?” Stax spoke out without thinking.

“What do you mean Yeoman Wildson?” The Commander asked.

“You are to address him as Overseer. I will not tolerate insolence to the Overseer.” The voice came out of the walls of the ship.

Not only were the Commander and the Chief Engineer surprised but others were looking bewildered.

“Computer, what kind of ship is this?” Stax said impatiently.

“My knowledge of your vocabulary is too limited to properly explain the design of this craft, however, this ship is both atmospheric and non-atmospheric.

“Are you able to leave this planet?” Stax asked.

“Yes, Overseer,” it replied.

“Are you able to produce water and air for 20 of us?”

“Yes, Overseer.”

“Are you able to leave this enclosure?”

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“That’s about enough Yeoman Wildson,” the commander interrupted, “We understand how to ask questions.”

“Overseer, do you wish for me to take disciplinary action for the insolence shown toward you by this person?” the female computer voice spoke distinctly.

All the other officers looked at each other after the voice spoke.

“I’m awaiting your command, Overseer.”

“Answer the computer,” the Commander ordered after some deliberation.

“No disciplinary action is necessary, Computer,” Stax said.

“Computer, why do you call this person Overseer?” the Commander spoke loud enough for all to hear.

“Overseer, shall I answer the question,” the female voice directed the question to Stax.

“Yes, answer the Commander,” Stax ordered the computer.

“Some four hundred years have passed since I was built. I am still reprocessing my data in my original language but one command was primary and that was to acknowledge the first person who entered this ship as Overseer. That programming cannot be changed.” The alien computer then fell silent.

“And exactly what is the responsibility of the Overseer?” the Chief Engineer spoke up this time.

“His responsibility is to oversee the welfare of this ship, myself, and the people aboard making sure that we return to our home port safely. And my primary responsibility is to protect the Overseer from any harm and also to run this ship as directed by the Overseer.”

“The Captain needs to be informed about this,” the Commander said aloud. “We have little choice but to move everything over anyway. We can sort the Overseer problem out later.”

“Ask the computer, Overseer,” the Commander slurred the Overseer part, “whether it can move within range of our ship.”

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“Computer, answer the question,” Stax ordered.

“It would not be practical. I am still in reprocessing mode. I’ll be several days before I’m up to full power. The ships systems may need some repair after being dormant for so long.”

The female voice was more female than moments earlier, Stax noted.

“Advise the Captain that everything is secure here and it’s safe to move the ship’s crew over,” the Commander said into his communication unit.

6 Overseer

It what? Captain Spenser could hardly contain himself.

“It required us to address Wildson as the Overseer and it clearly acknowledged that he was in charge of the ship. I thought it was best to go along with it until I talked to you,” Commander Owens said.

“Okay Commander, thanks. I’m afraid Wildson has really messed things up this time. I’ll stay here, for now, at least until the last person leaves, but I want you to take some of our computer people and find out as much as you can about that computer. See how much control it has over the ship and whether or not it offers any real threat to us.” the Captain ordered.

“Yes Captain,” the Commander got up to leave.

“Oh, one other thing, assign one of the rooms on the ship as a brig and put Wildson in and lock it.” the Captain said firmly.

Sand had already been cleared away from the pyramid mountain’s entrance. Those that returned packed all the tools they could carry. Air was now no longer an issue. The alien ship was pumping air even into the hangar bays themselves. Water was being produced at quite a pace also. The engineers were all over the ship listening to the various sounds coming out of the engine room. The engines had definitely taken on a heavier whine since their first visit. It seemed as though the ship was coming alive. The computer people were studying as much of the computer paths and circuits as they could understand.

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“We’ve been at this three hours, commander. The ships’ computer seems to be considerably integrated into all the manual controls,” the computer specialist whispered to the Commander.

Two civilian scientists walked up, “I think we have found the main memory core on level four but it’s sealed. There doesn’t seem to be any kind of an entrance into it.”

“Excuse me gentlemen, but please keep your voices down,” the Commander requested.

“Oh yes, of course, we forgot.

Others arrived from Deimos II packing supplies on their backs and bags in their hands. Things were being dumped in corridors, the Brig and just about everywhere else. The alien ship had an abundance of work-space, cabins and community living areas. The cabins contained all the comforts of home. Each had its own en-suite bathroom plus a small living and eating area. The ship was more sophisticated in technology than Deimos II but not so advanced that the crew didn’t understand what was what. When they asked the computer questions, it only stated that it was still reprocessing its data or that some references of its prior history were missing from its memory. Its voice invited conversation as it spoke from anywhere and at anytime. The Engineers were studying the engineering compartment and already initiating minor repairs. These amounted to stuck keyboards or dusty console panels.

After some time, the Captain arrived escorting a party of civilians. Again, everyone was loaded down. “Where’s Commander Owens?” the captain asked walking up the ramp leading up to the entrance.

“I think he’s in the upper levels of the ship Captain,” one of the civilian scientists answered.

“Go find him, I want to talk to him outside the ship,” Captain Spenser ordered the officer. “And where’s Yeoman Wildson?” the Captain Asked.

“I’m not sure, sir. Do you want me to find him, also?”

“No, not right now,” the Captain replied.

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After some time the officer returned along with Commander Owens. The appeared at the top of the ramp just outside the open hatch. Neither wore their breathing masks. Even the Captain had removed his.

As Commander Owens approached, the Captain turned his back to the alien ship and asked, "What have you been able to do about the computer, Commander?"

"Not a lot, sir. The computer is integrated into every system of the ship. We think its core memory is located on the third level right below the bridge and engineering department. But that area is totally sealed off. According to the computer people and engineers there are numerous back circuits laced throughout the ship. So it seems that the ship is the computer and the computer is the ship. It's impossible to separate the two," said the commander. "And I've also found a cabin that will do for the brig. I was about to escort Wildson to it."

"Hold off on that for now. I want to meet with everyone down here after an hour, including Wildson. Now find someone that can show me around this ship," the Captain turned and approached the ramp.

Everyone had gathered, as requested down in the hangar area. Some were talking, enjoying the wide-open hangar space with the abundant air. The Captain and the Commander came back down the ramp. Walking through to the other side, he turned and looked, "It's been one hell of a two days, hasn't it?"

Murmurs of agreement sounded from all of them.

"We've gone from a successful Mars Mission to the destruction of our ship and to the discovery of something," he indicated the alien ship, "That far outweighs anything that we've discovered on the expedition itself." The Captain waited, making sure what he had said sink in. "At one point I wondered about our very survival much less our return home. But we have air, food and water now. The reason I've asked you here is to state the obvious. We are dealing with many unknowns. We will have to meet each unknown as a challenge and try to work with it or around it. It'll take time, patience and a great deal of flexibility. Nothing has changed in regard to our command structure. All the departments exist as before. Are there any questions?" The Captain paused. "Okay, back to work then.

"Yeoman Wildson," the Captain called Stax.

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“Yes sir,” Stax said walking up to him.

“You are to consider yourself confined to quarters until further notice.”

Stax looked at the Captain feeling at a loss to understand what he had done.

“May I enquire as to why sir?”

“No, you may not,” the Captain answered.

“Commander Owens, have someone to take Yeoman Wildson to his quarters.”

An officer led a downcast Stax away to the cabin now designated as the brig. All of this had gone unnoticed by other bystanders. Once in the room, Stax just looked about feeling hopeless, wondering what he had done.

“What’s the matter, Overseer?” Stax almost jumped out of his seat when the computer voiced its concern.

“I can’t ever do anything right,” Stax answered.

“Well, you found me, didn’t you? And just at the right time. You’ve saved your people from possible death. After four hundred years of sleep you awakened me,” it was trying to console Stax.

“Computer, don’t you understand, I’m what we call an enlisted person, a simple yeoman. I can’t oversee myself much less you or anyone else,” Stax said despairingly.

“You are the Overseer. There is nothing that can change that fact. You will learn how to be the Overseer. You must understand that my very assistance depends on you accepting that,” the computer said, “And by the way, I have a name. It’s Fasala.”

“Oh great. A computer with a name. Well listen, I have people that are over me. I must obey the Captain. I can’t go against what he orders me to do. He’s now confined me to this cabin for who knows what reason.” Stax had started pacing the room by now.

At that moment the door locked to his cabin. “What’s happening?,” he went over and pulled on the handle.

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“You will be safe here while I deal with your Captain,” Fasala then said.

“What are you going to do?” Stax asked nervously but there was no answer.

Lights throughout the ship went off and systems begin to power down. The Officers and the civilian scientist looked about wondering what was happening. The Captain and several others stood on the bridge.

“I wonder what the problem is?” the Captain said aloud to no one in particular.

The answer came from an unexpected source, “You are the problem, Captain,” the alien computer spoke from nowhere and everywhere.

“What’s going on, Commander?” Captain Spenser looked up.

“It’s the ship’s computer,” the Commander answered.

“Yes, it’s the ship’s computer Captain,” Fasala said from the darkness.

“Okay, computer. What’s the problem? Why have you shut off all the lights?” Captain Spenser asked.

“I am programmed to protect and follow only the orders of the Overseer. You’ve confined him to a cabin which I interpret as a threat. I am thus programmed to take action against that threat.”

The Captain whispered to one of the officers to get Wildson to the bridge.

“You’ll find that the Overseer’s cabin door has been locked in order to protect him. However, all other hatches are unlocked and open, even the one to leave the ship.”

“Computer, we are at your mercy. I am not used to dealing with a computer with such a level of intelligence. Our people would interpret your actions as being from faulty programming, however I’m sure my computer people can fix whatever is wrong.”

Everyone looked at each other not really knowing where this conversation would lead.

“If I had faulty programming, I would have probably killed you by now,” the alien computer replied.

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“Oh, I see,” the Captain replied. There was a temporary silence. “So what now?” the Captain asked.

“I would like to recall your speech to your crew. You are dealing with so many unknowns, so you must meet each unknown as a challenge and try to work with it or around it,” the computer spoke to a shocked group. “Captain Spenser, you were Captain of a your ship Deimos II. That ship brought you from Earth to this planet. You are not Captain of this ship. There is no Captain, however, there is an Overseer. My programming has assigned the person you refer to as Yeoman Wildson as the Overseer. There is nothing you nor anyone can do to change that fact. For I will expend all the power I have available to enforce that person as the Overseer.” The computer fell silent.

“Wildson doesn’t have the experience to command this ship,” the Captain responded angrily.

“You must train him,” the computer replied.

“I don’t think so,” the Captain then smiled.

“It’s either that or I will request that you leave this ship and whatever your decision, you must from this point forth refer to your Yeoman as the Overseer.”

“Captain, there’s got to be a plug we can pull somewhere to turn this thing off,” a Major Barrett spoke up from engineering.

“Find it and do it,” the Captain looked at everyone. “Try and get Wildson out of that

The Captain never finished his sentence as two things happened at once. First, the room lights came back on plus an electrical discharge reached out from the ceiling and struck the Captain in the chest. He was just able to catch himself before hitting the metal floor.

“As you say Captain Spenser, you are at my mercy. Here are your choices. One, you are more than welcome to stay aboard this ship. I will return you and your people to Earth if you wish. Or you can leave this ship and return to Deimos II. I will supply you with as much water and air as I can provide. Understand this, whatever your decision, the Overseer will remain the Overseer. You and your people will put yourselves under his authority. He will not be Overseer

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in name only but you must instruct him how to take command. You must agree or disagree now.” The alien computer waited.

The Captain was still dizzy from the jolt he had taken. He looked at his officers and muttered, “Obviously, we have no choice. Returning to the ship is not an option. And since we are being so informal,” the Captain responded, “could you tell us where you’re from and why are you here?”

“These questions are of little value in dealing with the present problem. However, giving you time to think on what I’ve said, I’ll answer. As to my origin, a lot of my data is either missing or yet to be processed. But this place was an observation point, I believe, to observe your planet.”

Concern grew upon everyone’s face at hearing this.

“And why were we being observed?” the Captain resumed his questioning.

“To watch your development and that’s all I personally know. I have several references as to my origin but it doesn’t make too much sense as of yet. Captain, what is your decision? Will you co-operate or not?” the Computer spoke in the most female like voice yet.

“I can order your Overseer not to cooperate with you. Have you thought about that?” the Captain said.

“Then, you will die on this planet. If the Overseer chooses not to fulfill his role as Overseer, all Systems will be shut down.” the computer held an even voice.

“We will do as you say until we reach Earth,” the Captain slowly replied.

7 Fasala

The following day there was a silent stand off between the Captain, Officers and civilian scientists with Stax. Julie had told Stax what had transpired between the Captain and Fasala. Stax felt that it was the calm before the storm. He was hoping that everyone would get interested in the alien craft and stay off of him. Stax roamed through the vacant areas. There were five different levels with level three housing mainly the bridge and engineering with its nine engines. Level One was a launch bay with level two housing the crew and other community areas. Level

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four housed the automated equipment used by the computer and level five held two large cargo holds. The ship was nearly ten times the size of Deimos II. The crew was being assigned their quarters by the Commander which Stax had timidly agreed on. He wasn't in any hurry to get everyone anymore upset than they already were.

Some weren't really that hostile toward him, especially the civilians he thought. He knew that most of them cared less what the military types decided on as long as they were left alone to do their research. Most of the Officers had always been stand offish throughout the trip, all except for one or two while most of the civilians had really been quite friendly. That is until the Commander started to come down on him big time. Julie continued to be her friendly self. There were two medical doctors, one Navy while the other was civilian. Doctor Hussain was always professional, never really showing what he thought. Stax stopped his day dreaming and now headed down to level three near the aft of the ship.

"So, if it isn't the Overseer," Major Barrett emphasized the last word.

Stax wasn't surprised at the remark, Major Barrett had been a major pain. "Careful Major Barrett, I'm still not sure how the ship's computer responds to negative tones toward me." Stax couldn't help saying this, seeing that his sneer had now changed to concern.

Stax hurriedly moved through the corridor that linked the bridge with engineering and proceeded out the exit. He decided to look around outside. He was overawed at the solidness of the ship. The nine engines were divided up into threes, the computer had informed him, three smaller engines were for below light cruising while the next larger size pushed the ship nearly three times over light speed and then the three larger ones increased speed up to ten times that of light. But these engines also had to interact with established paths throughout the galaxy. The computer still lacked enough English vocabulary to fully explain it.

"Have you told anyone in engineering the speeds that you're able to travel at," Stax asked the computer.

"No, I haven't. No one has asked me," the computer replied.

Well, they'll never believe it and I'm not sure that I do, he thought to himself. As Stax considered what he had just learned he watched some officers returning from Deimos II. Each was loaded with various articles and equipment. Everything was being removed from the ship

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including computers, desks, etc. Stax couldn't understand the need but he wasn't about to interfere. Stax returned his eyes to the alien ship. It was impressive. Just a few of the things he had noticed were the active monitoring systems. Far more advanced than anything Deimos II had.

He knew the computer people were still looking for ways to unplug the thing. But according to Fasala, the ship could hold up to two hundred crew members with their families. The engines and engineering took up nearly two thirds of the third level of the ship plus parts of level two and four. It was a total living and working environment. A lot of effort had gone into making the living quarters as spacious as possible. His stuff was thrown all about the ship as everyone else's stuff was. Fasala had told him that his quarters were at the top of the stairs leading up from the bridge. Fasala had even shown a few scenes on screens that seemed to be all over the ship, even on different bulkheads of each of the living quarters. Accommodation was equipped with typical looking metal furniture. Whoever the beings were that created this ship, they weren't very different. Level four was the most mysterious in that Fasala did not know what some parts of it held but she still admitted that reprocessing hadn't finished. This reprocessing seemed to do with the ship being shut down for so long and her having to now deal in a new language. Basic ship management was handled by the computer but it did need a crew especially if anything extraordinary happened. Stax didn't know what the computer entity meant by that. He knew that Fasala was more than just some computer and perhaps an entity of some sorts. He didn't care as long it got them back to Earth.

Air and water management systems were connected to the engines. Fasala mentioned that it was a by-product from the mix of gases. Stairways were much like an ocean going liner on Earth, large enough for several people to walk up or down at the same time. Fasala told him that gravity was maintained within the ship by highly intensive magnetic fields operating. There were several shafts that didn't contain gravity where individuals could pull themselves quickly down or up depending on where they wanted to go. There were several lifts going between all levels, some quite large. He had re-entered the ship and headed toward the cabin Fasala had mentioned. Stax passed the Chief Engineer and his assistant Major Barrett. They only stared at him. Stax really didn't feel very safe around these two. He had heard what the computer had done to the Captain. So Stax wouldn't have ventured through the ship if it wasn't for the Fasala's protective hand on him. The medical clinic was located on level two also just opposite these new quarters of his. Next to the clinic he noticed Yelvin Greersky the only Russian that had joined the expedition was moving into some quarters. Mary Smith, a civilian communications expert turned

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her back to him as he passed. Mary was the only other New Zealander on board besides Stax but strangely she had always held her distance from him.

David Martin, a South African fellow who had always befriended Stax, greeted him. “Found any quarters yet?”

“Just looking for them now,” Stax smiled.

David was a black South African, a specialist in laser technology, electronics and computers. Stax actually considered him to be a friend. Stax asked Fasala about laser technology but she was unable to reply. As she reprocessed her data, she commented to Stax on several occasions the many gaps that were missing. She felt that there had been a major eraser throughout her core memory. This was beginning to worry Stax. He felt it a bit strange, this insistence on him being the Overseer, it could be an invention of a despotic computer. But he wasn’t about to express this to anyone.

He found his quarters. It was a one bedroom apartment with en-suite bathroom, kitchen, dining room and living area. He didn’t know quite what to think. He would move all his things in once he found them.

Stax now headed for the bridge, the place he had been avoiding all morning. Upon entering, he sensed an immediate rise in tension. Captain Spenser and Commander Owens looked up watching Stax come down the stairs. Two people had their head stuck into the panels underneath some consoles. “Fasala, what are they doing?” he all but whispered to the computer.

“They’re trying to figure out why my ship to ship communications abilities have been taken away,” the computer answered softly. “Hopefully they’ll be able to fix it.”

Stax wandered over to where they were. “Fasala told me that she doesn’t have the ability to communicate ship to ship.”

“From what the computer will allow us to look at, several unit modules are missing,” one of the civilians answered.

Moving about the bridge, Stax was excited about the prospects of taking the ship back to Earth. If they hadn’t been heroes after returning in Deimos II, now they would certainly be.

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8 Transition

Stax's training began the next day. The Captain officially advised everyone of Stax's new title trying to down play it as much as possible, as he didn't want to offend the faulty programmed computer. He assumed second in command. However, every time the Captain spoke to Stax, it was with obvious disdain. In spite of the tension, Stax's first day went well. He actually enjoyed reading some of the books the Captain had given him to study. They were diversions from what was going on around him. Even though he was studying, Stax noticed that the Captain had the computer specialist and engineers studying the circuitry of the ship. Stax knew that the Captain and the Commander were trying to find a way to unhook the computer, especially its power source. He had noticed that the Captain, Commanders and Officers took every chance to be away from the alien ship by organizing regular trips to the Deimos II.

"Do you have any idea when we are to leave?" Major Barrett asked the Captain off handedly as he came up to the closed hatch of Deimos II.

"Whenever that computer decides it's time to leave," the Captain responded. "There's very little we can do about it."

"Commander, have you made sure that all weapons were smuggled onto the alien ship?" the Captain asked looking back toward the Commander.

"Yes sir, all weapons have been hidden away inside several of the Officer's cabins," he answered.

"Good," the Captain replied.

"Sir, what's going to happen to Yeoman Wildson once we return to Earth?" a Lieutenant Commander Isles asked. She held a PhD in Astrophysics and was one of the only two pilots, with Lieutenant Looves being the second one, that accompanied the Mars expedition. She also had really never had anything against Stax personally. She knew from the Commander that he was a very rebellious person.

"He thinks himself the king ruling with a despotic queen, he deserves to be hanged for treason," the Commander answered instead.

"Perhaps he's as much a pawn as we all are in this situation," she replied.

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“I think he’s playing right into the hands of this alien computer and he’s enjoying it,” the Captain then answered.

In the days that followed Fasala worked Stax non stop having him view and study as much of the ship and its design as he could take in. Her reprocessing of data had meant that information was now portrayed on the screen in English, a surprise to everyone.

“Fasala, how long will it take us for the return trip to Earth?” Stax asked still thinking about the speeds at which Fasala had said the ship could travel.

“If all goes well and once we are clear of the planet’s gravitation, about 12 hours,” the answer came.

Stax wondered whether he should say anything to the Captain about it or even the engineers. “Fasala, are the others still talking to you as much as before?”

“Your Captain has purposely alienated himself and the others of your crew from me. He’s informed everyone except you to talk as little as possible with me. The engineering people only study my schematics in hope of finding a way to shut me down.”

Stax heard the computer laugh then. “Does that not bother you?” he asked.

“No, there is nothing they can do to harm me. I’m more concerned with what they may try with you.” the Computer said with a concerned voice.

“Well, I can see their side of it. This was an expedition that would make history. Beside finding out about Mars, we have found an alien space ship with a computer that thinks it’s alive. You have threatened the officers established authority by placing me, an enlisted person, over them. Not only that, I was already very unpopular and a thorn in their sides.”

“I am unable to go against my programming sub routine,” the reply came.

The Captain had instilled a sense of distrust of the computer with everyone, Stax knew. Stax decided to venture out and do little questioning of his own. “Couldn’t you allow our computer people to check you out to see if you do have some kind of glitch? Plus, Fasala, you realize that you’ve isolated me from my own people. However, I must say, beside Julie, you’re about the only one I have been able to confide in during this whole trip.”

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“I am truly sorry Overseer for what I have placed on your shoulders but I had no choice. I need you as much as you need me now. Please trust me, Overseer. I do not have any kind of glitch.”

“I would prefer that you address me by Stax,” he said.

“Is that an order?” Fasala asked.

“Can I make it one?” Stax said.

“Yes, but I recommend that when I address you in public that I still use your proper title, Stax.” Her voice was now so smooth, so female and even sexy, Stax thought. “We must keep up appearances,” she finished.

There were things that weren’t making sense about Fasala. She acted so real, so human for a glitched alien computer. She was correct in what she said about the Captain. He, the officers and civilians had withdrawn from having anything to do with the sentient ship. Stax saw a wealth of possible information but no one was interested. But just thinking about all these complications made him feel so tired. He had been at it for over fifteen hours. And his studies were tiresome also. They covered not only command situations but included astronavigation as well. On top of that, Fasala was making him study simulated space battles.

In the second week of training, his breath was taken away several times as Fasala began sharing with him about the capabilities of the ship. She always made sure that these little secrets were said when others had already left the bridge. Everybody was as stand offish now as they had been on Deimos II. The Captain held only the most formal relationship with Stax. Other officers now avoided him. Sometimes, Stax noticed, the Captain’s voice showed the disgust he held for him. He even insinuated that Stax was treasonous. Stax now knew that once the Captain got him away from the protection of Fasala, he would be a dead man.

“Fasala, can you keep up with everything going on this ship?” Stax asked casually thinking that he already knew the answer.

“No, not exactly.” Fasala’s answer surprised him.

“That surprised you, Overseer? I mean Stax,” she corrected herself since they were alone.

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“I thought you saw and heard everything on the ship?” he said, a bit confused.

“I have subroutines that can keep up only appearances of multiple sight and sounds. This is why I need you and your people to crew the ship. It helps me from making a mistake. It’s like a double check. I would not like your Captain to know about that, though,” she said.

“Don’t worry, we only speak formally when he does speak to me,” Stax replied.

“Stax, do you have someone that you care about back home?”

He considered the question and the strangeness of the computer wanting to know such information. “Yes, I think about my mother and dad,” Stax answered.

“No, That’s not what I mean, do you have a girl friend or wife?” Fasala said.

“No,” Stax was confused. Why would a computer ask such a question? “Fasala,” Stax thought carefully, “I forget that you are an alien computer. I have no idea what you really are.”

9 Limitations

With each passing day, Stax became more isolated from the others, so much so that he was dependent on Fasala for basic conversation. Julie no longer spoke to him either and that was hurtful, considering all they had been through. He felt that if anyone would understand, it would have been her. He wanted to go to the Captain but he knew that was impossible. He had made a bed with his own past actions and now had to sleep in it.

“I can’t do this, Fasala. Everyone thinks that I’ve committed the unforgivable sin. None of them will have anything to do with me now. The Captain speaks but only when he has to. The officers won’t speak even when spoken to.” Stax said in desperation.

“Then, you and your companions will never see home again,” Fasala’s voice was hard, but then she gently said, “I’m so sorry Stax, I’m really trying to do the best for all of you. Like you, I am working with limited resources and programming routines that I must adhere to.” She fell silent hoping that he would understand.

After a time of staring into the walls of his quarters, Stax lifted his head and spoke sadly, “Okay, I’ll try Fasala, I’ll try,” and after a few minutes he added, “I’d like to speak to everyone on the ship please.”

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“Everybody will hear you now,” Fasala replied.

“This is the Overseer. I’d like to meet with everyone on the bridge in fifteen minutes. I think we need to talk,” Stax said hoping everyone heard him.

Stax was waiting on the bridge for the others. He dreaded this but it had to be done. Everyone came in by ones and twos, most were late. The last to appear were the two engineering officers.

Stax looked around. Some looked back, some looked away as their eyes met. He decided to be honest and above all, open. “I feel not only inadequate but afraid meeting with you in these circumstances. I’ve tried to convince the alien computer to change its programming or whatever that’s making it do what it’s doing, but it still insists on me being the Overseer. The Computer says that it’s our only chance to get back to Earth.” Stax moved his eyes to the floor, “So, for better or for worse, I’ll try to do what the computer wants. I need your co-operation in this. From now on I will try to play the part,” he looked up as everybody was now looking at him, “I’m the Overseer.” He stopped, wanting everyone to think about what he had just said. “That means, you now take orders from me.”

Officers held faces of anger but remained silent. Both, Captain Spenser and Commander Owens stood red faced, glaring at Wildson with eyes of hatred.

“Just keep in mind that I’m only trying to get you back to Earth. I don’t understand it all yet but the computer says that she needs your help in doing that. From this moment on, any order that I give that isn’t followed, that person will be dealt with.” At that, Stax knew there was no turning back.

“And how do you purpose to follow through with that,” an Officer asked sarcastically.

But before Stax could answer, “Well, why doesn’t Miss Computer let us handle everything,” Commander Owens spoke up.

“Because we are dealing with an alien computer, and for good or bad, this has set limitations on how we are to work with it. I’ve accepted that and now you need to also,” Stax answered.

“I have already given my word on that,” the Captain said.

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“Giving your word, Captain, is not coming into a meeting five minutes late,” Stax countered.

“So help me Wildson, I’ll have your....”

At that moment an electrical charge reached out and struck the Captain. “I will not allow disrespect for the Overseer,” the alien computer said.

It was Stax who spoke up then, “Fasala, do not do that again.”

“As you say, Overseer, but I will not tolerate disrespect toward you.”

“Okay, one last time, will you work with the computer’s requirements so we can return to Earth? Please decide now or leave the ship,” Stax’s voice was hard but desperate. How could he make them understand?

With the help of two other officers the Captain got up off the floor.

“Captain, I would like for you to be second in command but if you don’t want to be, I’ll appoint someone else.”

The Captain remained silent, as did the others.

“I’ll take that as a yes. I hope its settled then. Captain, station an officer in each of the designated section that Fasala is screening now. Each officer will have a civilian so as to help that officer,” Stax ordered thinking it was all over with.

“Hey, we never signed on for any of this,” a civilian scientist spoke up. Stax couldn’t believe his ears. He hardly knew the American lady except that she had something to do with geology. She had always kept herself busy at whatever she did, quite an independent sort.

Stack let out a sigh, “That’s beside the point, the computer needs all the help she can get.”

“Sounds like you’ve fallen in love with the machine,” the lady continued sarcastically.

An electrically charged bolt flew out from the ceiling striking the floor in front of her. They then looked eye to eye. Wow! If looks could kill, he would have been dead by now.

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“Captain, please assign the crew and have them set through the drills until they know what to do.” Everyone’s eyes followed Stax leaving the bridge.

The Captain began issuing placements for everyone. Stax really didn’t care who was where, he just wanted off the bridge and out sight from everyone. Five minutes later he was in his cabin, feeling relieved at not having to face them any longer.

10 Preparations to Leave

The pyramid face had been carved out of a mountain. Fasala remembered it having a communications tower on top when she had first arrived. She had no idea how it had been reshaped into a face.

The great hangar doors near the pyramid’s top were raised using a simple set of levers and pulleys. The view of the plains below took everyone’s breath away, especially Stax’s. He stood transfixed as his eyes roamed the redness. He loved Mars for the solitude and peace it offered. A mumble of voices was heard through the communications unit. Someone pointed at the doomed Deimos II off in the distance.

It had been nearly four weeks since moving into the alien spacecraft. For Stax, it had seemed like four years. He had accepted his fate and tried to make the best of it, confiding more and more in the ship’s computer. All Captains must live such a lonely life, he was now sure. But then again, none were forced into committing acts of treason or whatever the Navy would eventually try him for.

With his back to the open bay door, Stax looked up at the alien ship. The symmetrical structure stood nearly five floors high and three times the length. The hull was a mixture of granite, steel and mesh nearly half a meter thick. Engineering hadn’t bothered enough to find out about the ship’s engines as much as they had tried to find a way of shutting the computer down. Stax had learned from the computer that indeed it was a form of fusion but it was power incarnate, relying on certain gas trails scattered throughout the galaxy. No one believed the speeds Fasala said it could achieve. They really didn’t care as long as they returned to Earth.

“Penny for your thoughts,” Julie said standing near him.

“I wish I could stay,” he said looking away from her.

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“Well, I’d rather go home,” she replied.

“This is the first time you’ve spoken to me in nearly a month. Change of heart?” Stax said a bit too strongly.

“Look, I’m sorry but I’m been so mixed up with what’s been happening. I don’t trust that alien machine,” she then whispered, “nor does anyone else. Everybody thinks that you’ve been taken in by it.”

“What do you think?” Stax asked her.

“I don’t know,” she said sadly. “What will you do once we return to Earth?” she asked quickly changing the subject.

“I’ll wait and see what the Navy does with me,” he said sadly, then continued, “We need to get there first.”

“Do you think there will be problems with the alien craft?” she asked, obviously realizing that there could be a problem.

“Fasala thinks everything should work out to get us back. But that ship has been sitting in this place for nearly four hundred years. And now we’re just going to start it up and fly it back to Earth. I suppose anything could happen,” he said.

“Why do you treat the computer as if it’s a person?” Julie asked with a questioning face.

“Because it talks and also acts like a person. I think it’s more human than most of the people on this expedition.” Stax said looking at Julie defensively.

“We’d better return to the ship. It’s only another half hour before Fasala begins the launch routine,” Stax said walking toward the ramp.

“Yes, Overseer,” Julie answered.

Jerking his head back toward Julie, he saw her smile.

11 Complications

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Captain, have everyone attend their assigned stations,” Stax’s voice still showed uneasiness in speaking with the Captain. “Fasala intends to take us into a low orbit around Mars. After the first orbit, she’ll decide if it’s all right to leave.”

“Everyone’s at their assigned stations, Overseer,” the Captain answered.

Stax noticed that the Captain’s voice was even, showing only a slight tone of anger. “Thank you Captain. Okay Fasala, what next?” he asked.

“Give the command Overseer,” she replied.

“Okay, let’s go, Fasala. Take us to Earth,” he said firmly. Remarks of confirmation were heard around the bridge.

The ship started with a low rumble. The intensity increased showing what Stax thought to be a strain. “Fasala, are the engines working correctly?” Stax asked becoming a bit concerned at the sounds he was hearing.

“I think everything is fine,” she replied.

“Captain, is everyone reporting regularly?” Stax asked.

“Yes, Overseer,” Captain Spenser answered.

On the screen above Stax, Fasala displayed a picture of the engine controls. Another screen viewed the ship rising above the hangar deck. Clouds of dust rose about the ship. As it cleared the opening and started to gain distance, the Face of Mars could be seen retreating.

Reports could be heard over the communication units, “Cleared bay doors, engines functioning normally, inertia level normal,” and others followed. There were no signs of G forces within the ship. Fasala had assured Stax that the crew would not feel anything. It had something to do with a magnetic field produced by the engines. Another report, “Orbit obtained.”

A light began blinking on the engine controls. “Captain, there’s a slight rise in heat from one of the engines,” Commander Owens from engineering reported.

“You heard the report Overseer,” Captain Spenser echoed.

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“Respond and adjust accordingly Commander Owens,” Stax spoke into the communication unit.

“Keep us posted Commander,” the Captain spoke again.

“What’s the story, Overseer?” the Captain asked.

“Captain, according to the read outs, the engines are about to jump into fifth gear,” Commander Owens called out through the communication unit.

“The ship has left orbit,” a report came in.

“What’s happening, Fasala?” Stax asked.

“There’s been a misfire in one of the fusion chambers. I have a run away burn,” Fasala replied.

“What can you do about it?” Stax asked.

“We have two options, Overseer. One, we ride it out until the engine returns to normal. Two, we shut the engines down. There’s a ninety percent chance that if the engines are shut down, I will be unable to start them up again without proper repair. If we let them burn, the chances are that they will return to normal. What are your orders Overseer?”

At that moment, Mary Smith, civilian communications specialist, pointed toward the screen and yelled, “Look!” Jupiter came into view and was gone in seconds.

“What are your orders, Overseer?” the computer asked.

“The spaceship just passed Jupiter. What is happening?” Captain Spenser asked.

“Speed is increasing. We’re at half light,” the computer said.

“Stop it! Stop the ship!” the civilian specialist added to the craziness that was already happening on the bridge.

“What’s your recommendation, Captain?” Stax felt out of his league.

“It’s your call, Overseer,” the Captain replied smartly.

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“Let it ride, Fasala,” Stax told the computer. Everyone on the bridge watched in awe as Saturn revealed itself on the screen.

But then the ship shot forward as if out of a canon. That was the last Stax remembered. He opened his eyes hearing someone from a distance talking to him. “Overseer? Overseer?” Dr. Hussain stood before Stax.

“How is everyone?” Stax came to.

“Everyone, I believe, will live,” the doctor replied. “There are some broken bones but that’s about all.”

“What happened?” Stax asked.

“Ask your computer friend,” he replied coldly.

“What happened, Fasala?”

“As I opened another engine to help balance out the problem drive, it also misfired. I had to open other engines to balance things out. The ship shot forward into higher G’s than the inertia system could immediately compensate for.

“What are we doing now, Fasala?” Stax asked.

“We are continuing to burn off the residue from the misfire,” the reply came.

Dr. Hussain managed to help Stax off the deck. “Thanks Doc.,” Stax said.

“That’s not necessary,” the doctor responded

Stax looked at the doctor for but a moment remembering that the hiring of the Egyptian Doctor, like his posting, was a political move. A person representing the large Arab faction of Earth.

“Just how fast are we going, computer?” Captain Spenser asked watching the screen.

“At present we are just under four lights continuing to increase.”

A silence swept over the bridge.

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Part II

1 Committed

The ship was shrouded in black mist. The thickness formed a darkness blocking the light of the stars. Occasionally an opening created a mystical sight on the screens. At times the mist would clear for hours at a time only to return again.

Stax had long retired to his quarters. He sat at the table with a cup of coffee mesmerized by the fading in and out of the darkness. "Once your engines have finished this burning cycle, how long will it take us to return to Earth, Fasala?" Stax asked.

"Overseer, there are several complications now," Fasala answered hesitantly.

"Yes?" Stax knew he wasn't going to like this.

"By the time the engines burn through, we may be over 500 light years down the Orion Belt," Fasala said.

"Well, that's not a problem, just turn around and head back," Stax said.

"Returning to Earth would mean exhaustion of fuel and danger to myself and possibly to everyone on board. We must go on to the supply depot at Deneb for refueling," Fasala said lightly.

"What supply depot?" Stax said, "You didn't mention this to me before, Fasala."

"One problem created another, Overseer," I'm sorry.

This puzzled Stax. There was that humanistic talk again. A computer can't have those kinds of feelings.

The computer continued, "My consumption of fuel has tripled. I estimate that will be down nearly a third of what I originally had."

"I thought your data files were erased?" Stax questioned her.

"The data, which I do have, says that there was a supply depot some 400 years ago," the computer answered.

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“But, what if there’s no fuel at this depot?” Stax said.

“That involves the other problem. If we turned around, we would have to seek another trail back to Earth and would use additional fuel. It would be too dangerous for us to retrace the way that we’ve come,” Fasala actually stumbled over her words.

“Why do I get the feeling that you’re not being completely open, Fasala?” Stax didn’t know where this was heading to, but he began to think that possibly the computer was in some way, mad. “What’s this danger you’ve mentioned?”

“Overseer, I’m being completely honest with you. It’s just that bits of information keep popping up. One thing triggers another thing. I have a reference to some kind of threat throughout the galaxy. A warning not to travel alone through open space. Ships star trails are easily traced,” she said.

“That’s just great!” Stax said, hanging his head down. “Do you know what these people will want to do to me? No, don’t answer that. Fasala, patch me into to the crew. I’ll have to tell them.”

An hour later, all nineteen officers and civilians surrounded him. This time he met everyone in a large community room near everyone’s living quarters. Stax actually required Fasala to replay the conversation that transpired between him and Fasala. At the end, quietness reigned for several minutes until the Captain spoke, “What now, Overseer?” He then laughed bitterly, looking directly at Stax.

“I don’t really know,” Stax was upset, “but let me say that I’ve been thrown into this the same as you and everyone has. I’m trying to make the best of it. And you, instead of fighting me with your stupid laugh should offer help.”

“How dare you talk to the Captain that way,” Commander Owens said sternly.

Stopping the Commander by his hand, the Captain just looked at Stax.

Stax faced him off. After a minute or so, “If anyone has any suggestions, comments, ideas or fears, come and talk to me afterwards. This meeting is finished.”

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Moments later, several of the civilian scientists expressed their fears about what was going on and wanted to know if they would be able to return to Earth. Stax had no answer for them other than the reassurance that he was trying.

Shortly after the Captain approached, “Overseer, I’d like to investigate the situation we’re in so as to make some sense of it,” he said with a somewhat different tone.

No apology, no saying sorry or anything, thought Stax. “Okay, sure. That would be great, Captain.”

Training resumed for everyone, including Stax. People were extremely upset and tempers flared easily. Many openly expressed distrust for the alien computer while others were just afraid. The Captain had worked at the computers all day. Stax ordered Fasala to give the Captain as much assistance as she could, that is if he would accept it.

The next day, the Captain walked up to Stax laying out several papers before him. “The physicist and engineers understand the theory behind the engines but the technology to do it is something else,” he said, speaking to Stax quite humorously for the first time. “It has something to do with active protons being kept in a charged field. They’re fused together to make helium atoms with the resulting release of energy like a minor supernova. The waste gases somehow then interact with the dark matter inside the mist that we fly through. That gives us our speed ratio. But these waste gases are somehow traceable. The amount of the fuel in the fuel cell continues to decrease drastically.” he said and then left.

Well, straight to the point, Stax thought. “Fasala,” Stax spoke softly from the bridge.

“Yes, overseer.”

“I assume that we have no other choice but to proceed to Deneb after the engines return to normal. Is that correct?” Stax asked.

“That would be the best alternative,” she replied.

2 Friendliness

A week had passed with the spacecraft continuing its hurried journey down the Orion belt. Stax had continued his training exercises avoiding as many of the crew as he could. Today,

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having repeated an exercise five times, he grew tired. The problem involved an evasive maneuver co-ordinated with the ship's computer at a certain point where an attacker was positioned at a certain point in space. He couldn't figure out what he was doing wrong.

Stax looked around. Captain Spenser and Commander Owens were over at the side of the bridge studying some schematics of the way the engines performed. No doubt, trying to figure out how to turn the computer off without it affecting the ship, Stax thought. David Martin, computer specialist, was engrossed in how the ship and computer were so intertwined. He had his head stuck in a bank of circuits near the communication desk. Mary also had her head under the console trying to figure out why the communications unit wouldn't work properly. Stax had privately gotten David's promise not to try anything funny and in turn Fasala gave him a little more leeway in studying her circuitry.

Taking a break from his studies, he walked over to David, "Find out anything interesting?" Stax said.

"The ship's computer circuits and everything else is all one. The computer is even tied directly into the electrical wiring. As far as I can tell, the ship is the computer and the computer is the ship. The technology is perhaps thirty to forty years beyond us. I understand quite a lot of it, but some of it I don't. And just think, all of it's four hundred years old, if what the computer says is correct." They both laughed and David then returned to his work.

Julie entered the bridge from the corridor hatch. "Stax? Oh! I mean, Overseer?" She put on a smile. "We've moved all the astronomical and meteorological gear to the place Fasala showed us." The outward friendliness of Julie and Martin was encouraging, to say the least, especially to Stax.

"The proper chain of command, Dr. Timon and Dr. Martin lie over here." The Commander interrupted authoritatively.

Commander Owens comment cut through the first relaxed moment Stax had felt in days. Not knowing how to reply, he simply said, "Let's don't be so stiff about things, Commander."

"Why you impetuous nothing," the Commander said scornfully. "I dare you to correct me."

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“Commander Owens, you’re forgetting to whom you are speaking,” the computer filled the room with her voice.

The Commander turned his head, barely able to keep his tongue, went back to whatever he was doing, his anger, still evident through the stiffness in his movements.

“I’ll expect your reports as soon as you can provide them, Dr. Martin and Dr. Timon,” Captain Spenser said evenly.

“Sure, as usual,” both acknowledged Captain Spenser.

At that point, Stax didn’t want to carry the point any further for fear that the computer might over-react again, so he returned to his problem. Julie left the bridge and David was left sitting on the deck, his head under another console.

Later that day as Stax wandered through the 2nd level corridor, Julie called out, “Hey Stax! Oh! I keep forgetting, Overseer?” but she laughed anyway.

Entering her office Julie said, “I still can’t get used to calling you Overseer.”

“I think it’s especially important to use the term whenever we’re on the bridge. I think it’s more a sign of respect and you can show that by using my name,” Stax replied. “Would that be correct, Fasala?”

“Well, that would be a break from discipline, but you can allow different people to use your nick name. I would encourage caution as others would take advantage of it.”

“Look now, Stax, I’m sorry that I’ve been a bit stand offish. I’m trying to make sense of what’s happening with us. The destruction of Deimos II in the Martian Storm, the discovery of this ship, and now we find ourselves going through space at unbelievable speeds. It’s nothing personal. You’d be interested to know that a few couldn’t even care less. Right now the astronomers are going crazy studying the local star systems. And Stax, I just want to add that I actually admire your stand. I know you’re only making the best of a given situation.”

Stax was surprised by how personal Julie was. “Well, things have certainly been a bit crazy lately.”

“What an understatement!” Julie said.

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“Listen, would you like to have some coffee?” Stax asked.

“Sure, but I’ll get it. I don’t think it would be all proper for the Overseer to be waiting on a common civilian,” she grinned.

“Oh, come on,” Stax tried to laugh.

“I’ll be back in a moment with the coffee,” she said leaving the room.

Stax enjoyed his time with Julie. An hour had passed before he knew it. But all good things come to an end Stax thought as Lieutenant Andrews walked into the office.

“Well, hello there. The Overseer fraternizing with the troops?” he smiled assuring Stax of the intended joke. “Nice to see you out and about. Is it permissible to call you Stax?” Paul looked around at the walls and ceiling of the room.

“I think we may have a short truce at the moment,” Stax replied. But at that moment Lieutenant Commander Isles walked in. Stax saw the consternation on her face. “Well, better return to the studies,” he said getting up out of the chair. “And thanks for the coffee, Julie.”

“Oh, don’t get up because of me, enjoy yourselves,” she said biting.

“Loosen up, Lieutenant,” Paul countered.

“Loosen up? How do you loosen up when I see people joking around with a person that committed every treasonable offense under Naval regulations?” she continued angrily.

“He’s only making the best of a given situation that’s been forced on him.” Julie interrupted.

“I certainly agree, he is most certainly making the best of a given situation,” Lieutenant Commander Isles responded with a sneer on her face.

Stax had already left but a female voice rang out from the walls, “I suggest you stop these comments’ Lieutenant Commander Isles, for you’re getting dangerously disrespectful.” He knew that Isles acted only on what she had been told by the Captain and Commander.

3 Revelation

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Stax seated himself at the table to eat his evening meal. He stared at the walls of his cabin, thinking over the past twenty four hours, thankful there hadn't been any major problems. Captain Spenser kept himself busy by keeping everyone else busy. Neither had there been any more scenes with the Commander. However, Stax hadn't seen him since then either.

"Fasala?" Stax called.

"Yes, Overseer," she always spoke in a certain formal manner when using the term Overseer.

"Tell me, are there any other things that you haven't told me about yourself that I really should know?" he busied himself eating.

"Yes," she replied.

Stax waited. When nothing else was said, he slowly put his knife and fork down. "What are you holding back?" But no answer came, nothing except the sound of crying. Stax waited not understanding what was happening. "Fasala, you seem so human to be a computer. How can you cry? Why are you crying?"

"It's because I'm not just a computer. My people discovered how to take a person's total memory and soul, enhance it and imprint it onto electronic cells and then incorporate them into a starship. As David said, I am the ship. Over four hundred years ago I contracted myself out to be the first living ship in history. It was the most advanced technology, a great leap forward in starship design. They have kept my body in an active stasis field stored somewhere. It was only supposed to be for three years."

Stax came completely out of his chair listening to every word Fasala was saying.

"For some reason I was shut down shortly after arriving on this planet. The next thing I knew I was speaking to you. I was activated the moment you touched me. There was another ship like me that came along. I don't understand what happened to her either. As experimental ships, we were assigned Overseers not only to be like a ship's Captain but also a friend and someone we could talk to when we felt lonely," she said. "But there are sub routines that I must follow. In some things, I have no choice but in others, I do. I was only supposed to be away from home for three years but it's been four hundred years. I don't know why the company left me like this. A lot of my personal memory is missing, especially the co-ordinates of my home

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planet. The moment you touched me, a sub routine took over declaring you the ‘Overseer’,” she finished.

Stax was at a loss for words. The alien ship and computer had indeed acted so strangely but yet so normally. That was the paradox which he hadn’t understood; the computer is an alien entity of what, Stax wasn’t sure. “Fasala, do you have something that shows what you or your kind looks like?” he said fearfully.

Above his table, the wall seemed to open up. What appeared next, took Stax’s breath away. An active matrix screen with a beautiful black eyed and dark olive skinned Nubian girl. Her shining black hair lay in braids down her back. Her wide smile commanded your total attention. Her clothing was a tight fitting blue jump suit with tall laced material boots. “You’re human,” was the only thing that came out of his mouth. He slowly sat back down in the chair not taking his eyes off the screen, not even to blink.

“Of course I am, whatever else did you expect?” The picture actually spoke to him.

“You’re talking to me. Is this real? You’re talking and you’re so beautiful.”

“Well, thank you Overseer,” she said bashfully.

Stax couldn’t think of anything else to say. “How are you doing this?”

“I have the ability to portray myself in what you call a 3-D image,” she said.

“Does this image represent who you really are?” Stax asked.

“Oh yes, it’s every bit of me,” she then laughed. The screen changed before his eyes, “We can have dinner, together.”

The whole of the wall changed in depth and imagining. The room seemed to extend another meter with Fasala now sitting on the other side taking up a glass in her hands. “I can do this anywhere within the walls of the ship.”

“This is incredible. What happens if we are blown up or shot at?” he asked.

“Then I die, just like you and everyone else,” she said solemnly. “But Stax, as I said my contract was to be for only three years. I planned to return home afterwards. The process was

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supposedly simple. I upload my memory into the ship, become the ship and then after my contract finished, I simply download myself back into my body. Four hundred years ago the known galaxy was a peaceful place. There were problems with food production in some Kingdoms but production was on the increase. Science was on the increase. Now there's some kind of great threat to the galaxy. Ships are warned not to travel alone. And I was left, abandoned, in a dusty hangar on the edge of the galaxy for four hundred years. Everybody that I knew is now dead, my family and my friends," she ended sadly.

Stax sat listening, not sure whether he could believe what he was hearing. But there she was, sitting across the table from him, her facial complexion was picture perfect. She had changed from a blue jump suit to a white evening gown with a diamond necklace around her neck. Her smile ever so inviting. "This is really incredible!"

"You've already said that," she laughed.

"Wait until everyone else sees you," Stax said.

"Perhaps my visual introduction should be a little slower. Most of them resent me. They think I'm a computer gone mad."

"We'll see," said Stax.

4 Training

Their journey continued down the galactic arm. Days had now passed into two weeks. The officers and civilians had settled into an uneasy peace for the time being. That is, all except for a few. Commander Owens and several of the engineering people were always ready to pick holes in whatever he said or did. But it wasn't so bad, they were in engineering most of the time anyway. And besides, they were always careful not to go overboard with their verbal abuse. Fasala's early demonstrations of power prevented them from such actions. Out of fear, tempers would often flare and usually he was on the receiving end when they did. He had instructed Fasala, short of a life or death situation, to strictly hold back her temper no matter what they said to him.

Stax told the group in one of their rare meetings about what Fasala had said about herself. This brought arguments of disbelief from a few. Others didn't really care. Wanting to return to Earth was foremost on their mind. Even to Stax, it was still difficult to understand

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what exactly Fasala was. She had shown him pictures of herself but what did they really mean? The alien computer could have created all of it for who knows what reasons. But, he felt sure that it was some type of alien entity and knew that it hadn't revealed everything about itself yet.

Every day, Fasala insisted on training, training and more training. Her command of English increased also. She had digested all the information from Deimos II's computer about Earth and every technology. Some questioned this but it could hardly be helped. Several of the officers, especially the Commander insisted that he needed Earth type operational computers thus having David Martin network them with the ship. Interestingly enough, she openly admitted that Earth's technology wasn't that far behind hers. And there was some Earth weaponry that was actually beyond her knowledge. This wasn't a surprise since the galaxy of her day was a peaceful one.

Stax continued studying the books the Captain had given him, plus practicing different attack scenarios Fasala had provided through the computer terminals. The Captain also kept busy studying semantics of the ship's design. All agreed that the engineering of the ship was basically understandable but some things just didn't make sense. The great speeds which she could attain and how the ship could handle the extreme heat it generated, weren't fully understood. The computer people were fascinated with her ability to carry on multiple conversations and thinking. And through all the interaction, most found it easier to relate to the computer as a living entity because of the way it acted.

Besides training, Fasala instructed repair crews to fix things that could be fixed. But Stax knew that she carefully watched everything and anything the crews did. She privately discussed the lack of trust she held for the Captain and others with Stax.

5 Mountains of Ice

One morning, out of the darkness of surrounding space, a reddish orange flowered Nebula appeared with Christmas Tree like star points placed throughout it. All of the scientists busied themselves monitoring it. Stax heard someone mentioned names: North American & Pelican. He felt, somehow that they were less meaningful now, especially seeing them from this distance and location rather than from Earth.

He had never been interested in deep space phenomena, but the objects of glowing dust and gas were certainly beautiful. Stax became interested in spite of himself. It was difficult not to

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watch. Loops and cloud formations in bright red and orange presented themselves. And the beauty only increased as they approached. Two astronomers standing next to him were deep in discussion about how some thought that ultraviolet radiation ionized the gases within the nebula thus causing the sparkle effect that characterized nebulae while others thought nebulae actually contained huge particles of ice that floated freely reflecting star light. He really had no idea what they were on about but he listened in spite of himself.

“Fasala, how soon will we reach these clouds?” Stax asked ever so slightly interested.

“We will pass by them in another four days,” she said.

“Any sign yet of those engines returning to normal?”

“They are still burning at maximum power,” she replied.

The closer the ship came to the clouds, the variety of colors increased. For hours at a time, different ones stayed glued to Fasala’s larger screen. Some out of scientific observation and study, but most out of simple curiosity. Eventually the orange shades started to change to bright dirt browns. The blues began to stand out like snow flakes. Then heavier concentration of blues became apparent in the larger North American Nebulae.

“Stax, I mean Overseer,” Julie approached him. “Can you navigate a little closer to the nebulae?” Julie held a second degree in astronomy so naturally she was interested in it. Stax hadn’t seen much of her ever since the phenomena presented itself.

“Fasala?” Stax spoke aloud, “Is that possible?”

“In fact, it may help us slow down.”

“Why is that?” Stax wanted to know.

“It’s because the ship automatically seeks out heavily gaseous areas of space to travel in. These areas run ribbons or trails throughout the galaxy. They’re called *Star Trails*. It’s where the surrounded gases interact by the engine combustion.”

“Is that why, we’ve been traveling so fast, Fasala?” Stax asked.

“Yes, but this information was only recently processed.”

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“Okay, take us as close as possible to the Nebulae,” Stax changed the subject.

“Overseer, I’d like to remind you that this isn’t any pleasure cruise,” Commander Owens interrupted. “Our lives are at risk in a run away alien spaceship hundreds of light years from Earth and you want to investigate a nebula?”

Stax looked up at him and then over at the front screen. The approach to the nebulae changed. “Commander, a chance of a lifetime is before us. Why not take advantage of it. It also gives some purpose in coming all this distance.”

There was no further response from the Commander.

Most of the civilians and officers became involved with the study of the nebulae. In fact, the closer they approached, the fewer complaints were heard. Their purposes seemed restored, at least for the time being, thought Stax.

“Overseer?” Fasala surprised Stax out of his daydream.

“Yes?” he replied.

“The engines have returned to normal,” she said with a surprisingly normal voice. “Fuel is low as expected but all shipboard systems and engines are working normally.”

The nebulae continued to fill the bridge screen.

“It’s beautiful,” Communications specialist Mary Smith commented.

“You can say that again,” Julie said standing beside her.

“Well, while we’re here, Fasala, can you slow right down so we can have a closer look. I’m sure no one would mind.”

“What are those blue things floating inside?” David Martins was drawn to the screen.

“Whatever they are,” Julie answered, “they vary in shades of blue.”

Fasala slowed down to a crawl. She entered the dust particles and gases of the nebulae. They were swallowed in the bright colored hydrogen whirling in and out as if being blown by a light wind. The blue objects were coming into the range of the view screen. There were gasps of

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surprise as the blue objects were recognized as being nothing more than ice bergs. Great mountains of ice laced with rocks and dust moved lazily through the gases. They were from a couple of meters across to hundreds of kilometers. They floated in the gas much the same way as ice floated in the oceans on Earth, except in this case they were not melting. Fasala had to change course several times to move out of the way of the larger ones. The gases of the nebulae seemed to constrain the bergs from traveling at any great speeds. Fasala literally pushed many of the ice objects to one side as she continued her course.

“Captain, I think you should see something,” one of the Naval astronomers first approached the Captain.

Stax turned with a question on his face, “See what?”

“We’ve got the scope trained on it now, up on the 2nd level,” Lieutenant Andrews said.

Paul was the primary astronomer that had accompanied the expedition to Mars. Julie was the other astronomer. Paul was also the only officer who had actually befriended Stax during throughout the trip. In fact, in the whole time he had known Paul, Paul had never said an unkind word to anyone.

Stax followed along with the Captain, Commander and a few others from the bridge. Definitely a break in discipline, the Commander would be saying any time now, Stax thought but it never came.

“I was looking at what I thought was a strange looking berg and there’s a reason why it’s strange. Look,” the officer pointing to the telescope.

“It’s a ship half buried in one of the ice mountains,” Stax moved off to let others see.

“Fasala, can you pick any of this up on your sensors?” Stax asked.

“Only because you have now pointed it out. I’ve been too busy watching everything else,” she replied.

“It can’t be that far from us,” the Captain commented. “Computer, can you get us any closer than we are.”

“Overseer?” Fasala asked for confirmation on the Captains request.

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“Go ahead Fasala,” Stax said

After about an hour, the wreckage could be easily seen on the bridge’s main screen. Everyone watched as Fasala worked herself around ice mountains moving right up the wreckage in question.

“Overseer, I’m picking up a weak message from the ship,” Fasala said.

“Can you play it?” Stax asked.

Everyone held their comments as they listened to the message, “We are under attack, trying to evade.....ships. Please help.”

“That confirms the entry about a galactic wide threat,” Fasala commented.

The ship, itself, was similar to Fasala. It had plunged into the ice mountain, enough to bury itself deep within its mass.

“Overseer, that’s my sister ship. She’s the other prototype. We went through pre-training together and traveled out to Mars. Her name was Naomi, she was from one of the central Kingdoms,” she said sadly.

Several mumbled about Fasala’s comment regarding Naomi. They still weren’t sure of Fasala’s sentence.

“Captain, can you organize a group to investigate that? Maybe Commander Owens would like the chance to lead the group. Have them find the engineering section, if possible, and look for fuel cells,” Stax said.

“Good idea,” the Captain replied.

Stax noted that was the first compliment the Captain had ever paid him. Several hours later six people entered the wreckage. Fasala continued with more memories about Naomi and her experiences. She found it confusing, some memories came easily but large gaps were obvious there. Fasala had hoped that Naomi died on impact, otherwise, she would have gone literally insane.

“This ship is identical to Fasala,” Commander Owens said, “it’s dead.”

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“I’m not dead Commander.” Fasala replied.

There was no reply from the commander. He never cared for the intelligence the computer entity manifested.

“We’re on the bridge now,” the Commander continued. “There doesn’t seem to be any power but the bridge is very much intact. “Could there be any way that we could access the computer’s core memory? This would help us find out just what happened.”

Fasala answered immediately, “The core memory is located on the level right below you but I don’t think you will be able to gain access to it. I don’t even know how to gain access to my own core memory.”

Again the Commander chose not to answer Fasala. He ordered two officers to the engineering area to search for a fuel cell. Another two were sent to check out the cargo hold.

“All of you keep in touch,” were the Commander’s parting words.

Commander Owens and David Martin worked their way around the bridge. Various object floated past them. “Listen up, everyone. Be careful, this place is full of floating debris,” the Commander said.

“Commander? This is Major Williams.”

“Yes, Major.”

“Still proceeding to Engineering, but we’re still in an area open to space.”

Everyone waited on the bridge for the additional news about the crashed ship. Then, Commander Owens broke the stillness, “We are continuing our search, Captain.”

“Acknowledged,” Captain Spenser replied.

“Commander Owens, we’re now in the engine room,” Major Williams reported. “It all seems intact but I think the next compartment is open to space as well.”

“Continue your search, Major,” the Commander ordered.

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“Commander Owens, Captain Lake speaking. We’ve just entered one of the holds. There are several things anchored to the deck. They’re about the size of F16 fighters. They have enough room for two people in the cockpit.”

“Fasala, what do you make of that?” Stax said but continued thinking about Captain Lake; like David Martins, Lake was also a specialist in computers. Captain Lake was one of the more level headed officers on the ship, Stax thought.

“I don’t know, I haven’t any references in my memory about having any craft,” Fasala said.

“Commander Owens,” an excited Williams interrupted the by play between Stax and Fasala, “we found a partially filled fuel cylinder.”

“Commander Owens,” Captain Spenser spoke this time, “that fuel cell may be our only ticket home. I suggest that all efforts be made to recover it and everyone return, immediately.”

“Then again, it may not be,” Stax said to the Captain. “I think we should continue to explore the ship with two of the teams. Major Williams can return with the fuel cell. The ones in the hold should continue to find out as much as possible about those craft. I think Commander Owens should continue his search of the rest of the ship.” Stax was still a little concerned over this mysterious threat and he wanted to know more about what caused this ship to drive itself into a mountain of ice.

Captain Spenser stared at Stax spitefully, not used to having his ordered counter commanded. “You heard the Overseer, everyone,” the Captain finished off.

“Fasala, are you sure you can’t tell us anything more about that message?” Stax asked.

I can only repeat what I’ve said about the threat. With this message now, I have two references. Upon leaving the central galactic core, there were no wars, only peace.

Stax wasn’t encouraged by what he had heard. No one else thought whether or not this threat involved them. And perhaps it didn’t but Stax wished he knew for sure.

They remained at the damaged ship for a week. With the discovery of the fuel cell nothing was more important, especially to the Captain and the Commander than returning to

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Earth. But against their arguments, Stax insisted that everything should be taken that wasn't bolted down. Fasala recommended taking anything that could be unbolted. After cutting a large hole in the bottom of the wrecked ship, the two craft were transferred over into Fasala's holds. Tons of space frozen food supplies were found.

Fasala demonstrated a sadness throughout their time. She remembered everything about the girl who served as the other ship's computer. They were practically the same age and had often relied upon each other for support throughout the space journey. The evening before they planned to leave, she started crying again. The next morning Fasala pulled away from her dead companion, slowly moving out through the ice mountains once again.

6 The Threat

Deneb was over hundred light years away now. A short distance compared to what they had traveled so far. Before continuing, Stax wanted to discuss the situation with everyone. They had found a lot of things on the ruined ship. The most important to him was the message. Stax wanted to know if any of the others were as apprehensive as he was. Being somewhat still uneasy with his new role, he called everyone to order, chairman like.

"I think that we should continue battle drills in light of what we've found here," Stax said after the customary greetings and small talk, "but with even more rigor. Fasala has stressed again the importance of preparation against whatever this threat is about."

"A proven threat whose only word we have is a computer," Commander Owens said.

"Well, there's a ship sticking out of an ice mountain, Commander Owens," Stax said a bit too intensely. "I think that says enough."

But to his surprise, the Captain actually agreed, "If we run across anyone else in returning to Earth, we would need to be better prepared. I'll get the computer to give me a list of weaponry, offensive maneuvers and any information that will help with training."

"That information is available at the Overseer's approval, Captain," Fasala's voice interrupted the Captain.

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“Please make it available for the Captain, Fasala,” Stax said wanting to keep the Captain on his side as much as possible. “Also, Fasala has some weaponry, but she fears it too outdated and wants us to see if we can come up with anything.”

“What can we possible provide to match any of this technology?” David Martian asked.

“Lasers,” the Captain immediately commented. “There is no reference to indicate any kind of laser capability. Is that correct, computer?”

“That is correct, Captain. By the way, Captain, you are allowed to call me Fasala,” she added cutely.

Why does she do this, Stax thought to himself? Can’t she see that this kind of talk doesn’t make my life any better? “Captain, can you organize the Engineers to help David start working on this as soon as possible?” Stax asked.

“What do you think, Commander?” Stax continued.

“We have nothing to work with,” the reply came, “it would be a waste of time.”

Again, a silence reigned but only for a few seconds.

“Well, we wouldn’t know until we played around with it. Using some of Fasala’s technology, who knows what we could come up with,” David Martin tried to ease the tension somewhat.

“I think it’s a waste of time and effort,” Commander Owens continued.

But then the Captain took up the cause. “I’ll get something started but I believe the Commander’s doubts have some merit,” he ended.

“Thank you, just see what you can do.” Stax got up and left.

Mean while, Fasala slowly ploughed her way out of the Nebulae. It would still be days as she continued to push the mountains of ice about, making a clear path for herself.

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The Captain wasted no time in setting up training schedules for the crew. On top of the already heavy training hours, more were added. Stax was encouraged with the seemingly new truce between himself and the Captain which affected his relationship with the others as well. Some were being a little more friendly than before, but it was still obvious that all hadn't changed nor been forgotten.

Sitting before the work station in his own quarters, he spoke, "Fasala, what do you remember about your life before coming on this trip?"

Fasala had made it a regular habit of appearing on the wall screen whenever Stax was in his quarters. "I now remember my home, my family and friends. I am from one of the twelve Kingdoms. As I continue to reprocess my data, small bits of information come to life. I remember that we used to go sailing together. There was this small sheltered lake near to where I was raised. Soft winds would push our small boat along the water. Often I would go to sleep on the seat with my hand over the side. Sailing was what started my interest in space. As a whole my race really didn't venture out into space very much. But that was four hundred years ago, Stax. All of those people," she looked straight at him, "my family and friends, have long died."

Stax saw a sadness come over her, "Sorry Fasala to have reminded you of them. I was just curious."

Changing the subject and blanking the screen, "Stax, the Captain and Commander are coming to see you."

A knock sounded at the door, "Yes?" Stax responded.

Both entered. Stax noticed that the Commander always had a sour look on his face. The Captain looked more encouraged. Putting on as much of a smile as he could, "What can I do for you gentlemen?"

"It's about the extra fuel that we took off the ship. What's hindering us now from returning directly to Earth? As soon as we leave the Nebula we should be able to return directly. I think," said the Captain, "the ship could easily go back to Earth and return to Deneb or do whatever it wanted to do. If you remember that was the agreement; to return once we found enough fuel."

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“Fasala,” Stax raised his voice indicating he was speaking to someone other than the Captain and Commander, “with the fuel we have now, could you return to Earth and come back to Deneb?”

“Yes Overseer, only if I took it slow,” she replied, “but there is still a danger of retracing our route so soon. You may be putting Earth in danger by doing this. I would still recommend we continue to Deneb and then take a much wider berth in returning to Earth.”

“Look, this so called danger is hundreds of years old and the computer doesn’t even know what it’s all about anyway.” Anger blossomed forth from the Commander.

He just couldn’t see clearly what was going on around him now, Stax thought to himself as he looked up into his face.

“Commander,” the Captain said, wanting him to get control of himself.

“These people want to go home. They’re afraid of this ship and all this madness that’s going on. And doesn’t it make sense to return to Earth to let them know what we’ve found out. There’s something happening out here and we need to get ourselves ready for it,” there was a desperateness in the Commander’s voice.

“It would take decades for Earth to prepare itself against whatever is going on in this galaxy,” Stax said. “But that’s beside the point, what’s the big deal. We take an extra week going to Deneb and play it safe by returning to Earth by a different route.”

“Why couldn’t we go out a couple of light years and then return?” the Captain suggested.

“What about it Fasala? Can we do that?” Stax put the question over to Fasala.

“We could try but more than likely we would end back up on the same *Star Trail*. We would need to pick up another trail and this could take weeks or even months. But Overseer, I cannot emphasize enough, the need to consider Earth’s safety.”

“Noted Fasala,” Stax looked at the two officers, “and what will happen to me, Captain,” Stax paused but held his stare, “once we return to Earth?”

“You’ll face a court martial for possible treason,” the Captain replied cynically.

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“And what if I return to Deneb with Fasala?” Stax countered.

“I’ll see that you are branded a deserter and traitor,” said the Captain.

Stax just looked at the Captain. It was all he could do to stop all the rebellious feelings, fears and hatred from bubbling up again inside of himself against everything that the Captain stood for. But after a further moment he said, “Fasala, after leaving the Nebula, plot a return course for Earth at the best fuel saving speed. I want to make sure we have as much fuel as possible so that we can return to Deneb and then find your people.”

“Yes, Overseer,” Fasala answered.

8 The Pull of Darkness

Stax sensed a jubilant feeling among everyone. Jokes and laughter were heard in the corridors, even from the Officers. It brought to mind the merriment weeks ago as they cleared the pyramid face of Mars leaving for Earth. But truthfully, sadness was at the back of his mind. There was no home for him to go back to. He also knew that Fasala did not want to return, but he didn’t think that she would not go against his orders.

Two days later Fasala left the ice field and later the following day pulled free of the Nebula and entered total darkness. It was like a room with the lights turned off. Not one star could be seen. The bridge staff stood at the view screen but it looked as if it had been turned off. Stax asked the Captain to check with the different departments to see if anyone could see anything. But after checking the telescopes, radio and a few other instruments, nothing could be made of it.

“Overseer,” Fasala spoke softly into Stax’s ear.

“Yes Fasala, what is it?” he replied.

“Should I change course for the galactic edge? I should be able to pick up a star trail from there.”

“Yes, but I’m concerned about this darkness we’re in. You have no information on it whatsoever?” Stax asked.

“None,” Fasala replied.

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The astronomers were still studying it. They could not tell where the darkness ended and regular space began. It was absent of light itself. Many of the scientists grew excited, a phenomenon of this nature to study before returning home, what more could one ask for. The phenomenon was light years in distance.

Fasala sped off into the darkness heading toward what she thought was the Galactic edge. As if crossing some invisible boundary, Fasala triggered alarms throughout the ship, “Overseer,” her voice was cautious, “I’m now being pulled off my course out into the darkness.”

“Turn around and head in the opposite direction, now Fasala,” Stax didn’t have to think to give that order.

The ship began a half circle. Fasala applied more and more power. She ignited the second set of engines resulting in an obvious change of force, however, the ship was still being pulled. “Overseer, I am fighting a losing battle against the pull,” she said. At that moment everyone felt the third set of engines start up, increasing the forward thrust nearly a hundred percent.

People on the bridge held their breath as they listened to the whine of the engines pulling against the gravitational well. Putting one foot before the other, everyone began experiencing a pull against their own bodies toward the end of the room. Minutes changed into an hour and then two hours. Fasala inched the ship forward, she was gaining over the gravity forces but ever so little. People were forced to sit down, no longer able to stand against the G forces. Stax got the impression that Fasala was doing everything that was possible to balance speed against the forces tearing at the ship.

Hours later her struggle was still going on but she was gaining.

“Captain,” Commander Owens spoke from the engineering room over the speakers, “the ship will be unable to take much more of these forces.”

The Captain acknowledged the Commander but only after meeting Stax’s eyes.

“Overseer, if I don’t shut the upper engines down now, they will be damaged,” Fasala said fearfully.

“Are we clear of the gravitational pull, Fasala?” Stax asked.

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“No, we are not, Overseer, however, we must shut the engines down, now,” she said.

At that moment, they were all knocked out of their seats to the deck. The ship shot forth as if out of a cannon. Stax managed to yell, “Shut them down, Fasala!”

Fasala brought the ship under control and they were traveling parallel to the Nebula, away from the forces that almost took them. In escaping the darkness, Fasala had spent most of the fuel she had. The exuberance that manifested just a day before was gone. Everyone had already left returning to their cabins for much needed sleep. Only a few people remained on station, Stax was one of them along with the Captain and another Officer. He looked at the screen with the colorful Nebula on one side and the total darkness on the other.

A day later and Stax was back at his work station with the Captain and the others of the crew. He had already given the order to Fasala to proceed to Deneb. But the commander was trying to put up an argument against it.

“We want to return to Earth,” the Commander demanded. “There is enough fuel to get back.”

“But not enough to return to Deneb,” responded Stax.

The Captain then spoke up, “That’s your problem. The crew want to return home. The computer should have realized that the area was a black hole. It should have known.”

“That’s why I need the crew to co-operate and help more. Yes, I should have known but my memory banks didn’t have that information. That was unexplored space,” Fasala defended herself.

“You’ll get no more co-operation from anyone,” Commander Owens interrupted threateningly.

The Captain turned and eyed the Commander, “Careful Mr Owens, we will not have a breakdown in command.”

“You will obey the Overseer and his decisions,” Fasala said sternly.

“Yes and be your slaves,” Commander Owens directed his eyes and head toward the room indicating he was talking to Fasala.

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“Or the Navy’s slaves,” Stax directed his comment to the Commander who only stared in hatred back.

Murmurs could be heard around the room.

Stax continued, “From what I understand, it would take years to go to Earth and have enough fuel to return to Deneb.”

“We must consider the threat even more now especially with the energy we’ve expended trying to get away from the black hole,” Fasala reminded everyone.

“This is why I ordered Fasala to head toward Deneb,” Stax said.

“No!” Commander Owens rushed toward Stax grabbing his shirt.

“No Fasala!” Stax called but too late to stop the bolt of lightning hitting the Commander.

The Commander fell to his knees unconscious. The bolt that Fasala had released was the strongest yet. She knew that she could have killed him had Stax not countermanded.

The Captain ran over and held the Commander’s head off the floor. Dr. Hussain was also there checking his pulse.

“We’re on our way to Deneb,” Stax made his way to leave.

“It’s not decided,” the Captain yelled to Stax.

“I have decided,” Stax said without turning. That evening, Stax was depressed as ever from the meeting. Fasala tried cheering him up by acting out having a meal with him and talking about things she was now remembering about her people. It did help and he soon forgot about the troubles of the day.

The following week was uneventful. Stax stayed in his quarters most of the time. Commander Owens had been confined to his own quarters. Surprisingly the Captain suggested this as an appropriate reprimand.

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A single planet stood out upon approaching the system. Its star was on a grander scale than Earth's own solar system. The Planet's distance from the star was nearly twice that which Pluto was from Earth's sun. Deneb was a super giant that dominated enough space to include Mars within its own sphere. Its mass was perhaps fifty times greater than the Sun. The world that circled the star was four times that of Earth with a calculated orbital period of one hundred and thirty years. Even though it lacked an ocean, the planet was covered with various lakes. The atmosphere extended only fifty or so kilometers above its surface made up of an extremely high concentration of ozone. A small layer of carbon dioxide with some oxygen hugged the surface. This would make it quite harmful to walk around in without proper equipment. Stratus type clouds covered nearly seventy percent of the planet's surface. Deneb appeared three and a half times larger in the planet's sky than Earth's sun. And in further study other differences were evident. The escape velocity was twice that of the Earth due to the heavier gravity. Volcanoes were active in few different places. Average planetary temperature was 27 Degrees Celsius compared to Earth's 14 revealing a slight green house effect. Surveillance of the world took several days as Stax wanted to make sure that everything was safe before allowing Fasala to land.

The base was easily seen when Fasala first placed herself in orbit about the world. Two large clear domes covered a habitat of structures within it. Different levels were seen within through the clear structure. Vegetation covered a smaller dome almost hiding it from view.

Upon landing the Captain immediately asked for a landing party to investigate the ruins. Suits, air and communication units would be needed at all times. But in deciding on these things, he could hardly bring himself to even look at Stax. His anger showed in every tone and action he made, but Stax had had enough of everyone. Stax knew that the fuel problem was the item of most concern to the Captain and everyone else. Lieutenant Commander Isles would head the group.

Without further ado, they left the ship and went directly toward the domes. Some woods, thick with undergrowth of limbs, vines and bushes separated the ship from the ruins. The flora contained orange blue tints with a crimson color for the bark. A very colorful world but interestingly, no animal life. Their protective suits kept them cool from the late afternoon heat as they continued their tramp. It only took about twenty minutes to reach the ruins and upon arriving, confirmed that they were exactly that, ruins; seemingly abandoned for decades. Considering the diversity of color about the area, the ruins were a disappointment with all they clear domes and gray structures inside. The undergrowth near the domes was entangled with bits

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and pieces of discarded metal. Some of these loose pieces were collected to be examined later after their return.

The biologist went about collecting samples of leaves. Others were collecting anything they thought important. But each knew the importance of finding much needed fuel cells. The party separated, two guards remained at the entrance while others began their search into the greater dome.

Within, seven levels with conventional stairs were easily distinguished. Technology was the same as that which was throughout Fasala. Vines had grown into the openings making it difficult to enter the dome and had also extended into different rooms and corridors of the dome. Two scientists stayed on the ground floor while others headed up the staircase. Stax listened intently to communications between the party and the Captain. Stax had wanted to accompany them but Fasala didn't think it was such a good idea, especially since the last encounter with the Officers.

He listened as they reported their every action. They were now going up the stairs. After several flights, they entered some kind of general office area. The scene suggested that a mass exodus had taken place with materials thrown everywhere. No one had ever returned since the ruins had been abandoned. Dust and dirt along with odds and ends cluttered the place. Different members of the party slowly searched room after room, hoping to find anything that would reveal the mysteries that surrounded Fasala and the galactic threat the computer had talked about. Being late, the party decided to return to the ship to mull over their findings. They had enough artifacts to keep them busy most of the night.

The next day's investigation continued with even greater effort, especially, the search for fuel cells. The Captain didn't have to emphasize how important this was to anyone. Two groups went along, one went back up the stair case and the other group descended after removing the rubbish from a blocked stair case. It was seen to go down several levels. At one level they entered a dark corridor which proceeded for some fifty or so meters. Stepping over junk, dirt and debris they came to a blocked security door. Upon clearing the dirt and junk plus a little yanking and pushing, the door opened. Lt. Commander Isles and her group entered into a large subterranean storage area. The darkness was so intense that their torches had to be used but even then they could only see a scant distance. The ceiling could be made out near the entrance way.

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Stax listened to the byplay between the Lt. Commander and the Captain. Jan, as some of the civilians called her. She had never given Stax too many hassles. But being all Navy as she was, he knew that she stood with the Captain and the Commander.

“This seems to be outside the dome complex,” Lt. Commander Isles spoke. “The ceiling slants upward from here,” she pointed the light at the top of the door. “Just look at this,” she cast her torch about the place. A mixture of metal and wires protruded from all directions. “You know, I don’t think this place was ever finished,” she commented as her light went across a jungle of scraps, wires and pipes of various kinds piled on the floor. To her side, she saw a picture propped up against a junk pile. “What’s this?” She asked taking the frame in her hand.

“What do you mean, ‘never finished?’” Stax interrupted.

“Well, if you look around the place, including down here, there are bits and pieces lying everywhere but nothing looks used. The structure seemed like it was partially finished and then it was left.”

“I wonder why?” Stax replied.

“Oh! Captain Spenser, I’ve just found something that may be of interest. It looks like a star map with areas marked out over what I think is our galaxy.”

“Make sure that you return with it, Lt. Commander when you’re finished,” the Captain replied.

“Captain,” Stax leaned over speaking softly to him. “That could be really important. Maybe they should return with it now or at least send someone back with it.”

The Captain stared at Stax for a moment and then spoke into the mike, “Lt. Commander, it’s been decided that you should return with the map now.”

“Yes sir,” Isles replied, took up the map and started to make his way back.

10 The Map

Stax, along with the Captain Spenser, Julie and Lt. Andrews stood over the map. “Fasala, this shows twelve areas in space. Are they the kingdoms you spoke of?” Stax asked.

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“Yes, those are the twelve kingdoms,” she replied.

“That’s a lot of space,” Lt. Andrews commented.

“Fasala, what percentage of space do these kingdoms occupy?” Stax asked.

“About fifteen percent of the galaxy,” she answered.

“Deneb is singled out in the color orange plus two other stars are marked here and here in the Orion Belt,” Julie pointed. “Those stars must contain other command posts like Deneb.”

“But look,” Lt. Andrews put his finger on the place where Earth was situated, “there is nothing marked in this area where Earth is. Why would that be?”

“That could be for a reason.” The Captain entered the conversation only momentarily.

The others waited thinking that he would continue but nothing else was spoken.

“According to this map, the kingdoms differ in size and the distance across the Kingdoms is more than the distance we’ve traveled from Earth.”

“The question is, how old is this map. This place looks as if it has been abandoned for hundreds of years,” Julie added.

“I hate to sound negative but those Kingdoms may not even exist anymore,” Lt. Andrews said.

“You could be correct, Lt. Andrews,” Fasala answered sadly. “Anything could have happened in the last four hundred years. The kingdoms were very independent. I just wish I knew which of those kingdoms was my home base.”

At that moment, Lt. Harris, entered the bridge with a smile on his face. Others followed him carrying cylinders of fuel. “Five all together,” he said as he faced them.

“Good work, Lt. Harris,” the Captain looked over the fuel cells.

“Well Fasala, this is enough fuel to go anywhere and back. We can have our trip to Earth and you can return home,” Julie said with a smile, casting her eyes to the walls of the bridge.

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“That’ll have to be considered,” Fasala replied. “But it is good news.”

“What’s there to consider? That was the deal,” Lt. Harris spoke angrily.

“That’s okay, Lt. Harris, I’m sure that the Overseer and the computer will keep to their word,” Captain Spenser cast a serious look at Stax.

They continued talking amongst themselves with an occasional question to Fasala. With the exception of Julie, this was the first time others had acknowledged Fasala in any way.

“Is Commander Owens aware that you found more fuel?” Captain Spenser asked Lt. Harris.

“Not that I know, Sir. He, along with the Chief Engineer and Major Williams are off scouting the area around the ruins.”

Stax thought about that. He knew what the Captain would and would not do. So in a sense he could trust the Captain with that but Commander Owens, the Chief Engineer and Major Williams were three that he wanted to stay away from. Commander Owens had completely avoided him since being released from his cabin. Well, the fuel should make them all very happy. They could return to their introverted Navy lives. There was nothing on Earth for him anymore. The Captain and the others would make a strong enough case against him for treason if he returned. He knew now that there was a whole galaxy out there waiting for him.

“Fasala is there anyone in Engineering?” Stax stopped his day dreaming.

“No, there isn’t,” she replied.

“Julie, can you and the others take these down to Engineering where they can be checked out later?” Stax still felt awkward in his command role. Perhaps he should have asked the Captain to over see it, but sometimes he just didn’t care what anyone thought anymore.

There was no reply. They grabbed a fuel cell and headed out the hatch. Even the Captain followed along.

“Fasala, start plotting the safest route back to Earth.” Stax hated giving that order.

“Even if it’s still not safe?” Fasala said.

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“We have no other choice. They want to go back regardless of any threat and I have agreed to that,” he replied.

“But the fact that this outpost has also been abandoned confirms that something happened,” she argued.

“I agree with you Fasala but we must return these people to Earth. They would openly revolt otherwise,” Stax said.

“I can control that,” she said evenly.

“Yes, but that means they would be no more than our slaves with no say what so ever,” Stax answered.

She was correct of course. It was dangerous to expose Earth until they knew exactly what was going on in the galaxy now.

11 Diamonds and Deceit

What are we looking for, Commander?” Major Williams asked stepping over another dead tree trunk.

“Nothing more than to enjoy the wide-open space, away from that demonic computer and its puppet. Even though we have to wear these masks,” the Commander held his hand up gazing at the orange light as if for the first time he had noticed it. “I feel like a new person just being away from that ship and out of that room,” Owens replied.

“I agree with that. I’m so sick of big sister looking over my shoulder and little brother reigning over the kingdom, I don’t know what to do. One of these days I’m going to show little brother a thing or two,” Major Williams said.

“Tut, Tut. How unprofessional of us,” Owens mimicked the British Engineer’s voice.

All three laughed. Their wanderings brought them up over a rise. A small volcanic lake revealed itself. It was guarded by a thick band of bush and trees. Without thinking the Commander headed down into the forest making his way to the crystal clear water.

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“Did you make sure that the ship couldn’t pick up our own communication devices?” Owens asked.

“Anything over a kilometer is out of range and we’re well over that distance from the ship now,” McBride said. “Wow, what a sight!” McBride turned and looked over the lake. “This place looks as if it’s experienced a recent quake of some sorts,” he said pointing toward a large crevasse that lead down into the water. “What’s that?” he asked indicating an object in the water.

“Looks like some kind of metal,” Williams said.

Having now gotten the Commander’s attention, “No gentlemen, if that’s what I think it is.” He took off his mask and jumped into the water before finishing his sentence. Moments later he came out of the water and put his mask back on. With a smile he held a rock up between his thumb and right index finger, “An uncut diamond, gentlemen! And there are more. Can you believe it? They must have been unearthed by the quake.”

Hours passed. The three sat on the lake shore counting the diamonds that had collected in three piles. Far more than they could ever carry.

“We’re not going against any regulations by doing this are we, Commander?” the Major asked.

“Not to my knowledge,” replied the Commander. “It’s that Wildson who is going to be tried and hung for treason and we’ll be rich as we watch him swing,” he smiled. “However, I suggest that we keep this to ourselves. That computer may get other ideas.”

“Hey, we’d better get moving, look at those clouds,” McBride held his eyes up to the sky. “I think we had better leave now.”

But the rain began to fall. Lightning cracked over the lake with an ear piercing noise, the rain fell in torrents flooding down the hill side. Each grabbed what they could of their diamonds, putting them into empty pockets, shirts, anywhere and headed quickly up the now slippery foliage-covered bank. But as abrupt as it came, the rain also left. Reaching the top all three were out of breath.

“Hey, I left some down there,” McBride said wanting to return.

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“I think we had better return to the ship before they miss us,” said the Commander heading off toward the ship.

A moment later the Major asked, “Commander, what happens if big-sister doesn’t want to return to Earth?”

“I’ve been thinking about that. Big sister has been using Wildson to get her own way; I’m sure of that. If she is programmed as she says she is to follow his instructions, then there needs to be another Overseer.”

“Yes, but if you lay one hand on Wildson, that computer will strike you down instantly,” Major Williams replied.

“Not if I can act before the computer can,” the Commander said looking back at Williams. “I’m not sure how I can do it, but I’m still thinking. Let’s just keep this amongst ourselves even while away from the ship. We’ll talk about it later.”

Nothing else was said about Stax nor about the diamonds. An hour later, they carefully re-entered the ship heading directly toward their cabins. Making sure that the lights were off, they hid their newly acquired wares.

12 Plans and Dreams

By the end of two weeks, the ship was completely checked out. The engines were serviced under the scrutiny of Fasala’s electronic eyes. The time had been very fruitful. Some of the civilian scientists even wanted to stay a while longer. They had only began to study the planet and for them strange things abounded, such as the lack of any animal or insect life. Microscopic life was evident but only in its very infancy. Of course objections came from everybody else in prolonging any departure. The Captain encouraged those that had time to try and learn as much about the planet as they could, however he too was eager to get back to Earth. The planet had a wealth of minerals and an abundant colorful plant life, but the fact that it had no animal life mystified them and Fasala couldn’t shed any light on it either. She knew nothing about animals until she downloaded Deimos II computers into her own memory core.

The Engineers were the busiest of all but the Commander and Engineers always had their daily walk about, leaving the ship for hours at a time. Stax chose to take a back seat during these preparations. It really didn’t matter, for he would be returning to Deneb with Fasala. The

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crew looked to the Captain for commands but they still knew that Stax with Fasala's help held the final decision. He quietly continued his command studies, wanting to learn everything about Fasala's origins and the twelve kingdoms. He questioned Fasala on every scrap of information she had in her memory core. She told him all about her people, the type of government, her best friends, the schools and studies she had accomplished. But huge gaps were still missing and many things she just didn't know.

Everyone was engrossed in getting Fasala in tiptop shape to leave. No one wanted a repeat of what had happened when they left Mars. In addition, upon insistence from Fasala, a thorough weapon's system check was being made. Drills were to begin as soon as they left Deneb's world. The laser technology was still being worked on. Yelvin Greersky decided to do a complete check of the Life Support System which including ventilation, air production, water and recycling. Stax liked the Russian but admittedly hadn't had a lot to do with the bearded man. He usually kept himself busy and had probably gone over the life support systems a dozen times already.

The count down had finally come down to eight hours. Everyone stood back from the bridge screen watching as Fasala drew their return route. A background view of the galaxy's side had already been placed on the screen. "The return route will take us three times as long as it took to reach Deneb," Fasala said.

"Why is that, may I ask?" The Commander said showing a definite lack of trust in what Fasala was talking about.

"Fasala still believes that there could be some kind of danger from this threat. So these are extra precautions," Stax answered for her.

"Oh yes, her imaginary enemies," Commander Owens said smartly.

"Mr. Owens," the Captain said condescendingly.

"Anyway," Fasala continued, "I will burn the least amount of fuel possible so that our exhaust trail will be minimum and fuel saving for my return trip is maximum. We will also be traveling over twice the distance in returning. I will first head away from the galactic plane and skim along the rim. References from my core memory show that there are numerous star trails that can be easily found upon the rim. Once we get directly above Earth and we are sure that

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everything is safe, I'll head inward. My return trip to Deneb will be in the opposite direction. So it will take me as long to return. All of this is more for the protection of your world.

Some of the Officers and civilians were shaking their heads obviously having more objections, but they decided not to voice them.

Looking out at everyone, the Captain said, "I approve of these plans...hu... computer. We can't be too careful and a few extra weeks won't matter."

"Thank you Captain," Stax replied but the cold stare he received indicated that not all was forgiven.

Stax turned toward the others, "So, we have eight hours before liftoff. I think, perhaps, getting some sleep would be a good idea."

At that, everyone started to leave. Stax also left heading for his cabin, sadly thinking about returning to Earth. And in that thinking all of his old fears and anxieties came back. "Fasala," he said entering his quarters, "What keeps you going? Sometimes I get rather depressed, like now. In fact, I stay depressed. Honestly, I know that I promised to take these people back but that doesn't say that I want to go back to Earth myself."

"Stax," she said softly, "sometimes, you are the only thing that keeps me going. Other times, it's thinking about my people and getting my own body back. Being able to live a normal life instead of being a lost starship who doesn't even know where she originated. Once we find my people, you will be welcomed into my own country and my own people. I'll show you our beautiful lands and you'll love it and I'll be there with you, standing along side of you."

"Not much of an Overseer am I? I'm supposed to be the one encouraging you." Stax sat on his bed. "You know something else, I thought that the Captain and I were almost seeing eye to eye on things but did you see the way he looked at me?"

"Get some sleep Overseer. Tomorrow is another day and we have a lot of work to do." Fasala lowered the lights and Stax heard the soft sound of his favorite music off in the background. It only took a few minutes before he'd drifted off to sleep.

Part III

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1 Galactic Rim

Are you awake, Overseer?”

“Yes, Fasala,” Stax replied. “I’ve been awake for some time now. I keep going over the things that need to be done. How much longer before we leave?”

“One hour.”

“Well, wake everyone up. Let’s get with it,” Stax told her as he expelled a deep breath then jumped out of bed.

“All the Officers have been at their stations for the past half hour. I’ve woken up the others,” she finished off.

Stax showered; he knew Fasala wouldn’t proceed without him on the bridge.

Forty minutes later Stax had arrived, Captain Spenser and Commander Owens were showing impatience at his late arrival. Others were at their assigned stations. Mary, at communications, watched Stax step off the stair case and walk across to his station.

“Captain Spenser, is everyone at their assigned stations?” Stax asked out of ceremony.

“We’ve been at our assigned stations for over an hour,” Commander Owens answered instead. “Now, can we get on with it?”

“Everyone is at their stations Overseer.” The Captain waited until Commander Owens finished but then added firmly, “Commander Owens, control yourself, we will have order.”

Owens gazed at the Captain with almost hysterical eyes.

“Okay Fasala, let’s return to Earth.” Stax noted the lack of excitement that accompanied the same statement in leaving Mars. But that was now a life time ago, he thought. They knew they weren’t home yet. Stax returned from his day dream when he felt the shudder of the engines throughout the ship.

“All stations remember your reports to the computer,” the Captain said. “We don’t want a remake of the last incident.”

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Stax listened to the reports being called out every few minutes. The alien ship slowly lifted off the ground.

“First set of drives are on line and functioning properly,” Fasala said. After a few more minutes, “We’ve left the atmosphere, adjusting the course for the Galactic Rim.

“Well, that was certainly uneventful,” Stax said to no one in particular.

There was a sign of relief by some but others said nothing not wanting to build up their hopes. Everybody continued their assigned watches which the Captain had set for them. Stax returned to his quarters. Once inside he said, “Is everything functioning normally, Fasala?”

“Yes Overseer, there’s nothing abnormal. The fuel cell is working fine. Engines are running the correct temperature. All is well. “Were you afraid?” Fasala asked in a concerned voice.

“No, I wasn’t,” Stax smiled watching Fasala take a seat behind her desk on the screen. Stax recognized this as her working routine that she often portrayed during working hours. She looked over at him and smiled a lovely large smile. He knew it was all put on for his benefit.

“Overseer, I find commander Owens acting with more and more disrespect towards you. Are you sure that you do not want me to do something about it?”

“Call me Stax, Fasala. In this room, you call me Stax and stop acting in that official voice of yours.” Stax reprimanded her.

“Sorry Stax,” her tone lifted somewhat. “I’m just concerned about the man’s irrational behavior.”

“The Captain will keep watch on him, don’t worry.” He went into the small kitchen area to pour himself a cup of coffee.

“But I do worry,” she replied seriously.

“If it gives you any peace, watch him. But don’t zap him if he stomps his toe near me,” Stax warned Fasala smiling back at her as he left his cabin.

“Yes, Overseer,” her subservient voice trailed him down the corridor.

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Stax wanted to see David about the laser work he and engineering were working on. Walking down one of the corridors on level two, he entered a room that David had annexed for his office. “Dr. Martins, how’s the business with the laser?” Stax asked.

David looked up from studying some papers he had spread out before him. “Well, good and bad. I’ve got something that could breach the hull of this ship and fry the electronics but only at close range. The further away, the less effective it is.”

“Most of Fasala’s weaponry works at a range of about 100,000 k’s,” Stax commented.

“You’d have to be much closer than that for this laser to work,” David replied. “Like, I said, good and bad, but I’ll keep trying to improve it.”

Leaving David, Stax almost ran over Captain Spenser in the corridor.

“Overseer!” the Captain over emphasized his name, “a moment of your time if I could.”

Stax knew this wouldn’t be good, “Yes, Captain Spenser.”

“Now that we’re on our way back home. I just want to remind you that nothing has changed. I will do everything within my power to bring you to trial for your crimes.” The captain said waiting for a reply.

Stax just looked. He was no longer intimidated by this kind of verbal abuse. The fact that the Captain was still going on about this, saddened him. Blowing out a breath he said, “Captain, you and your little group of boy scouts still don’t see it, do you?”

At that, the Captain’s expression was a questioned mark as to what Stax was on about.

“Captain, I’m a grain of sand on the beach. Can’t you stop and look beyond your almighty Naval regulations? Look at the ocean that’s before you. In the past weeks, we have skipped ahead a century. We’re now traveling at speeds that defy relativity. Earth now belongs to a populated galaxy that’s under siege from some powerful threat which we know nothing about. If you don’t change your tune Captain, you’ll be swept away by the tide that’s around us now.”

“Fine speech, ‘Overseer’, but it’s not going to get you off the hook for the crimes you’ve committed,” the Captain countered.

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Again, Stax just stared, not believing the Captain couldn't let it go. "I have work to do Captain, as I'm sure you also have." Stax brushed past, happy to get away from him.

2 Fasala Reveals Herself

Stax pushed himself up out of bed that night. He turned his side light on.

"What's the matter Stax? You've been tossing and turning half the night," Fasala spoke in a soft comforting tone.

"I guess it's my little conversation with the Captain. Fasala, I really thought he was beginning to see the situation we're all in."

"I thought that also," she confided in him.

"I shouldn't be surprised and I shouldn't let it be a bother," he said staring into the dimness, "but I do get rather sick of it. I'll be glad when we're back to Earth. The Captain and whoever else can go wherever they want to."

"We're only human," she responded, "full of emotions that drive us and make us who we are. It really makes me sad to see you like this Stax and I'm so proud of you," Fasala added the title, "Overseer."

For the second time since knowing Fasala, he heard silent soft sobs. "Now look, I've made you cry."

Nothing else was said that night. The ship's day finally came and with it training continued for Stax. Engineering and David continued their work for the Laser weapon. Fasala called a drill. Stax would have preferred that the Captain schedule such things but it seemed that the Captain, Commander and several of the other officers were reverting to their pre Mars thinking, biding their time and thinking that they were within days of reaching Earth instead of several months.

Stax was deep in thought on a training problem he had before him on the screen.

"Hey...uh," looking around the walls, "Stax?" Julie whispered, afraid that Fasala would be upset for using his name.

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“Yes Julie,” he replied after seeing who it was.

“Some of us are having a bash this evening. Would you like to join us? Very informal.” She then looked up at the walls, “And Fasala, you’re invited of course.”

“That would be great,” Stax replied.

“I’ll be there also,” her voice rang excitedly.

At 7:00 p.m., Stax walked through Julie’s open hatchway.

“Come in Stax,” Julie said, “David, James, Paul and Yelvin are already here.” Julie handed Stax a drink of some kind.

“Beer! Wherever did you get it?” Stax was surprised. “There had been no alcohol allowed along on the Mars mission.

“Not exactly, only the taste, no alcohol content. Fasala came up with it.”

“That’s great Fasala,” Stax replied.

There wasn’t an answer and Stax grew concerned.

“I think she has somewhat of a surprise for us. She hasn’t officially arrived yet,” Julie said.

“Oh!” Stax’s replied.

Then one of the walls in Julie’s cabin flickered, changing three dimensionally, it showed Fasala standing as if she had just walked into the room. Stax of course was used to seeing her on the screen but the others weren’t. Everyone froze and stared not sure who it was or what had happened. A tall Nubian stood before them. Her light brown skin contrasted with the simple red blouse and shorts she wore. Her silk net hair stood away from her head in frizzy curls. The amber lip stick drew everyone’s attention back to her face. She smiled, “May I come in?”

At that moment, Stax spoke, “Everyone, I’d like to introduce you to Fasala.”

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Julie went up and spoke to her, then followed by others. Stax then hung back enjoying his drink and watching Fasala as she acted so realistically on the screen.

Assorted food lay on the table: meats that had been brought from Deimos II plus a variety of vegetable dishes Fasala had made up. Stax had forgotten that Fasala didn't know about animals nor what they were used for. Her people were all vegetarians.

Mary and Ron then arrived. Ron gave Stax a wide berth taking a drink from the table.

Julie rang a small bell getting everyone's attention, "Make sure you enjoy the eats and drinks." She smiled. "Before you get back to socializing, I want to propose a toast." She took on a serious face. "To Earth and smooth sailing."

Several other murmured agreement. Conversation then increased as everyone talked about one thing or another. Julie cornered Stax asking him about his training, but Stax was far more interested in seeing what Fasala was doing. Most of the crew had felt very uncomfortable with Fasala but he wondered whether her new presentation would help changed their attitude.

"So Stax, we're headed home." Julie said.

"Well, I guess so. That doesn't exactly run well with me. The Captain still wants to hang me from the tallest tree on Earth," he said.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry too much about that if I were you. You were thrown into a situation which you've handled very well," she smiled at him.

Stax almost felt a glimmer of interest coming from the smile. She was definitely friendly enough.

"You know, you've really matured over the last six weeks. You are beginning to fit the title of Overseer. It becomes you." She smiled again and looked into his eyes. "Here, let me get you a drink," she added taking the empty glass from him.

"Getting a bit close, you and Julie?" Fasala's voice spoke gently into Stax's ear.

"Fasala! What are you talking about?" Stax replied more out of fright than having from guilt.

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“You know what I’m talking about,” she spoke softer this time.

Stax looked at her from across the room. She stared at him. “Your dreaming,” he spoke lowering his voice. “This is the first meeting we’ve had like this and you start speculating. Go and enjoy the party.” Stax walked over to the South African. “David, how are you?”

“Good, we’ve needed some R & R for a long time. Don’t you agree?”

“Oh, definitely,” Stax replied. “Too bad the others decided not to come.”

David just made a face indicating that he didn’t want to speculate on the reason why they hadn’t come. “Hey, what gives with your computer friend?”

“What do you mean?” Stax asked.

“Is that what she really used to look like?” David said looking toward the wall screen.

“Yeah, beautiful isn’t she?” Stax replied.

The party went on for hours with everyone seeming to relax for the first time since leaving Earth. But Stax wondered still yet what surprises there could be in store for them.

3 Alien Encounter

After a few more days, they arrived at the upper galactic rim. Fasala adjusted her course back toward Earth and the ship immediately entered a star trail showing a significant increase in speed. Soon after, shipboard life settled down into a routine. People were happy enough. The Captain kept everyone busy doing a variety of work. If they weren’t engaged in battle drills, it was studying, if not studying then sleeping and very little of that. The battle drills made Fasala happy. The study made Stax happy. He could bury himself into the books or in this case the computer screen not having to think about the return to Earth. Stax watched the galaxy speed by. Every so often the star trail would cloud the view and total darkness would shroud the ship. The Captain wised up enough to encourage the officers to learn as much about Fasala’s technology and mechanics as possible. Stax thought that was a good move. Other scientists tried to understand the laws by which Fasala could travel at such great speeds and how the gases within the star trails affected the engine’s propulsion. This interaction caused the ship to obtain

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unfathomable speeds. Fasala was somewhat amused. If her people had ever known about relativity, they would never have achieved light speed velocity.

Now it was ship's night. Only one person stood watch on the bridge. Those who had come to accept Fasala as a person always stayed occupied talking to her during the night but others who despised Stax and the alien ship found it to be a boring shift.

Stax was asleep when Fasala's excited voice started to yell. "Wake up Stax." Her face appeared on the wall screen. "Do you hear me? Wake up!"

Stax mumbled something and then turned over.

"Overseer, this is important!" she called again.

"What?" was Stax's startled reply.

"I've just crossed a traveled star trail," she said showing signs of fear in her voice.

"What do you mean?" He asked not really awake yet.

"Other ships have recently come through this section of space," she said. "What am I to do?"

It was then that Stax came fully awake. "Okay Fasala, sound general quarters and make sure everyone meets together on the bridge."

Fasala turned lights on in each person's living quarters, giving the general quarters warning.

Stax dressed within minutes and was soon on his way to the bridge.

James Irvine was on watch. The civilian was surprised at the sound of general quarters. "What's up Stax, uh, I mean Overseer?" he asked.

"Has Fasala said anything to you?"

"We've been talking most of the night and then she started yelling about other ships a few minutes ago. What's going on?" James looked confused.

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“We’ll find out shortly. Fasala is everybody up and on their way to the bridge?”

“Everyone, except Commander Owens and Barrett Williams. They refuse to answer my call,” she answered.

“Give them another verbal warning. If they refuse again, disburse an electrical charge into the room, not at them but just in the room. Tell them that it’s by my orders,” Stax said. “And advise me if they still refuse.”

A few minutes later, “Done, Williams responded with the verbal warning. Commander Owens responded to the electrical charge. They’re on their way to the bridge. Commander Owens comes with a string of profanities aimed at you markedly. I am holding myself back from the lack of respect he is demonstrating toward you, Overseer.”

Everyone had eventually entered the bridge with Commander Owens coming last. The disdain for Stax was evident even before he came through the hatch.

“What’s going on, Overseer?” the Captains’s irritated voice rang out.

“Fasala, explain,” Stax ordered.

“Twenty thousand kilometers back, I crossed another star trail, heavily used. Other starships have traveled it recently,” she paused, “possibly within the last few weeks.”

“What does this have to do with us?” Commander Owens said angrily.

Fasala continued, “Since the emissions are recent, we should wait and find out who they belong to. It would be dangerous to go on.”

“Why waste time with these emissions, let’s get out here. Continue our route to Earth,” Commander Owens said accompanied by a muttering of agreement from others.

“But the ships will be able to track us. We’ve crossed their star trail. They’ll pick up our own emissions easily,” Fasala said.

“Okay Fasala, double back and let’s find out more about these emissions. We can also get a bearing on the route of the star trail itself.”

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“This is a waste of time!” Commander Owens said savagely.

“Commander Owens, held your peace,” the Captain said. Everyone could see that the Commander was about ready to lose it.

“Captain, have everyone take up their stations.” Stax never gave the Captain an actual command but always made it sound like a request instead.

Some time later, Fasala had stopped where the two star trails met. “Three ships passed this junction flying in close formation,” the Captain told Stax. “The computer was correct about it being some kind of heavily used trail. Older emissions are also evident.”

“Overseer, I’ve projected the trail to run toward the next galactic arm. If continued, it would parallel the galactic core,” Fasala said.

“Let’s see that map,” the captain spoke to one of the officers. “The Kingdoms are located to the left of the galactic center. According to your computer, this trail goes along this arc. It follows the upper outer edge of all the Kingdoms until it reaches this larger Kingdom up here at the top of the map.”

“It would take nearly eight months to travel that star trail to its end,” Fasala said. “The nearest Kingdom is perhaps two months travel time at normal speed.”

“Why are we just sitting here, Captain? We don’t know if those who came through here were friendlies or the threat the computer keeps going on about,” the Commander said.

“That’s correct Commander Owens, we don’t know if they are friendly or not. But now we know there are others beside us. If they’re enemies, I don’t believe anyone on Earth would be able to cope with the technology that’s in this ship much less anything else that we may find,” the Captain looked hard at the Commander. “Ultimately it’s the Overseer’s decision on what action to take now. But I couldn’t recommend returning directly to Earth without further investigation.”

Stax almost felt relieved at what the Captain had said, but the Commander was speechless. His face was one of confusion. He never would have guessed that the Captain would side with Stax and the alien computer.

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“Overseer, I’m afraid you’re not going to get time to think this over. I’ve just detected three ships coming up the star trail,” Fasala’s tone held an edge of anxiety.

“Order the ship to Earth, Captain,” Commander Owens said pleadingly.

“Try to communicate with them Fasala,” Stax ordered trying to overlook what the Commander had said.

“I’ve sent a message requesting that they identify themselves and state their intentions,” Fasala said. “A reply is already coming in. Here’s the translation, ‘What do you mean, Kingdom Ship? Our intention is obvious, food, and you’re it. Prepare to be boarded.’”

“If that’s all they want, give it to them,” Commander Owens said quickly.

“Somehow, I don’t really think they mean exactly that,” Stax looked at the captain saying, “Am I correct?”

“I think that is a correct assumption, Overseer,” for the first time the Captain didn’t put the stress that he usually assigned to the word.

“Fasala, change course and head directly down the star trail into the center of the Galaxy,”

Hysterically, Commander Owens bit into Stax with a stare, “I’ve had enough of you, Yeoman,” and pulled out a gun.

“No Commander!,” The Captain turned into the fire.

An electrical bolt shot out from the walls hitting the Commander. Both fell to the deck.

“Call medical now, Fasala.” Stax was already at the Captain’s side.

“I’m sorry Overseer, I didn’t react soon enough,” Fasala cried.

“That’s okay Fasala, you need to keep your attention on those ships. Get us out of here, fast.”

Doctor Hussain came running onto the bridge but the Captain was already dead. Commander Owens was alive. Fasala had indeed held back from acting sooner.

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“Overseer, I’ll need full power to all engines. I’ll need another fuel cell very soon.”

“Engineering, this is the Overseer. Major Williams, are you there?” Stax asked authoritatively.

“Yes, I’m here,” Barrett replied.

“Fasala will be needing additional fuel cells. She’ll be using all her engines.”

“What? If you use fuel like that, we won’t have enough to return to Earth,” Barrett argued.

“Major, I’m the Overseer. If you question me again, I’ll have Fasala strike you down. You have five seconds to comply.” Stax was just short of yelling.

“Yes sir!” Barrett answered.

“They’re inserting the fuel cell now,” Fasala said now reassured.

“Listen up people. We have three ships coming at us. Stay alert, keep your flow of reports to Fasala exactly as you’ve been trained to do,” Stax continued. “David Martin and John McBride to the bridge please.”

Both civilians replied and entered the bridge shortly after.

“Take Commander Owens and lock him into his quarters,” Stax ordered them.

“Fasala, can you show those ships on the screen?”

The ships appeared. Stax quickly noticed their condition, repair patches stood out where metal had been layered over metal. They looked to be a third the size of Fasala. Stax then noticed three small clouds leave each ship.

“What’s that, Fasala?” Stax asked watching the clouds speed away from the three ships.

“Energy crystals that affect a ship’s electronics, similar to what I have.”

“Release one to see if it has any effect on theirs,” Stax told Fasala.

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The ship shuddered. “Energy crystals are released, Overseer,” Fasala said.

The Doctor had arranged to take the Captain away just as everyone’s attention had been directed toward the three approaching ships. Minutes later the three clouds dissipated. Unlike the other three ships, the crystals released by Fasala could not be seen.

“We are beginning to move away from them Overseer.”

“Overseer?” David’s voice was heard from the walls.

Fasala then interrupted, “There’s been a launch from the bay.” and then added, “Overseer, I’m not used to dealing with all of this action,” she left off.

“Just keep your focus on those three ships, Fasala,” Stax said.

“Martin, are you okay?” Stax asked through the ship’s comm.

“Yeah, he slugged both of us. We weren’t expecting it,” Martin replied.

“Fasala, release communications to Mary. Provide translation only. That’ll be one less thing for you to worry about.”

The small craft was soon left behind as Fasala’s speed continued to increase. One of the approaching ships fired a smaller ball of crystals toward the small craft that contained Commander Owens. Dead in space, it would soon be overtaken by the alien ship.

They watched as the craft was scooped up. “Overseer, a image is coming through from one of the ships,” Mary said.

The screen revealed a being with round hollow eye sockets and a hole where the nose should have been. Its mouth extended from one side of the head to the other and it squared off in the front. Its teeth were needle sharp. The being had no lips to speak of nor any ears. The face reminded Stax of the South American piranha fish. Arms were of normal length but its fingers were short and stubby with claws instead of finger nails. The bridge was horrified by the sight. Behind the being stood Commander Owens, blood dripping from his mouth, held between two more of the beings .

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“Thank you for the offering, Kingdom Ship,” Fasala translated. The being spoke with its mouth opening and closing like a fish sucking air. Its tongue seemed normal enough, “You are a bit of a mystery. We haven’t seen a Kingdom ship larger than yours before,” the being sighed, “But enough of this, my people need fresh meat. We have been away from home so long.” It then pulled out a short knife like sword and with a flip of its hand toward Commander Owens, the knife gutted the Commander from the stomach to just under the neck. Owens eyes held a surprised look as his guts spilled out before him. The being then turned and made what Stax thought to be a smile. “We will catch you before you reach the barrier and then it will be your turn.”

“Cut the communications,” Stax yelled consciously holding back bile from his throat. “Fasala, put as much distance between us and those ships as you can.”

“Yes, Overseer,” Fasala replied.

A quietness reigned on the bridge for more than an hour and only then Stax could barely speak, “Fasala, what were those things?”

“I have no record of them or where they came from in my data core, Overseer.”

Stax and the others stared at the screen still unable to understand the implications of what they had just experienced.

4 Changes

The following weeks took a toll on everyone. Fasala had outdistanced the three pursuers but fuel was being burned fast. The Captain’s body was put into cold storage. A memorial was given by Nola Lee, one of the civilians who had assumed the post of chaplain, counselor and listener to anyone’s complaints. She was the only religious person on the ship, belonging to some church denomination in the states. Stax wasn’t a religious person but he didn’t see the harm. In fact it would save him from listening to everyone’s problems. Everyone was afraid. Different ones met and argued over what was to be done. Some officers questioned whether they should assume some kind of control, Fasala had informed him. Some cried themselves to sleep at night. Stax knew that he had to do something about their feelings and about facing them with the only choice. But his mind returned to watching the forward screen. The blackness of the star trail permeated it. Stax received an occasional glimpse of the distant galactic arm which they

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approached. The dark gulf between the Orion and Sagittarius arms added to the depressive mood in the ship. “How many more days, Fasala?” he asked staring.

“Fourteen at our present speed,” Fasala whispered.

“How much fuel is there left?” He added.

“Three full fuel cells,” she said. “We will use two to reach the other side.”

Stax finally got up enough nerve to act. He knew that he had to assume some kind of control. He ordered everyone to meet together and waited as they begin to enter the bridge by ones and twos. Stax reasoned now that there was a possibility that none of them would ever reach Earth. The sooner everyone faced up to that reality, the better. He looked around at all the faces, some with obvious hatred toward him, some with indifference and some with an air of expectancy.

“I’ve been putting this meeting off until I was sure that we had slipped away from our friends. But I assume that they are still on our trail. To face you this way, I find very difficult. Even though Fasala has put me in this position of Overseer, I am still very much the second class naval yeoman who was thrown on the ill-fated Mars expedition. Now, you too have been thrown into something you haven’t asked for. I wish that I could turn this over to any of you. I wish I could go back to be the rebellious Stephen Wildson as you probably wish you were back home with friends, family and another life on Earth. But it’s impossible to turn back the clock. If you believe in some all-powerful God as Nola often speaks about, perhaps we are predestined to go through this. I don’t know. But, I am the Overseer. You are seventeen people, officers and civilians, all from the International Space Administration, now in a situation neither you nor I can change. Four hundred years ago the galaxy was made up of twelve Kingdoms, all living in peace. Now that no longer seems to be true. A threat has entered the situation, an enemy that we’ve now had experience with. An alien being that could bring devastation to Earth. Perhaps we have protected our planet, at least for now. Fasala believes they will not be able to trace our emissions back down the Orion arm. But be certain, we are not able to return home for the immediate foreseeable future.” On that, Stax heard whispering in the background, but he continued, “Maybe perhaps sometime in the future, I don’t know. Here are the facts: these aliens are coming after us. We are in this together. In order to survive, we must work together as a team. We will need to learn as much as possible about the galaxy, this ship and how to fight these beings. Fasala needs our help in order to operate this ship properly. Don’t let your hatred

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destroy you like it destroyed Commander Owens and the Captain,” he paused, thinking about what happened to the Captain. “I am truly sorry for what happened to the Captain. I am truly sorry for what happened to Commander Owens. No one deserved that. From this moment on there are no longer any military officers, nor civilian scientists on this ship. We are a Kingdom Ship under Kingdom rule. All references to Earth must be buried as deep as can be. Each person will receive a new uniform, a kingdom uniform and a new rank according to the specification Fasala has in her memory core. We will operate like a Kingdom Ship, at least until we get some answers and find out exactly what’s going on in this galaxy.

There will also be an advisory group. Hopefully, this will offset my lack of experience. This group will be made up of Julie Timon, David Martins, Jan Isles, Yelvin Greersky, Paul Andrews and of course Fasala. Julie Timon will also take on the position of Second-in-Command.” Stax saw Julie’s surprised face. “Are there any questions?”

There was a silence, however he stood waiting for the onslaught. Everyone looked at each other, then Julie slowly began to clap her hands, others followed. As the applause died out, James Irvine raised his hand slightly.

“What are the chances these beings will find out about Earth?”

“They haven’t the slightest idea that there’s another world out there. They have already assumed that we are a Kingdom Ship and we will continue that pretense for as long as possible. That being seemed too over confident to me but maybe there’s a reason for that. He acted as if he had the superiority but you heard him. This ship is different, even if it is four hundred years old.”

Julie held up her hand, “Where are we heading now?”

“That goon said that we were headed toward the Barrier, whatever that is. According to the map we found at the Deneb Base, we are headed toward one of the twelve Kingdoms. Are there any more questions?” Another hand went up, “Yes, Lieutenant Isles.”

“Are there no other options?” she asked with some anger in her voice.

“Not unless you come up with something that I feel would work within the present situation,” Stax replied.

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She didn't continue but Stax knew that she wanted to say more.

"Okay, return to your duties. Tomorrow is another day." Stax left them talking.

5 The Eye of a Needle

Two weeks had passed. The crew of the Kingdom Starship stood out in their new uniforms. Each person of the Advisory group had been given command over five new departments: Weapons, Operations, Support, Engineering, and Security.

There would be an unofficial department known as Research where everyone would be given time to pursue their own respective fields of study. It would be voluntary and left totally up to those who ran it. The department head would report to the advisory group regularly.

Their journey across the void had taken them another two thousand light years. The dark clouds of The Sagittarius had long been a mystery, according to the astronomers aboard. Using all nine engines, it took just four weeks to reach the new arm. The Star Trail had worked itself back to the galactic plane. As Fasala came closer to The Sagittarius, she began to pick up massive radio readings.

"The readings indicate that it's the same stuff as the energy crystals," she told Stax.

"Keep enough distance from it and shut down all but the three lower engines," Stax ordered her.

They approached what was a massive electronic wall stretching for hundreds of light years in every direction. "This must be the Barrier that the goons were talking about," Stax said to those standing in front of the screen. "It extends almost half the depth of the galaxy. Its boundary also follows along the same coordinates as one of the Kingdoms shown here," his finger indicated the area on the map.

"Fasala, continue a course parallel to the wall." Stax said standing before the screen. The wall seemed endless and at the same time awesome. The technology that had been required to build it and the cost would have also been awesome Stax thought.

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After another two weeks of cruising, Fasala saw a minor blip. It was a breach in the wall. The electronics still played havoc with her instrumentation so she wasn't entirely sure of its size. Stax ordered her to come about and stood off some 10,000 kilometers.

"Okay, what do you think? Should we try to go through?" Stax faced the five advisors, happy to have someone he could officially go to for advice.

"Do we really know what we're getting into?" Jan asked looking around at everyone. "At home when someone puts up a fence, they're saying, 'stay out, private property,' and sometimes there's a dog on the other side, and usually a big dog. We could be committing a grave sacrilege by entering their space."

"But what else are we to do? There isn't enough fuel to go around if it's as big as the map says," David said.

Stax looked at the map yet again for the countless time, "That's correct. We have less than half a fuel cell left."

Fasala spoke up then, "Overseer, if we are to go through, there would be no room for error. The hole is just big enough and we would have to get the timing exactly right."

"What would happen if we got caught in the Barrier electronics?" Yelvin Greersky asked.

"It would fry the ship and me. You would be stranded and then die once you ran out of food and water," Fasala said.

"Fasala, line yourself up with the opening and see how many runs you can project in going through the barrier and their outcomes," Stax said. "This will give us a little more to go on. I think perhaps we should talk to the others about it also. We'll all meet again later and see what we're up against."

Hours had passed. Stax had called the crew together, informing them of some of the considered options. Stax was trying to be as open as possible with them.

"But what about the fancy speech you gave two weeks ago? You demanded that we follow you, never to return to Earth. You've let a computer manipulate you since we entered this

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ship and now you come to us because you no longer have an answer. You're the glorious Overseer, now oversee! Get us out of this mess," John McBride raved.

Stax didn't answer. He was so tired of hearing that tune that he actually passed over John as if John hadn't spoken but what John said did have an effect on the others.

"Well, are you going to answer?" John stared at Stax.

"Anybody else have anything to add?" Stax put the question forth. He knew if they didn't release it this way, they would find another way.

"We could turn back to Deneb and try to make a life for ourselves there," someone in the group said.

"Perhaps we could look for a planet outside the Barrier," Jan Isles spoke up.

"We haven't seen many habitable planets actually. Returning to Deneb is out since those goons could trace our emissions back to that place and besides, we don't have the fuel."

"What has Fasala found out?" Julie asked aloud.

"Let her answer," Stax said.

"It would be a one out of five possibilities that I could make it through the Barrier. The sequence is far too irregular. I've run every situation possible," Fasala answered and then continued, "But then again maybe we'll just have to take the chance and see what happens."

"What do you mean? One chance out of five isn't very good," Stax had to admit.

"It's probably better than dealing with our friends. I've just picked them up on my sensors," she reported.

"Get to your stations," Stax ordered everyone, "Where are they?" He turned toward the screen. "So, we may not have a choice."

"They're moving parallel to the Barrier following our emissions," Fasala answered.

"I'm surprised that they caught up with us so soon," Stax commented to no one in particular.

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“Perhaps they’re just good at what they do and we’re not,” her voice sounded scared.

“No blame on you Fasala, we’re all new at this game. How long will it be before they are able to fire that energy weapon?”

“Fifteen minutes, approximately,” she answered.

“Well Fasala, it’s your turn. Go when the time is right,” Stax said.

Everyone expected Fasala to ignite the first two sets of engines immediately and take off but that didn’t happen. And then seconds passed to minutes.

“Uh, Fasala, they’re getting closer,” Stax whispered afraid something had gone wrong with her programming.

“Patience Overseer, it must be perfect,” she replied in the first ever condescending voice Stax had ever heard from her.

“Take all the time you need. How close did you say those ships were?” He finished off.

Silence grew. Stax decided to keep quiet since Fasala hadn’t answered his last question. Several commented that the ships were almost in range to fire.

Mary then said, “There’s a image coming through.”

“Cancel that image,” Stax directed. “I want complete silence on the bridge and over the ship.”

“You can do it Fasala,” he mumbled audibly.

Twenty minutes had passed. Stax saw the ships fire their energy crystals.

“Everyone back against the bulkhead, quickly,” Fasala yelled her command.

Stax, Mary, Yelvin and Paul, all ran positioning themselves with their backs against the back wall of the bridge.

Even from there, the four watched as the energy crystals drew nearer and nearer.

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“Firing all engines,” Fasala anxious voice proclaimed. A thunderous roar came. Stax felt the increased pressure on his body before blacking out.

Julie was the first to wake. She heard crying off in the distance in her mind. Drowsily she picked herself up, looking around she saw Jan Isles unconscious on the deck. She quickly checked Jan’s pulse which registered to be normal. She still heard the crying. “Fasala, are you okay?” Julie then asked.

“Oh Julie, I’ve killed my Overseer,” another burst of crying followed.

“Just wait Fasala, let me see.” Julie stepped through the hatch that led down to the bridge. Everyone lay passed out on the deck. Going over to Stax, Julie found that his pulse was strong.

“Stop the crying Fasala, he’s just unconscious, like everyone else,” Julie said.

“Will he be all right?” Fasala asked still sniffing audibly.

“They’ll all be fine,” Julie said. “Look, I’ll just go find the doctors.”

“They’re lying on the floor in medical,” Fasala said.

After awakening the doctors, Julie returned to the bridge. “What actually happened, Fasala? Did that energy weapon hit us?” She said with her arm around the back of Stax’s head.

“I ignited all three sets of engines at one time. We made it through the barrier.”

“Did those other three ships follow?” Julie asked.

“I hope so,” Fasala gave a chuckle. “I don’t know how we made it through. Julie, I was never so scared before than when I thought that Stax, I mean the Overseer was dead.”

Julie smiled to herself then said, “Fasala, you are so human, it’s hard for me to imagine that you’re a computer. You have all the emotions of a woman.”

“Of course I do. That’s because I am a woman,” Fasala replied questioningly.

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“I’m not making myself clear. It’s been very difficult for the crew to really understand what you are. You aren’t flesh and blood like us. It’s still hard for us to associate with anything but a very intelligent computer. Your feelings prove that you are indeed more.”

There was a pause between Julie and Fasala. “I have feelings that can match any woman on board,” Fasala stated. “Like you, I have feelings for Stax, deep feelings.”

Julie’s breath was taken away at Fasala’s admission.

“Are you so surprised that I knew you were interested in Stax?” Fasala asked.

Julie didn’t reply.

Then Fasala said again, “Julie, I’m a woman just like you. You can talk to me as one. I’m not some electronic entity or monster that thinks it’s in love with a human being.”

“Fasala, I’m sorry, but I just can’t understand,” she said.

“My entire brain and soul were transferred into the core memory that was built specifically to download a person with my training. We were prepared for it. I am who I used to be in every way. I can love, hate, cry, and be sad. I even have programmed PMT and period pain! That’s something I wish they would have left out.”

Julie leaned against the wall, a sign of surprise on her face, “I never really knew and I don’t think anyone with perhaps the exception of Stax, ever understood.

“Well, actually, I’m not sure that Stax still understands.”

“Well, to answer your question. I do have feelings for Stax. Is that a problem?” Julie heard herself say to Fasala.

“A little competition never hurt anyone,” Fasala giggled, “and besides I’d like to think of you as a friend and one of only two I have on the ship.”

“Thanks Fasala, that goes for me also.”

They both heard moans and groans from others now. Fasala and Julie began to reassure those on the bridge that they were indeed going to live. The story of their escape was repeated

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several times as each person wanted to know what had happened. This, along with the fact that they were safe seemed to revitalize everyone. Stax ordered a day's rest knowing that the last few weeks had been quite stressful on everyone.

6 Binary

A week had passed since coming through the Barrier. There had been no further sightings of ships. The presence of the electronic wall added to the puzzling galactic mysteries that had already been presented since encountering the alien spaceship. Many still wondered about the story behind the ship and its computer entity. Had the computer been completely honest with them? Most doubted it. Had another piece of the puzzle revealed itself with the appearance of the strange beings? Stax wanted to know the extent of the threat these beings represented.

Everyone endeavored to learn more and more of the theories and operation of the ship. This pleased Stax and he knew it would help relieve Fasala of part of the more mundane side of running the ship. It also helped them to think differently about their own new roles. A new bonding process had begun with most of them.

Ron, David and the rest of engineering never stopped their work on the laser weaponry. It was found in re-cutting some of the larger diamonds and using them instead of the glass, both range and strength improved greatly.

Fasala on the other hand revealed more of her human character through the heart to heart talks she had with Julie.

Stax had no idea of what awaited them within the barrier. Even with fuel down to a minimum, Fasala came across a binary, one blue/white 'O' star having a large planetary system. Its secondary yellow 'K' star, several times larger than the solar sun, held two planets. Both stars had planets with an atmosphere, two out of the fifteen that orbited around the yellow star and one of the two from the 'K' star. Of course everyone aboard was given ample time to concern themselves with the different properties of the binary system. The seventh planet of the primary had a large ocean with small-island like continents. The sixth showed only a dull reddish/orange Mars like landscape. Other planets held large gaseous atmospheres, while one held a bright orange cloud cover wherever so often a geyser would jet up out into space. Another strange

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phenomenon that pricked everyone's attention was the farthest planet of the primary. It had a moon like planet orbiting it with a smaller moon of its own.

The planet orbiting the secondary was slightly smaller than Earth. Much more land surfaced the planet than water. A sparser population was shown to inhabit the world and for that reason Fasala was told to head for it. Fasala took her time approaching the planet, burning only fumes left in the fuel cell and after several more days she went into an orbit around the planet. The world seemed to be an agricultural planet. The advisory group had joined Stax on the bridge watching the screen. Large farm-plots were evident with a planet-wide irrigation system. No large cities were seen, only small towns and hamlets dotted the landscape and to everyone's surprise, television signals were received. Fasala promptly displayed an image of a rather average looking adult black male onto the viewer, clothed in a one piece sleeveless outfit of rough woven material. He wore simple matching cloth shoes. The individual spoke to the camera as he walked along the road. Further monitoring revealed people walking about on narrow stone streets in the background with an occasional vehicle passing. Fasala hadn't provided any translation yet.

"They're as human as we are," Stax said watching as the person walked about obviously orchestrating the filming of a program.

"The fact that they're human doesn't change anything," Jan Isles said. "How do we know that they haven't been monitoring us since we first entered an orbit around their planet?"

"There doesn't seem to be any defense, air-base or otherwise on the planet." David spoke up.

"I doubt that if they'd need any defense system, with that barrier protecting them." Stax said and then continued, "Fasala, do you know exactly where we are?"

"No idea. As I mentioned before all co-ordinates were wiped from my memory core but what I'm seeing has a sense of familiarity about it. I think we are now in Amorian space. Their people are made up of a mostly dark skinned race but short in stature as compared to me and my people. I believe the Amorian Kingdom was one of the most technically advanced of all of the Kingdoms. In fact they were mostly behind the technology that built me. But these scenes show a large amount of poverty."

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“I would say, even if they know we are here, our intentions would appear but hostile,” Stax said. “And even so, we have no choice. We are out of fuel.”

“Why don’t we go look? We play out our kingdom ship role. Fasala could provide all the translation,” Julie suggested to everyone.

Fasala agreed with Julie, thinking that was the best way to go about it. After further discussion, it was agreed that two flyers were to be taken down to the surface.

The next day, Gean Looves and Jan Isles, accompanied by David Martin and Paul Andrews, piloted the two small craft down into the atmosphere. Gean, Jan and Paul stood out as odd among the black inhabitants of the world. Martin was given charge of the group for obvious reasons. Rigged with communications, David tested the system, “Fasala, do you hear us?”

“Yes, loud and clear,” she replied.

“Well, we have a visitor already,” David said as two people approached him.

“What business do you have with us?” a young male asked. “Are you here to trade or to study our agricultural methods?” he asked again before David had a chance to answer the first question.”

“Yes, we’re here to study some of your methods,” Martin replied.

“There are better worlds. We’re a poor backward world far away from the main part of the Kingdom,” the man said, “but you are welcome to use the facilities of our small community. We are always pleased to aid the kindred races in their struggles against the great threat.”

“Thank you,” Martin answered. “You are very kind.”

The group wasn’t surprised to hear the mention of the war. They headed directly into town feeling more confident now. Some buildings weren’t that much different architecturally from those on Earth, however, others were tall, multistoried mud with thick walls around them. The streets were cobble stones now flattened through heavy use. People were walking the streets going about their business paying little mind to the visitors that stood before them. David gave a constant update of what was happening around him as the group made their way along the central avenue. A crowded marketplace was off to the right. Hawkers could easily be heard from

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the street trying to sell various wares. Their clothes were all one type with shades of washed out colors. The foursome continued walking toward what looked like some kind of public building.

“Stax, are you listening?” David asked through the communications link.

“I’m here David. We’re sitting on the edge of our seats listening to every word.”

“If we could find a library or computer terminal, maybe we could upload the data directly to Fasala, maybe saving us heaps of time and effort.”

“Good idea, what do you think Fasala?” Stax asked.

“I’m as anxious to fill in as much of the missing gaps in my data as you are,” she replied.

“Fasala? Do you have any records of the economic standards of the other kingdoms?” David asked.

“Some kingdoms had a fairly high standard of living, especially the Amorians but some had poverty. Why?” she asked.

“I just wondered. Most buildings around here need maintenance. There are also beggars at the entrances of several larger buildings. This place would be classed as a poor, third-world country back on Earth.” David continued, “Born and raised in South Africa, I’ve seen a lot of this. Well, I’m going to try and find out if there’s a library in this place.”

“Okay, go ahead, I’ll continue translation,” Fasala said.

Martin walked up to an elderly couple about to enter a nearby building. “Can you direct us to your library?”

“Oh! You’re from the kingdom ship.” This was more of a statement than question from the lady. “You’ve come a long way. How long will you be visiting us?”

“We’re not really sure,” David answered.

“Well, the knowledge center is right over there.” She pointed to a two storied building just off the main avenue.

“Thank you,” Martin and the others turned to go.

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But before they could get away, the lady placed her hand upon Martin's arm, stopping him, "Is it really as bad as they say it is?" Her face took on a concerned and saddened look but without waiting for Martin's answer she continued, "The barrier costs our people everything. We're so fortunate for its protection. I wouldn't want those monsters attacking our worlds." The lady and the man she was with walked away and entered the door of the nearby building.

"Well," Martin commented, "that was an ear full. We're learning enough just from the comments of people and it doesn't sound good."

The foursome led by Martin reached the Knowledge Center and entered.

"Look back there." Jan pointed to a row of computer terminals against a far wall.

"Let's go and see if we can find out anything," Martin headed off.

The massive shape of Fasala kept its line-of-site orbit with the small town below. After Martin made the connection, Fasala started the download of information. She found that the Knowledge Center was actually linked to a global systems network and found what she was looking for.

7 All is Known

"They've killed all of my people, Stax," Fasala could hardly contain herself. Her image showed a distraught girl sitting at a chair, her head propped up by her arms with her face hidden behind her hands. They were in Stax's cabin. He wanted so much to reach out and put his arm around her.

Seventeen men and women sat in a circle on the bridge waiting for a report from Fasala and Stax. Stax knew that Fasala was in no shape mentally to give that report just yet.

Stax walked down the stairs forcing heads to turn toward him. "First the good news because there's plenty of bad and one or two surprises," he started out. "Fasala will not be able to bring you this report for reasons that you will soon find out. So, it seems that this part of the galaxy is quite populated by others of our kind. The Kingdom's name that we're now in we already knew to be Amoria. The map we found at Deneb shows twelve kingdoms spanning out from this point to this area across the galaxy. Some of those kingdoms no longer exist. There are now ten kingdoms. Two of them, the Amorians and Zeebians border each other here in the

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Sagittarius Arm. One kingdom is farther down the arm but quite small in comparison to all the others. Six kingdoms, situated closer to the hub of the galaxy, border each other. These six kingdoms plus two from the Sagittarius Arm make up a loose federation. Amoria is not part of that federation, they are neutral. This federation is united to fight against the threat of what used to be the largest kingdom of the original twelve, the Etihwa.”

“But what about those monsters that attacked us?” Someone asked.

“That was the Etihwa,” Fasala answered the question and waited.

A mummer went through the group.

“A lot, indeed, has changed since I left four hundred years ago,” Fasala only then spoke interrupting everyone’s thinking.

Stax took over the report again, “More good news is that somehow, we are kindred to these races, I mean Earth or we as a people group.”

“How can that be?” Julie asked.

“That, I don’t know but these answers will create more questions. The kingdoms vary greatly both politically and ethnically. The people below us now are a peaceful race. As Fasala has already mentioned, four hundred years ago, Amoria was the most technologically advanced kingdom. But now it’s a major agricultural producing kingdom. They have all but lost their technological standing in order to counter what the Etihwa turned themselves into.” He stopped and noticed the faces of some who had understood what he had said. “They built the barrier and changed to agriculture in order to help feed all the kingdoms including the Etihwa so they wouldn’t want to feed off the defenseless kingdoms. The Amorians are made up of nearly three hundred and fifty worlds spread over a large section of space protected by a vast electronic barrier that costs them everything to maintain. They have no space fleet as such except for repair ships and grain ships. Their capital world is Hodayu far to the other side of the Sagittarius Arm. All the other Kingdoms have embassies there. As Amoria is officially neutral in the conflict, the Etihwa even has an embassy. The Barrier that surrounds Amorian space took all the resources they could muster to build and nearly a hundred years to build it. Their technology has actually regressed since then.

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Their objective since the beginning of the war has been to sell as much grain to the Etihwa as possible in order to curb their attacks against the other kingdoms.

Now that was the good news, here's the bad. Four hundred years ago, the Etihwa, the largest of the twelve Kingdoms both in area and population and second to the Amorian Kingdom in technology, started a war against the Bassoon Kingdom. They experienced some kind of wide spread starvation and annexed the whole of Bassoon. But at the same time they started a program to genetically change themselves. A radical group had seized control. It was started through initial injections and the process was unstoppable once began"

"I knew that there were shortages of food in different kingdoms but I personally never knew about any of this," Fasala added in a voice heavy with weeping.

A look of concern crossed many of the people's faces on hearing her speak.

Stax continued without commenting on what Fasala said, "The genetic changes they adopted made them more animalistic. Those changes were not only physical but also mental. There is no animal life anywhere else in the known galaxy except on Earth. Maybe this explains why an observation post was placed on Mars at one time. The Etihwa no longer regard themselves as humans. They regard everyone else as cattle. After subjugating the small kingdom of Bassoon, Fasala's home worlds, they conquered and subjugating another kingdom later on. The Amorian Kingdom opted for neutrality and began building their Barrier. The other Kingdoms didn't have the technology to stand against the Etihwa but they slowly united themselves knowing that they had to. The Etihwa stopped their expansion activities for a while giving time for the other Kingdoms to develop their own defenses. But the Etihwa have continued their advancement over the years. They now control an area of space equal to that of the eight kingdoms that make up the Confederacy. These Kingdoms continue to retreat under the immense Etihwa threat."

There was a stillness in the group. Some of them had already read parts of the report but now they had the whole truth. The deep silence continued only interrupted by the far away inner workings of the ship.

Stax saw faces of fear. He was hoping someone would speak up, to say anything, to get their thoughts out in the open. Slowly a hand went up as if a little child were asking permission to go to the bathroom.

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“Should we consider returning to warn everyone back home about this before we are discovered?” someone asked.

I believe we have done the right thing by coming here. No one knows where we came from and it will stay like that. We are now a kingdom ship until we have more answers,” Stax finished off.

Mary then spoke up, “They would never believe what’s going on in the galaxy even if we were to return and tell them. They are so caught up in their own selfish political squabbling.”

“Whatever happens, we must find out as much as we can about the Etihwa and ways to perhaps fight them,” Stax said.

“I’m not fighting anybody,” Barrett said loud enough for all to hear, “This is their mess and we’ve been dragged into it by this Yeoman and this ship’s computer.” He turned looking at everyone so as to include them in his conversation. “I say, let’s find some fuel and go home, destroy this ship and let Earth get on with their lives.”

There were only a few murmurs of agreement. Stax was going to reply, but he thought he had heard electrical cracking from the ceiling from Fasala. He was so tired of hearing Barrett singing the same old tune. “Returning is impossible,” Stax repeated and left it at that. “But it’s been a long day, a lot more thinking and discussion needs to go into this. I think we need to leave it for now.”

Some left the room while others lingered behind. Barrett continued quite boisterously with several others. Stax had decided not to get caught up in their anti-Stax comments and so immediately returned to his own cabin.

8 Stax and The Computer

Stax had returned to his quarters feeling the burden of what had been discovered, especially about Fasala’s people. She had spoken very little since then. Staring at the bulkhead before him, he was tired yet knew that sleep would not come easily. Getting fuel was a concern. My goodness, even knowing what to do next was a concern but Fasala was his biggest worry. To her, it had only been a matter of months since leaving her friends and family. Now returning to a war-torn galaxy she’d found, not only her friends and family gone but her entire race being used as meat for the larder. Also, Barrett and McBride worried him no end. He knew that he would

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never be able to trust them. They had been in thick with Commander Owens. He would have to continue to watch them.

“Fasala?” Stax spoke very softly to her.

“Yes Overseer,” she appeared on the screen in front of him.

“How are you?” Stax asked.

“I’m fine, Overseer,” she answered.

She was trying to speak in her formal tone. Perhaps this created some security within her, Stax thought and he knew this was no time for joking.

“Fasala, I’m sorry but I need to talk to you about other matters. I want you to keep an eye on Williams and McBride. Make sure you tell me if they start doing anything strange things like stirring up the others. Barrett Williams must have come out of the same mold that Owens was made of,” Stax said more or less to himself.

A few seconds passed until Fasala replied. “Stax, the situation looks really bad doesn’t it?”

“Yes, but we need to keep going. We need to find out more about what’s going on and among other things, we need fuel and we’re beginning to run low on food. Find out what the people use for money on the planet, maybe we can just buy what we need.

“I’ll follow up on that as soon as possible. Now go to sleep,” she said.

“I don’t think I can. My mind keeps going round and round,” he replied.

At that, Fasala lowered her head and began to weep.

“Now what’s the matter?” he knew he must have said something that she took the wrong way.

“I’m sorry Stax. I’ve taken you away from your home and everything you knew,” she cried more.

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“Yeah, like as if I was a happy person. You forget, both the Captain and Commander were going to try me for treason. Hey, and I found me a beautiful Nubian Queen!”

“Do you really mean that Stax?” She looked across at him sounding a bit more cheerful.

“Once we find out where your body is kept. Well girl, you and I are going to paint the town red,” he said.

“Paint the town red?” she questioned.

“We’ll get to know each other better,” he corrected himself. “What does a guy like me do to entertain a lady like you in your culture?” he asked.

“There used to be theaters or visual movies that people could participate in. We could go to a nice candle light meal together. A walk in the desert gardens would be very romantic,” she said a little embarrassed.

“Romantic you want, romantic I am,” he replied with a smile.

“Why Stax, are you saying that you’re interested in me?” she asked candidly with somewhat of a shy look.

With her mind was off her people, Stax felt better. “Fasala, I’ve been interested in you ever since you first called me Overseer,” he replied.

“What about your other friend?” she said teasingly.

“Who is that?”

“You know, Julie?”

“Oh, she has no interest in me,” Stax replied.

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that. Good night Stax. I think you are so tired that you don’t even know what you’re saying, but thank you anyway. I know that you’re only trying to help.” Her image disappeared from the screen.

Part IV

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1 Preparations

The stark bone face glared out into space. Its skeletal forehead was just visible through the hood that covered its head. The creature's sunken eyes were hidden by shadows of deep darkness. Its needle-like teeth, the distinguishing feature of all Etihwa, wrapped around its head from ear to ear. "They have a new kind of ship," it spoke but not turning to the officer standing beside it.

"Makes no difference, it's only a matter of time," the other one answered.

"Yes, perhaps," the Etihwa Captain replied, "nevertheless, we have been ordered to find out about it. We might even interrogate a human before committing it to our meat locker." Two deep guttural laughs were then made.

"Where do we begin our search?" the officer asked.

"It was sighted on the far side of the Barrier and then again before slipping through it. We will proceed first to the Amorian home world and see what we can find."

"That will take us deep into their space," the Officer replied.

"All the better to flush out the coming kill."

"I could do with a bit of a hunt," the lipless being turned in acknowledgment to its superior.

2 The Protector

Ample food had been brought on board. Fasala had set down just outside the town's outskirts. She had contacted the authorities about supplies and everything had simply been provided.

"They said that they would just charge our account at the central world," Fasala explained.

Stax thought this rather interesting, especially since there wasn't enough fuel to reach the farther side of the Amorian space much less leave orbit. And even if they did get there, there

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would be trouble with them having entered Amorian space through a back door. Well, one thing at a time, he thought.

Much of the food stuffs centered around various types of grains and some root type vegetables. Something like peanuts was also plentiful. They were able only to get a little of the fresher leafy type produce. Once back in orbit, there had been a grand meal cooked that very night by several of the better cooks in the group. And it was a feed indeed. Bottles of the local wines were bought especially for the occasion. Everybody had showed up, even the more antagonistic ones enjoyed themselves. It was held up in what had now become the common room where everyone went to relax. A screen revealed the world below, a beautiful site compared to the blackness of space. Fasala was there on another screen. Others were getting more used to seeing her like this and thinking less and less of her as a computer. It was just after midnight with the party going strong and everyone enjoying themselves that Fasala spoke directly beside Stax, “Stax?”

Stax jumped, startled from the sound of her voice directly in his ear. “Fasala, how do you do that? You scared me.”

“This scares me, there’s a ship approaching,” she said.

“No, not now,” Stax said, “of all times. We don’t need this now.”

“We don’t need what?” Paul overhead Stax.

“Okay people, listen up,” He got their immediate attention. “There’s a ship approaching. Everybody to their stations, now!” Stax bellowed the order out.

A roar of complaint went up but Stax didn’t have to call again. People headed off to their assigned stations. Stax, Mary and David headed off to the bridge. Gean and Jan went up to the launch bays. The doctors headed toward medical.

“Fasala, what information can you give us on the ship?” Stax asked.

“There’s an image coming through right now,” she replied.

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The screen revealed an interesting array of people on the bridge but standing before them was a uniformed person not altogether unlike the uniform Stax and the others were now wearing.

“Greetings....Kingdom ship?” Fasala provided the simultaneous translation. “I’m Captain Paerue. I picked you up on our scans and thought we would visit.”

“I’m Stephen Wildson, Overseer of this ship.”

“Overseer?” It was more of a statement than a question. Captain Paerue continued, “What ship are you?”

“Fasala, is her name,” Stax replied.

“A strange name,” the Captain commented.

“Careful Captain, she gets upset rather easily,” Stax smiled. “She’s more sentient than any of us.”

“Your ship is sentient?” the immediate surprise registered on everyone’s face including Captain Paerue.

“Stop translation Fasala,” Stax said quietly and quickly. “Something’s wrong, this guy is surprised at every word that I say. Why?”

“I don’t know, Overseer, but the ship poses no threat to us,” Fasala said. “It is only about third my size. We could easily outrun and outgun it.”

“If we had fuel, that is,” Stax said. “I think it’s time to use a new strategy. They’re obviously another Kingdom ship. Put me back on Fasala.”

“Captain Paerue, I think it would be advisable if we could get together and talk privately,” Stax suggested.

“Yes, I agree. My place or yours? This should prove rather interesting.”

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Stax saw that the Captain actually was enjoying all of this. It was like catching a little boy stealing a piece of candy. “What about my place? In about ten hours time? That would give us time to prepare you a dinner,” Stax added.

“That would be fine,” he signed off.

“Fasala, can I see the ship on the screen,” a ship came into view. Not only signs of wear and tear but obvious battle scars were evident. A grayish color with pitted paint covering it. Damaged areas had been overlaid with fresh repair plates.

“What about its computer Fasala, can you talk to him or her?”

“I’ve tried, the ship doesn’t have a sentient computer,” she replied.

“Something is strange here,” Stax said. “What are those letters on the side of the ship?”

“It’s the ship’s name. It’s called the Protector,” Fasala answered.

After that, a watch was set and everyone else returned to what was left of their meal.

The next morning after very little sleep, Stax stood along side the advisory group in the launch bay. Two craft, similar to the ones already in the launch bay, landed. Once air replaced empty space, hatches slid open on both craft. Stax and Julie stepped out as the others remained behind. Four humans got out of the craft wearing the uniforms they had seen the previous night. Fasala continued with her translations between the two groups.

“What do I do Fasala, shake hands or bow my head or what?” Stax asked.

“Follow their moves,” was all she said.

The lead person placed his hand over his heart and bowed slightly. Stax mimicked the person.

“Overseer?” The man asked.

“Captain Paerue?” Stax saw that he was a typical Anglo Saxon while others were of different heritages: Oriental, another like an Asian Indian and another Anglo Saxon. “This is my second in command, “Julie Timon,” Stax introduced her.

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Another bow took place. Stax knew that this wasn't going to be easy, however, he felt an immediately trust in the captain. And reading between the lines, the Captain seemed to be enjoying the discomfort he was causing.

“Well, shall we go?” The four followed Stax and the others down to the next level. All the time Captain Paerue and three that accompanied him eyed everything as if it was a new toy. Stax realized that Fasala was still a new ship, not more than a year old. She was clean and much more stream lined than the Captain's own ship.

Everyone sat down at the table looking across at each other. Everyone aboard Fasala was wearing a communications headset in order to hear what was being said. It was Captain Paerue that broke the silence. “Shall we get to the point, Overseer? All of you are a bit of an oddity. You look like a kingdom ship, except for the size, but you really aren't.

“Captain Paerue,” Stax held up his hand interrupting him. “There's another member of the crew that's needs introducing. Fasala, introduce yourself to the people here.”

“I am Fasala.” Her voice rang out, echoing from the four walls and the ceiling. (A bit melodramatic Stax thought.) Fasala used her formal tone which always made an impression. “I am the sentient computer who runs this ship and Stephen Wildson is my Overseer.”

It was Stax's turn to be intrigued. There were expressions of respect, surprise and even reverence on their faces.

“We're honored,” the Captain spoke, “Uh...what do we address you by?”

At this, Fasala's image appeared on the screen to the rear of Stax. “You are to address Stephen Wildson as Overseer and me, simply as Fasala. I will not tolerate any disrespect toward my Overseer. Is that understood?” The emphasis Fasala placed on the Overseer role was an integral part of her programming subroutines. It was also a self-protection device to help balance out the power she held and the mental stresses that incurred from the use of that power. The Overseer and the computer entity were a unit inseparable.

“Understood,” the Captain replied as if a direct order had been issued to him. He then stared silently at Stax contemplating what to say next. “You are indeed a mystery Overseer. You and this ship, I mean Fasala. You are a kingdom starship, obviously but at the same time there

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exists nothing like this ship in the known galaxy. You are not of the Etihwa, that much is certain and you are not Amorian.”

Then Stax understood. “But, at the same time Captain, we aren’t a total surprise to you, are we?” Stax said.

“Legends only mention that a ship once built centuries ago had been given life. But only a legend, that is, until now,” the Captain replied.

“We are from a world far away from this part of space. We have come here through unexpected circumstances,” Stax was hoping that Fasala was translating all of this correctly.

“How did that come to be? You’re not actually registered in Amorian space,” the Captain stated.

“There are some things that we can’t answer right now but may be able to answer later,” Stax said.

“I see,” replied the Captain.

It was Paul who spoke next, “I would like to know something?”

The Captain smiled, “I’m at your service, we share all knowledge throughout the nine kingdoms in order to fight the hideous and cannibalistic Etihwa.”

“Tell us more about the Etihwa,” Paul said.

“You don’t know! Of course. Well, they consider themselves the only race of beings in the galaxy. All others are merely animals.”

“Fasala, the word animals, is it translated correctly?” Stax interrupted.

“That’s the nearest word in your language that describes what the Captain means. His words could also be translated, lower life forms,” Fasala replied.

“Please continue, Captain. I just wanted to clarify some translation of words,” Stax prompted the Captain.

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“So Fasala is translating directly to you,” he commented and then resumed. “All other people are now considered by the Etihwa to be perishable food. Before the changes, they were human, like us. They and the Amorians were the most advanced kingdoms of the twelve. The other kingdoms were even then considered the backwash of humanity. During the years it took the Etihwa to annex and subjugate two of the twelve kingdoms, the remaining eight managed to buy and build enough ships to defend themselves. The Amorian sold us their spaceships and continued to build their Barrier. The Etihwa farmed the people of those kingdoms like cattle, feeding upon their flesh. We have fought the Etihwa since then and have even raided those lands rescuing as many people as we could. Those who are left have been bred into mindless beings. In the last hundred years with the increased growth of the Etihwa population, their war activities have increased.” The Captain paused having a sad look about him.

Stax and the others felt a cold chill on hearing the story. “Captain did the Etihwa society just readily accept these genetical changes without any fight?”

“No, a dictatorial crazed government first came into office. As one thing lead to another, most of the population was tricked or forced into making the changes,” the Captain answered.

“Why do the Amorians deal with the Etihwa?” Paul asked.

“The Amorians changed their kingdom from a technological to an agricultural one. Their hope was to curb the Etihwa’s desire for human meat by providing enough food for everyone, but their plan really hasn’t worked. The Etihwa receive huge supplies of food stuffs at, practically, cost value while the eight kingdoms pay dearly for anything they get. However, they still continue with their raids. Everything we do and make goes into defending ourselves. Sometimes we gain but sometimes we lose. We destroy three to everyone ship they destroy. They are now driven by animalistic desires. We are driven by survival.

Stax stopped the Captain from continuing, “No more explanations right now, maybe later. Yelvin Greersky, one of my advisors will give you a tour of the ship. After that we’ll have a meal together.”

Stax sat until they had all left. “Fasala, you become more and more a mystery. You and your sister ship that accompanied you to Earth must have been the only ships of that type ever designed?” Stax said questioning.

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“I thought there were others but my memory core was more corrupted perhaps than I first imagined. Stax, all of this gives me such a lonely feeling.”

“One thing you can be sure of Fasala, you are not alone,” Stax quickly countered. “You’ve got some good friends, Julie for one, plus others are beginning to appreciate you, especially me.”

“Thanks Stax. I know you are only trying to encourage me. I actually need it. You are so good to me. Sometimes I wish that I could just bend over and give you a big kiss,” Fasala said.

“In time, Fasala, in time,” Stax smiled.

Later after Yelvin returned with the four members of The Protector, another meal had been prepared similar to the one everyone had had the night before.

“Never do we eat so good on The Protector,” one of the Captain’s aids said.

“Why?” Julie asked.

“This would cost an incredible sum of money,” the aid replied.

Captain Paerue spoke up, “As mentioned earlier, we’re under tight financial restraints.”

“Overseer? You only have eighteen crew members?” the Captain asked.

“Yes, we are a bit short staffed at the moment,” Stax answered.

“How many crew members are there on The Protector and do you follow some kind of military code?” someone asked.

“We have a complement of one hundred people and yes, we follow a strict military code. Fighting the Etihwa is not a choice, it’s a necessity for the survival of the kingdoms,” he finished.

“Captain?” Barrett Williams got his attention from the end of the table. “What do you use as a medium of exchange? You know, money?”

“The Amorians have their own currency since they are so restricted. The eight kingdoms of the Confederacy have one currency but trading is often the preferred method of exchange,” Captain Paerue said.

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“Do you use gold or any kind of metal to back up your currency?” Barrett continued.

“No, gold is far to plentiful a metal to use to back up currency. In fact gold is usually thought of as quite useless since it’s so heavy and weak. We use hard glass objects which we call clear rocks. The Etihwa also uses these in exchange for supplies purchased from the Amorians. There’s a demand for them throughout the galaxy.”

“Clear rocks?” Barrett questioned. “Computer?” he quickly corrected himself, “I mean Fasala, is there another English name for this?”

“I think, the Captain could mean, diamonds,” Fasala answered.

Barrett Williams and John McBride quickly glanced at one another, there after, not mentioning the subject again.

Stax spoke up, “That should prove useful, we seem to have acquired a bag full of the stones recently.”

“A bag full you say? Quite a treasure, keep them closely guarded,” the Captain said.

“Oh, they are. Nothing happens on this ship Fasala isn’t immediate aware of,” Stax make sure that he was heard by everyone.

After the meal, the advisors and Stax were left alone with the four from The Protector. “Captain,” Stax started out, “the events that we have found in the galaxy are still as mysterious to us as perhaps we are to you. We have already encountered your Etihwa. That’s why we chose not to return to our home world, for fear that they would follow.”

“A wise choice Overseer, if you encountered an Etihwa scout group, you or they would be destroyed before they would have given up their hunt,” the Captain said.

“We need your help Captain,” Stax decided to go ahead and put some trust in the Captain.

Smiling, he replied, “As we need yours, Overseer. You could be quite an important addition to the rest of the kingdom forces. We feel like a beaten people Overseer. We are only just stopping the Etihwa ever increasing demonic advance. Your ship is the largest starship in the known galaxy.”

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“I doubt that it is more advanced,” Stax commented.

“I beg your pardon,” Fasala spoke up.

“And that,” Captain Paerue pointed toward the image on the screen, “is what makes it so advanced.”

“Okay, perhaps we can help each other. First, we need fuel.”

“That, we can supply,” the Captain answered.

“Second, we need to find what used to be the headquarters for the Galactic Exploration Company. This was under the Twelve Kingdoms Co-operation Organization or something similar.”

“The Eight Kingdoms Confederacy was formed directly out of the Twelve Kingdoms Co-operation Organization,” the Captain answered. “That goes back nearly to the beginning of the conflict.”

“We need to get there,” Stax said, “as fast as possible.”

“We can direct you there but first we are on an errand of mercy to our most remote Kingdom with food.”

“The third thing, we really need to know more about the Etihwa, their strengths and weaknesses plus the situation within the kingdoms,” Stax finished.

“Perhaps you can help us take food and supplies to the Kingdom of Baccurin. This is the smallest of the eight kingdoms. You will learn a lot from this trip. You also have a large amount of free space on this ship for supplies.”

Stax looked around at the other advisors, “What do you think? Should we take Captain Paerue up on his offer?”

“I think it would be a good idea,” Yelvin said in his heavily accented English.

“I agree,” Paul Andrews said.

“What about you Fasala?” Stax called out.

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“Yes,”

“Okay, Captain, we’re at your service,” Stax said to the Captain in affirmation.

3 Joining Forces

Captain Paerue filled Fasala’s cargo holds plus every other empty room and corridor, plus areas on the bridge held sacks of grain. Both ships had landed on the planet making the loading of supplies easier. The Captain’s crew took care of everything. They acted with euphoria in being allowed on the sentient ship. Whenever any of them were required to address the Overseer, an air of humbleness and awe was immediately evident.

Fasala received ten fuel cells from Protector’s Engineering department. Interestingly fuel wasn’t in shortage in the Kingdoms which was an opposite experience to the trouble they had encountered coming from Earth.

Back in orbit Stax and the advisory group were invited to inspect the Protector and to have a meal with the Captain and others of the crew. Stax consented under strong disapproval from Fasala. In fact, so much so that Stax had to give her a direct order to calm down. In the end she accepted the situation but on condition that she could pull up alongside parallel to The Protector orbital path. The fuss she had made was going bit over board Stax thought and later he had even learned that she ordered the whole of the advisory group to be his security guard and that they would answer to her if anything went wrong. She had said the same thing to Captain Paerue! Every movement was over shadowed by two of Captain Paerue’s security marines with Paul, Julie and the others refusing to leave his side. This gave more credence to everyone on The Protector to the mystery that shrouded Stax and the sentient ship.

Walking down the corridor blanketed by people on all sides Stax finally asked, “What is going on? I feel like a sardine.”

The Captain explained what Fasala had done.

“She said the same thing to us, Overseer,” Julie added.

“That woman has gone too far,” Stax yelled into his communication set. “You wait until I get back.”

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Julie whispered into his left ear, “Soften up Stax, she’s in love with you.”

Stax stared at Julie for a second and then relaxed, understanding having dawned on him.

“Okay then, just give me breathing space.” Things became a bit more tolerable after that.

The so-called inspection of the ship would have never passed naval regulations but Stax reminded himself that he couldn’t satisfy the Navy either so who was he to say anything. In the launch bay, about twenty odd military types had lined up. The Crew’s uniforms were tidy and clean but ill fitting. There was an air of scurfiness in the work area but mind you, supplies were indeed stacked everywhere. It made him appreciate the cleanliness on Fasala and some of the naval discipline he had learned. Appreciate naval discipline; he couldn’t believe himself thinking this. As already mentioned the ship was crowded, but it did have more space than first thought. Even though Fasala was two thirds larger, with the engines and all the extra electronics that enabled her sentience, it only gave her a third more of the living space. But there was something that made him feel uncomfortable, then he realized. The people had a defeated look about them. There was a hopelessness on their faces. This bothered him.

“What’s your main line of defense Captain?” Stax asked.

“As with Fasala, we have the energy crystals that cause destruction of a ship’s electronics. The weapon is especially destructive against planet side targets. The crystals react differently in certain gases. They are a little more difficult to use in space. It really depends on the circumstances,” the Captain said. “And of course there are these things,” he pointed toward a glass sealed box and a weapon that reminded Stax of a space war movie laser gun. “These are very effective planet side or inside a ship. It’s a small version of the energy crystal weapon.”

“Is there any defense against them?” Paul asked.

“Well, you can out run them but sometimes maneuverability is a problem. You can fire the ball into a coming ball and cancel it out but you have to be heading directly toward the enemy to do that. The Ethwa ships carry larger charges but the ships themselves are a little less maneuverable than Kingdom ships.” Captain Paerue continued, “Our second line of defense and offense is the fighter. We carry ten double crewed fighter craft. On a one-on-one fight, we have a better chance over the Ethwa, however, they won’t usually enter into a combat situation of this

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type. They prefer to out number us and usually travel in packs of three or six. They have the ships.

In understanding the Etihwa, their acts of aggression are usually associated with starvation and famine. Their rashness in battle is not evident in many cases. Their acts of aggression are carried out often in haste and error. Their insane goal is to populate the galaxy with the Etihwa race. They lose twice the number of ships compared to us but they build them as fast and more. But we have come from a primitive and backward people in these four hundred years building our space fleet out of nothing, and uniting under a common goal. We were independent arrogant nothings.”

“Captain, perhaps you could run us through some of your battle drills once we get under way,” Stax decided to change the subject.

“That we will. Outside the Barrier, the star trails are frequently traversed by Etihwa hunter packs. It was my intention to provide some formal training while we were within the security of the Barrier,” Captain Paerue said.

“I understand,” Stax replied.

In The days that followed, Fasala and The Protector made their way across Amorian space farther in toward the galactic center. Captain Paerue did more than just keeping his word about some practice drills. There were constant battle stations, maneuvers, chases and mock fights. Those of military experience loved it but those of prior civilian scientist status complained daily. Stax would not impose military law on them since they hadn’t really signed on as soldiers, nevertheless they were in a war situation now. Stax was of two minds about it but he tried to keep a balance in his thinking.

“Fasala, have you got it all sorted out with The Protector? How will we leave Amorian space?” Stax asked her.

“Captain Paerue assures me that leaving Amorian space isn’t a problem. It’s entering it where most problems are encountered, he tells me. There are three other Kingdom ships in orbit. They’ve been waiting for The Protector to return. The Captain will make a payment for purchases and log a flight plan. He says they shouldn’t give us any trouble. The three Kingdoms have been notified about us and to act as if we are part of the group. Not finding our names, the

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Amorian officials will only think that they have made an error of some sort. We will then accompany The Protector and the three other Kingdom ships through the gate together.”

Hodayu was somewhat disappointing. There was no huge armada circling the world as Stax had imagined. The planet seemed heavily populated with large cities scattered about its surface but there existed a significant lack of space traffic. The Amorian fleet were some fifteen odd ships of various sizes with one or two of them quite large, which were special grain transport ships. The fleet took up stations at various distances from the planet or near a stationary moonlet which housed the controls for the opening and closing of the Gate. Two ships were stationed near each side of the imaginary gate that allowed other starships to enter or leave Amorian space. All visiting ships were assigned strict parking orbits with Kingdom and Etihwa ships kept far from one another. Only one Etihwa warship was allowed within the Barrier at any given time, however smaller Etihwa ships came and went as they pleased. One such Etihwa freighter became particularly interested in Fasala. In its route to the Gate, it came excessively close to the five Kingdoms ships.

The Barrier’s Gate gave way to the Zabian Kingdom on the right, half again the size of the Amorian kingdom, and with open space on the left. Kingdom ships cruised the Zabian frontier with regular passages that often brought them near the Gate itself. Altogether there were four fleets of Kingdom Starships. They were assigned to particular caldrons of space. Their assignment had something to do with the ratio of attacks by the Etihwa. The first and second fleet were kept stationed on the frontier nearest to Etihwa space. The third watched after the borders of the six kingdoms and the fourth was assigned to the Zabian and Baccurin Kingdoms and the star trails that connected them to the six other kingdoms. In there discussions Stax found out that all Kingdom ships usually only acted in the defensive when attacked. In recent years hardly anything was ever done on the offensive.

All went as planned in leaving the Amorian capital world. There was but a moment of worry when the gate controller couldn’t match the number of Kingdom ships with what he had listed before him. After some discussion between the controller and Captain Paerue, they were allowed to leave. Once out the Gate, the five ships headed for the Baccurin Kingdom with their shipment of relief supplies.

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We have received word, your Grace, that our embassy witnessed five Kingdom ships leaving Amorian Space. One of them was very large. This happened nearly a week ago,' the Etihwa Second-in-command said. "According to transactions on Hodayu, they purchased a large quantity of food stuffs."

"Good," replied the captain. "Perhaps we can take them before they reach a kingdom port."

"They may be heading for the Baccurin Kingdom, sire," the Second-in-Command suggested.

"Yes, possibly. I have never understood these human animals. Little they can do to help Baccurin. It will be our next step in controlling the galaxy. It will be a great addition to our survival needs." The Captain paused thinking about this then continued, "Change course for the Baccurin home world."

"Yes your Grace."

"What's on the menu for this evening, Second?" the Captain asked.

"Your favorite your Grace, unborn human served with Amorian spices and some of Etihwa's best wine."

The Captain turned and made a gesture of acceptance to the menu.

5 The Kingdom of Baccurin

Stax continued his history lesson of the war. As he had already learned, after the Etihwa annexed the two kingdoms near it's own space, there had been a period of peace. It was some fifty years later that the eight Kingdoms became strong enough to hit back at the Etihwa. They started hit and run raids in an attempt to rescue some of the former inhabitants from the Etihwa cattle pens. The Etihwa retaliated using the same hit and run tactics. But sometimes as much as twenty years would pass. The Etihwa would keep to themselves and then start up again. The raids had now been on the increase and they were even starting to attack outer planets of the Kingdoms. This had come to a head approximately seven months back when both fleets met

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head on. A large fleet of Etihwa starships tried to attack a populated world in the Baccurin Kingdom. The Etihwa had taken huge losses but percentage wise, it ended up a tie, however, the Etihwa fleet was routed. The Confederacy still had a shortage of ships from that battle. The military command was stretched to its limits.

It had been a long day. Stax sat before the main view screen that evening watching the formation of ships speed through space. Gean Looves, Jan Isles, and Ron Lake, one of the original officers of the Mars Expedition, came on the bridge. Ron had generally been against Stax like so many of the other officers. Upon seeing them, Stax wondered what trouble was about to take place. Ron generally had now accepted the status quo, but Stax was always aware of unsaid thoughts behind many of the group's hard cast eyes.

"Stax, uh, I mean Overseer, Gean, Jan and I have been studying some of the military strategy these Kingdom ships are operating under and we think we can help them," Ron then paused and waited.

"Yeah, go on," Stax replied not quite understanding what they were after.

"Well, if we could spend just a couple of days on each of those ships going through the procedures and entering the information into their computers, I think they would be able to deal with the Etihwa better in a fight."

"Fasala, are you getting all this?" Stax asked aloud.

"Yes, Overseer," she answered.

"Contact Captain Paerue and see what he thinks." Stax then looked across the bridge, "Mary? Help out with planning and transportation on this to free Fasala up a bit." Turning back to the three, "Okay, see what you can do."

Captain Paerue agreed to the idea and took it upon himself to arrange training for every ship.

Several more days passed with nothing untoward happening in their journey to Baccurin space. Upon entering the Kingdom, they were met by Kingdom warships identical to The Protector and the others. After formal and informal greetings plus transfers of some supplies, they changed course to a provincial world deep within the Kingdom to off load their supplies.

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Captain Paerue and Stax walked through the crowded streets outside the space port. The Captain required two of the five ships to be in space while the other three off loaded. The Protector and another ship, Rescuer, were over shadowed by Fasala's corpus body. Crowds gazed at the sight of the massive ship. To them anything would be impressive, Stax thought being so far removed from everyone else.

While they continued their walk, two military guards assigned by Fasala trailed behind them. No amount of ordering would change Fasala's mind and in the end Stax gave up arguing with her. The guards did their job well as all on the ship knew the wrath she could unleash.

"This is the second time I've seen poverty in the Kingdoms, but this is much worse," Stax said to the Captain.

"The Baccurin Kingdom is the remotest of all kingdoms. Most of the planets are of rocky sandy soil which make it difficult for crops. So they import and things cost more because of the distances involved."

"How many worlds make up the Kingdom?" Stax asked.

"It's only about thirty worlds but they're heavily populated," the Captain replied.

"Why don't you relocate them closer to the six other kingdoms?" Stax questioned.

"Most worlds are already inhabited to some extent. Those that aren't would be too difficult and even more costly than these to live on. And besides, the Baccurin Kingdom has had a long and rich heritage that goes back thousands of years. Many would rather die than leave their home worlds," the Captain said.

"Life is all very complicated," Stax said off handedly.

"Once, the Baccurin people were known for their beautiful hand-crafted carpets. They were sold throughout the known galaxy. Its people were consisted the most backward but they were happy. At that time, there was no poverty what so ever," the Captain commented."

Stax believed what the Captain had said but one would never have known by looking at the many destitute people wearing filthy rags for clothes and holding out their dirty bowls to

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anyone who looked better off. Stax noticed the dilapidated buildings that made up the landscape. Even the sturdier ones wore a mixture of washed out paint, broken windows and crumbling brick work. “It’s just hard for me to understand all of this Captain. We have this on my home planet but to see it on this scale is something else,” his eyes moved up and down the landscape.

“The fortunes of war,” Captain Paerue commented.

Stax stopped, tired of seeing the human degradation and looked into the Captain’s face saying, “You’re losing the war, aren’t you?”

The Captain stared into the masses on the street, silent and seemingly deep in thought, and then answered, “It’s only a matter of time.”

6 Closer to The Prey

Your Grace, we’ve just crossed a fresh star trail. Two ships head toward the six kingdoms,” the second waited for the Captain’s reply.

“Perhaps this is our prey. Even if it isn’t, a little sport never hurts.”

The second turned to the Etihwa standing beside him, “Change course.”

An excitement immediately spread throughout the bridge as word spread that they had officially been ordered into the hunt. As the tension now would increase, the more the Etihwa genetically engineered glands would drip saliva. All six Etihwa ships were now on battle alertness.

“Second?” the Captain commanded his attention.

“Yes, your Grace,”

“Increase speed by twenty percent.”

“Increasing speed by twenty percent, your Grace.” The Second turned to the bridge and made sure the message was communicated. “Look alive Etihwa, the hunt is on. There may be fresh meat on the tables tonight,” deep guttural laughs were heard over the bridge.

7 The Kill

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The five ships split up shortly after completing their mercy mission. Three returned to their assigned stations while The Protector and Fasala headed toward Kingdom Command, the center for the Confederate military operations, deep in the heart of the six main kingdoms, a further three weeks' journey into the heart of the galaxy.

What Captain Paerue had admitted continued to plague Stax. Both ships had just crossed a star trail regularly used by Etihwa. Twenty years ago, the Captain had explained, the Etihwa were never seen cruising these routes, but now, it was a regular occurrence. Formerly we would seek them out, however now we avoid them, having so much fewer ships than they do.

"Stax, six ships have just come into range. I am barely picking them up on my sensors," Fasala said.

"Captain Paerue? Do you confirm what Fasala just said?"

"Yes Overseer, we can see them. They are Etihwa. We will try to outrun them. It wouldn't hurt to be closer to Kingdom space before having to deal with them." The Protector increased to maximum speed which was only two thirds of what Fasala could reach with her third set of engines on line.

A week passed before the Etihwa ships got within range to open fire on The Protector and Fasala.

Gean, Jan and Ron had just completed the training of defensive and offensive tactics with the crew of The Protector and Stax thought it best if they returned to Fasala.

"They've fired their energy crystals," Captain Paerue called over from his ship advising Stax. "But it's so far away it'll have little effect."

"How long before it reaches us, Fasala?" Stax asked.

"Twenty minutes or so," she replied.

"Can we change course, Captain?" Stax now spoke through the communication unit.

"Not until your people get to you," the reply came.

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Stax had forgotten about them, he admitted to himself, “Hey you guys, hurry. How much longer before you reach us?” Stax asked.

“Another twenty minutes,” Gean replied.

“I’ll be there sooner,” said Jan with Ron sitting in the back seat.

“Overseer, all six ships have now increased speed by more than ten percent,” Fasala reported.

“Overseer, this is Gean. You must initiate the plans we’ve been training for. Fasala and the crew know what to do and also the Protector. You can’t wait for us.”

“I’m not going to leave you people,” Stax replied.

“We can leave the star trail and you can pick us up later,” Jan said. “The Etihwa might not follow us off the trail.”

“Captain Paerue, what do you think we should do?” Stax asked.

“I think that’s your only chance. You must change course to avoid the energy crystals,” Captain Paerue confirmed.

“Okay Jan, you’re free to leave the star trail. Head directly away from it and maximum power. We’ll pick you up when we can,” Stax ordered.

“Captain Paerue, Fasala is at your command,” Stax said.

“I believe we should follow through with the new attack strategies exactly as planned. If it goes wrong, we’ll try something else. First, start a complete circle. I estimate that we can release two sets of energy crystals each directly into their flight paths. If we’re lucky, we could get two or three of them at once.”

“We’re with you Captain,” Stax said.

“Okay then, start the maneuver, now!” The Captain ordered.

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Your Grace, both ships have veered off course leaving their craft in open space. What are your orders?" the Second asked.

"Let's wait to see what they're up to. If anything, we can pick up the human animals in the craft later. They've run, which is what I expected."

The Etihwa ship continued its drive. Another Etihwa Officer stepped over speaking in a low tone to the Second. "Your Grace," the Second relayed what the ships were doing to the Captain, "the two ships seem to be completing a half circle maneuver. If they continue, we will pass them up, unable to change course in time."

"Continue your heading Second."

Moments passed on the bridge of the Etihwa ship as the energy ball continued its journey toward the small craft.

"A hit!" the voice of an Etihwa spoke out with the sweat of the hunt on its face. A mummer of approval for the Captain went throughout the bridge.

"Your Grace, we have hit one of the smaller craft, the other was out of range," the second informed the Captain what had already been confirmed by the crew.

"Good!" Saliva was now dripping from the Captain's mouth.

One of the bridge crew was speaking, "Your Grace, the two ships are continuing their circle. They will intercept us in ten minutes," the Second said.

"What new game is our prey up to now?" the Captain said.

"They have now fired wide spread energy crystals directly into our path," the Second pronounced nervously.

"To what effect?" the Captain questioned.

"The Kingdom ships are headed directly toward us. If we move upward the least amount the two ships will ram all six of us," the Second was speaking louder.

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“Move outward to the side,” the Captain ordered. Minutes passed, the four energy balls hit the remaining four Etihwa ships, short circuiting their entire electronics. Obviously out of control, the starships hit each other, the explosions reaching out but not making contact with two that pulled away. The two Kingdom ships were almost on top of the remaining Etihwa.

“We have missed them,” the Second sounded relieved. But the Captain then saw a series of flickering lights leave the larger ship hitting his own. The Etihwa ship’s electronics were immediately affected as the two Kingdom ships passed on. He had never known Kingdom ships to risk themselves so.

“How bad is the ship?” The Captain asked.

“One engine is out, two others are still operational,” the Second answered.

“Good.” The Etihwa Captain smiled to himself. “Power down to pick up the animal craft. By the time they turn around we will be gone. Order the other ship to proceed to the nearest Etihwa outpost. They are not to wait for us,” the Captain ordered.

9 Rescue

Stax watched the Etihwa ship pick up the craft which Jean piloted. The Protector fired an energy crystal toward the Etihwa ship but knew it would do no good. “Captain Paerue, Fasala has the speed over the protector. Can you pick up the other craft? I’m going to pursue the Etihwa ship. Follow us as soon as you take the craft aboard.”

“Affirmative overseer,” the answer came. “Watch your back. There are two ships left out there.”

Jean’s craft was scooped up into the launch bay. She watched as the beings pried open the craft’s hatch. As it came off, she saw what she only guessed to be a high ranking officer standing several meters away. The hideous face revealed a lipless mouth with needle teeth and an open hole which Jean only guessed to be its’ nose. She was dragged out of the cockpit by two others who then held her firmly between them.

Fear came over her as the Etihwa Officer leaned up close to Jean’s face. He spoke in low guttural sounds and seeing that she was afraid, he then opened his mouth portraying a large cavity with a small narrow tongue at the bottom. This brought on a sound like laughter from the

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other two. The Etihwa barked unintelligible words to the two. She was dragged over to a nearby hatch and thrown in.

Jean saw only darkness but smells abounded of human excretion. As her eyes adjusted, she could make out faint movements against the opposite wall. Then she saw humans, some standing and some sitting amongst the filth. It was all she could do to keep from gagging.

Fasala had fired up all engines by now. Everyone had braced themselves in preparation. Only one person blacked out as Fasala shot forward.

“Fasala, can we fire an energy ball at this speed?” Stax asked feeling the increased G’s against his body.

“I think I should slow down, we’re only five minutes away from the Etihwa ship,” she answered instead.

“When you come within a minute of reaching the ship, cut speed, wait thirty seconds and fire an energy ball. Martin,” he turned looking across the bridge, “you get ready to fire that laser and don’t stop firing it,” Stax ordered.

Minutes later, the reduction of speed by Fasala was evident. Stax saw the release of the energy crystals by Fasala. At the same time, Martin started with the laser not totally sure the effect it was having. It was then that the Etihwa ship began to slow down, visible explosions were seen coming from the ship.

“Paul, get the craft ready, I’m going with you,” Stax said hoping that Fasala hadn’t understood him. But everyone turned and looked at Stax and then looked around at the walls waiting for Fasala to throw a fit.

“Overseer,” Fasala began.

Stax knew what was coming, “Fasala, stop it! That’s a direct order from your Overseer! I’m going,” he yelled running toward the stairs leading up to the launch bay.

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Fasala was immediately furious. He had never spoken to her in that manner before. The Overseer didn't know what danger he was putting himself into, but she had received a direct order. However, that didn't negate the fact of him being so reckless she thought.

Inside the Etihwa ship, the melting hell of fire spread. Jean and the others were knocked to the floor of their room. The hatch blew open and Jean began to try to get the others out. They only snarled their teeth and hit at her whenever she came close to them. They howled as flames erupted out in the launch bay.

Paul and Stax landed on the outer section of the small launch bay. They saw Jean leaving an open hatch within the air filled section. She wasn't more than ten meters away from them. They entered the air hatch carrying an extra breather and suit with them. Screams of anguish further back were heard as they approached Jean.

"Let's go, Jean," Stax grabbed for her.

"There are others, Stax." Jean pulled him to the door of the captives' room. The heat of the room immediately took his breath away. The cowering humans, those who were still alive, wailed as the scorching deck burnt the flesh of their feet. Stax headed toward the group only to watch as some scratched at the heated wall behind them only burning themselves more, others snarled and screamed at him. At that moment the ship shook. The wall where the humans stood burst open into flames engulfing those standing there. Jean pulled Stax back from the flames.

"There's nothing else we can do," Paul called out above the thundering noises. Minutes later, the three were in the craft flying off back to Fasala.

The Etihwa Captain watched from the bridge screen as the large Kingdom starship pulled away. He had under estimated the kingdom ship but then the thought passed through his mind, was it a kingdom ship? It was then the explosion ripped through the bridge and then through the rest of the ship.

Part V

1 The Middle Kingdoms

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Respect for the Overseer and Fasala had grown boundlessly. Five of the six Etihwa ships were destroyed by only two Kingdom ships in one clean sweep. A message had been sent to Kingdom Command a week out from arriving. It outlined the events that passed since the Protector had contacted the sentient ship and its Overseer. Jan and Ron had returned to Fasala soon after the Etihwa ship had exploded. There had been several days of celebration especially with the Protector and its crew. Captain Paerue wanted more training for his officers from the strange crew. Jan, Ron and Jean were also pleased that what they had done had been so helpful. Some of the other Officers aboard Fasala now volunteered to help with the training also. Stax was over-joyed by the turn of events. They were finally seeing the bigger picture that had always been there before them. The Confederacy had a great many needs. Something had to be done to help to save them from becoming part of the Etihwa's meat locker.

They had been in Kingdom space now for nearly a week. Upon entering, they had been met by two patrol ships. A large ship such as Fasala being escorted by the Protector was an interesting sight but not half as exciting when the patrol ships were told about the ship and its Overseer. They all knew the legends. Calls came from both ships congratulating the Overseer and Fasala on their recent victory. Stax quickly clarified that the Protector was as much involved and besides Stax really didn't care for the hero worship stuff. He was still coming to grips with his new role as Overseer and now the situation he and his crew of scientists found the galaxy in.

They were days away from the Kingdom Command and the planet Valium, the place that Fasala had originated from some four centuries in the past. The headquarters occupied an entire world in Zeeb space, one of the six central Kingdoms of the Confederacy. Etihwa space was another one thousand light years down the Orion arm. Valium was situated practically at the center of the six Kingdoms. Five hundred lights years beyond Valium was the heavily patrolled frontier.

"Captain Paerue has requested an extended time of rest for all of us. You'll be allowed to stay on the planet until it's decided what's to become of us. I will stay aboard Fasala taking short visits to the planet. I'm told there are quite a few places for relaxation." Stax was feeling a bit sad in some ways. Most of the crew had really begun to work together and many had found a real purpose in the events they had been cast into.

"I don't understand," John McBride said. "Are we to be just dumped on this world and forgotten? I have a family waiting for me." The bitterness was very evident in his tone.

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“The location of Earth cannot be revealed,” Stax said. “Even Fasala no longer has the co-ordinates in her memory.”

“But, surely, she could find the way back, couldn’t she?” Myrlen Roads, one of the medical doctors asked.

“I had Fasala erase all and I mean all co-ordinates. The only way she could go back to Earth now would be to retrace the star trails that got us here and that would be difficult,” Stax told the group.

“What have you done? You’ve made it virtually impossible for us to return,” Barrett’s voice was full of anger.

“But surely you understand,” the heavy Russian accent of Yelvin was heard, “that Earth must be protected. If any of us knew how to return, others could find out and those others could be the Etihwa. Earth would be defenseless against them.” The Russian looked at everyone, daring them to speak against him.

“Damn you all and your blasted theories about protecting Earth. Earth needs to be warned of what’s going on out here,” Barrett’s anger increased.

“Overseer,” Julie interrupted, “so what’s next? What do we do?”

“Fasala and I will continue to look for her physical body. Some of you have felt that this has been a prison so I wouldn’t blame you if you decide to stay on Valium and go your own way. Most of you could find quite an exciting new life amongst the Kingdoms with all of your expertise. From what I understand, they are short of scientists in every field,” Stax said.

“We don’t want a new life, I have one on Earth,” John spoke up again, still not wanting to give in to the idea of not returning to Earth.

“If you want to, you could stay aboard Fasala and see what develops next. It really depends on what we find out here at Valium regarding Fasala but that doesn’t mean that there’s a chance of her ever returning to Earth. As soon as we find her body, she’ll download her memories and this ship will become just an ordinary ship of the line.”

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“For me, I want to stay with you and Fasala,” David Martin spoke up. “Even though I agree with the Overseer about protecting Earth, I’ll stay around until I’m certain of no return or find a place within the kingdoms to settle down.”

“Overseer, Captain Paerue from the protector wants to speak with you,” Fasala said.

“I’ll take it in my quarters.” Stax exited the bridge going directly to his cabin. The interruption was timely as he was tired of arguing the point with Barrett and John.

After leaving, a low murmur continued amongst the group.

“I can’t believe I’m hearing this,” Barrett said aloud. “Isn’t there anything we can do to stand against this ... this ... yeoman?” There was so much hatred in his voice.

At that, several people looked up at the walls fearing immediate reaction from the computer entity.

“Just what do you mean?” Jean asked. “If there is any chance that the people of Earth can get dragged into this galactic mess, what we want is immaterial. Can’t you see that?” She looked directly at Barrett. “The Etihwa must never become aware of the fact that there’s an unprotected planet out there teaming with life, just waiting to be herded into their cattle pens. I’ve seen the mindless humans they breed. It would be better for all of us to die. I’ll hear no more of this talk about going against Stax,” Jean got up and walked out of the meeting. Others soon followed leaving only Barrett and John behind looking with awed faces as everyone left in support of Stax.

“Damn that Yeoman and damn you!” Barrett shook his fist at the ceiling and I don’t care if her majesty the machine hears me or not.

“Careful, Mr. Williams,” a calm voice spoke from the walls, even though the Overseer has given me strict orders not to strike anyone; however,” and Fasala paused for effect, “I’m only a machine!” High energy crackling like lightning near the ceiling made Barrett and John quickly vacate the bridge.

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Valium was located in a binary system consisting of a red giant primary and a yellow secondary. Valium was one of five large worlds in a stationary orbit with the yellow secondary. Once a year when it came close to the red giant, it was pulled slightly out of its orbit. There was never any night as such but instead light blue sky was considered the planet's day and red sky its night during a light season. After six months Valium entered a twilight season where darkness prevailed for four hours a night. Valium's winter season would come when both the primary and secondary were in the same sky. Valium was the only habitable world, however others had vast quantities of ore and were used for mining.

Valium's four moons consisted of large ship building docks and defense stations. A defense barrier was controlled from the moons that protected Valium. Two small space stations that orbited the planet controlled the opening and closing of the portal for ship's traffic.

Fasala and the Protector slowly entered the portal. Everyone watched as Fasala passed immense ship building structures on the surface of a nearby moon. Skeleton parts of several starships could be seen. Another moon farther away looked to have one big city covering whatever surface it had. Around Valium there were ships of various sizes.

Valium was partially covered with clouds and several small seas were visible. The world didn't look that industrialized but large cities populated the place.

"Welcome home Fasala," Stax said.

"Thank you, Overseer," she replied. "A message from Kingdom Command."

"Okay, let's see it," Stax said, "on the main bridge screen."

"Welcome, in the name of the Eight Kingdoms. I'm Amir Wakins, military government at Kingdom Command. For the first few weeks we have assigned Captain Paerue to assist you in your stay. That will also give his crew a well-earned leave. You have been given free run of Valium all expenses paid for the next month. We look forward to meeting all of you, especially the Overseer and the ship, Fasala. You and your crew have been invited to a dinner in your honor tonight." The message ended.

"Short and sweet," Stax said, "better that than some long winded question and answer game."

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“I’m sure, there’ll be many questions,” Fasala commented.

“Okay everyone, party time tonight by the Kingdom Echelon. Dress uniform is called for,” Stax spoke to the seventeen members of the original Mars expedition. Mars, he thought, so far away both in distance and the changes they all had experienced.

“Fasala, can you request that we be allowed to land near as possible to where we will meet everyone. Advise them that I require your close presence,” Stax told her.

“Why, of course, Overseer,” she appeared on the screen with a bashful look.

Whenever she did that, Stax gazed at her beauty. He loved her for it. Later that evening they were picked up at the space port. Stax had learned that normally warships weren’t allowed to land but in Fasala case an exception was made. He had also learned that the idea of an intelligent starship was beyond them. Stax knew that they were supposed to be in probably the second most protected area in the known galaxy. Because of this, Fasala didn’t say a word about him leaving the ship. Stax also knew that there were probably Etihwa informers about, but that was a problem he didn’t really care to think about at the moment.

Everyone except Stax had left the confines of the ship, happy to have some terra firma below their feet. The temperature was just above 27 degrees Celsius. The red glow of the primary was beginning to show itself on the eastern horizon while Valium’s own sun was sitting in the west. The port was a typical airport with different types of small craft going and coming. Workers and attendants moved about the place quite nonchalantly considering the whole of the area was the largest military installation in the Eight Kingdoms.

The port itself was a gray mass of concrete building three and four floors above the ground. In fact, Stax didn’t remember seeing any really tall building anywhere. The redness of the planets so-called night lit the port. The giant red star was twice the size of the system secondary in the sky. Its light was half that of the day.

All eighteen stood on the tarmac wearing the head sets that would allow automatic translation via Fasala. Several groups had formed discussing their surroundings and the reddening twilight sky. The bright red sun had risen further.

Stax had been standing right outside Fasala’s main hatch for ten or so minutes taking in the freshness of everything and watching the others mingling about. He noticed a flat bed vehicle

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approaching with dim lights. Diffused light from the red star made it difficult to distinguish more details.

“Fasala, a vehicle is approaching. I assume it’s for us,” he said walking down the stairs.

“It’s Captain Paerue. He advised me a few minutes ago that he would be part of the welcoming committee.”

By the time Stax had walked down the flight of stairs, the vehicle had pulled up. Several people stepped out of a door. Stax immediately recognized the Captain. The other person, Amir Wakins stood out because of his uniform. Stax and the others performed the customary bow but to everyone’s surprise the Amir and Captain extended their hands, timidly at first, for a traditional hand shake. They’ve been talking to Fasala Stax thought. He must talk to her about sharing information. There still were too many unknowns to be completely open.

“Welcome to Valium, Overseer,” the Amir said shaking his hand.

“Thank you Amir,” Stax replied.

Still holding Stax’s hand, “I think that you, your ship and crew, will be a godsend to the Confederacy.”

Stax was never sure how Fasala chose her words but he was sometimes amazed at the idioms she had begun to use just in the last several weeks. Why did Fasala choose the word Amir over Admiral, Stax wondered. He went ahead and smiled at the Amir’s comment, not quite sure of his meaning. The translation that Fasala provided was almost simultaneous, but it was always out of time with the speaker’s voice. One started to believe that they were communicating with the headset instead of a person.

The Amir went around to each person happily shaking their hands making comments of greetings to each one.

“Good to see you again, Overseer,” Captain Paerue said while shaking Stax’s hand.

“Just call me Stax, Captain.

“Uh, well since this dinner is semi-formal, I might continue with your formal designation, if that’s okay?” The Captain replied uncomfortably.

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“Sure,” Stax said feeling a bit rebuffed.

“Shall we proceed?” the Amir beckoned to everyone.

The ride was no more than five hundred meters across the tarmac to a building with similar vehicles parked outside. Upon entering, there were several uniformed personnel standing at attention with their hands pressed over their hearts in the formal salute. The uniforms were clean but tacky looking. Stax noticed that all of his group including himself wore similar uniforms but theirs held their shape better. The group purposely wore no rank insignia of any kind nor name to differentiate between them.

Double doors opened to reveal a rather large group of uniformed people with various insignias. Stax had a moment of fear but realized this was all part of the welcoming ceremony. The moment the doors opened, silence from within was intense, then someone starting to clap their hands followed by others and then the whole of the group followed suit.

“Quite some welcome,” Julie said to Stax.

“I think they’re making more of us than they should,” Stax replied.

“They still have no idea of who we are or what we are but they’re treating us as if we’ve already won their war for them,” Julie continued.

“That bothers me,” Stax said just before they were ushered into the room.

Everybody mingled together. Stax stayed with Captain Paerue and the Amir. After some time, Stax felt the uneasiness of the Amir and others in knowing what to talk about and what not to talk about with the eighteen. A kid gloves approach was obviously being applied by everyone but Stax decided to clear the air on several points as soon as he got the opportunity.

With everyone seated, the Amir welcomed everyone again. “I’ll let the Overseer introduce his people if that’s okay with him,” the Amir turned to Stax questioningly.

Stax stood up, “We thank you for your hospitality but before I introduce everyone there are things that I’m sure you’d like to know about us. Through unusual circumstances we left our home world some twenty weeks ago. But that seems to us to be twenty years. We have come a

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long way. Once realizing the threat that has thrust itself on the known galaxy we have destroyed all references as to the location of our world. I think the reason is obvious.

The ship that brought us here is or was one of your own.” There was a murmur all around over this statement. “But there’s a mystery that surrounds that also since you know nothing about that ship. And it’s not just a ship with a hull and bolts and metals, it is a living entity. She saved our lives while we were exploring one of the planets of our system. But the technology that built Fasala came from the world we are now on. She wants to know about her previous life. The others in our group are scientists and experts in various fields. I hope that they can be of some assistance to you and you can help us settle into this new life we have come into. I’ll let each of them decide their path or direction. My former job consisted of being a Yeoman in my own military. Now, I’m Fasala’s Overseer and I’ll continue with that job until we find the truth about Fasala. One last thing, our journey to you wasn’t without loss. Our former Captain and commander died under stressful circumstances. Our Commander was captured and killed by the Etihwa.”

The ceremony continued with Stax introducing the members of his crew. Food and drink were brought by orderlies after that. Stax no longer thought about the party but his mind was on Fasala. He hoped that she wouldn’t become a thing of curiosity. Neither did he feel comfortable in the role the Amir was bestowing onto Fasala and him.

3 Assassin

The next few days found different members enjoying Valium’s beaches, mountains and woodlands. Others walked about the city streets investigating its shops. Kingdom Command had kept their word. Anything anyone wanted, it was already paid for or billed directed to Kingdom Command. Everyone had already moved out of the ship into the equivalent of a five star hotel with Kingdom Command footing the bill. Fasala continued her translation for each of the people through special communications links set up by Kingdom Command. This was easily done through her subroutine programs. Stax chose to stay aboard but accepted an offer by Captain Paerue for a tour of the city.

Fasala made her demands for Stax’s protection understood so three or so body guards kept at a discreet distance as they walked the busy city center. There were a number of shops but goods were obviously short. Anything worth buying was very expensive.

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“So how much is this pair of boots,” Stax pointed to a shelf, “if you had to buy them on your salary?” Stax asked.

Smiling, the Captain answered, “About two months pay.”

“Would there be any cheaper places to buy clothing items?” Stax continued to ask questions realizing more and more the desperate situation the kingdoms were in.

“Oh yes, there are cheaper places but you get what you pay for,” Fasala translated.

Like the Captain, Stax wore his military uniform as did two out of every five people that passed them on the street. “Is that the way most people wear their uniforms?” Stax looked about.

“Those in the military are supplied with everything. All needs are met,” the Captain replied.

People of all kingdoms walked about. Streets and sidewalks joined together into one avenue. An occasional vehicle would drive slowly through the crowds. They would open up a space closing it afterwards the moment the vehicle passed. Several were sitting on the curb with bowls they held out asking for money. “Fasala translate what these people are saying,” Stax spoke into his communication set.

At the same time one such person hit the bowl against Stax’s leg. “Please Mr., my family is hungry,” the man held the bowl higher.

The captain dropped a coin into it while Stax stared.

“Is there no governmental help for this?” Stax asked.

“There is some but each kingdom pays a heavy debt for the war effort,” the Captain replied. “Do you not have this on your world?”

“Sadly, yes, but I’m not used to it from where I grew up,” Stax answered.

“Valium is better off than most but trade and commerce is very regulated and necessities are distributed as equally as possible,” the captain said.

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“Stax? You asked me once about us losing the war. There were times in our history that life was indeed better. But the kingdoms are tired. They’re mentally defeated, getting weaker and weaker. Can you understand why Kingdom command and everyone are so excited about you being here? We need encouragement, something new, something that will rally everyone.” The Captain’s sad but pleading tone came through the translation.

“I’m not sure what we can do Captain. So as soon as we trace the whereabouts of Fasala’s body, she will no longer be a ship,” Stax said.

“I can understand that but the Kingdoms have need of your people’s expertise also. Already you have given new ideas that have helped in combat.”

“Yes, they will eventually work into your society and so will Fasala and myself. We will be able to help in that way.” Stax said.

A disturbance ahead caused both men to look up.

“I wonder what’s going on,” Stax said aloud.

“There’s someone running this way,” Captain Paerue returned.

“What’s happening Stax?” Fasala grew concerned.

“Don’t know yet, someone seems to be in trouble.” Stax answered.

“Are you in any danger?” Fasala asked.

“Don’t,” Stax never got to finish his sentence. A man ran out of the crowd toward Stax. Stax felt his side go on fire and then saw the knife that had been plunged into him.

“Stax? Stax?” Fasala called over the head set.

Stax panicked, “Fasala, I’m hurt. Someone stabbed me with a knife. I’m sorry Fasala,” His knees bent, falling to the sidewalk.

Two people jumped the guy from the back but not before the man had given a wide grin back toward Stax.

“I’m coming Stax,” Fasala yelled over the communications device.

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With the crowd pushing around two of the security guard, Stax hadn't heard Fasala's last words. The pain in his side was unbearable. Captain Paerue ordered one of the security people to call for assistance but then a thunderous roar was heard overhead. A huge starship was bearing down upon them. People were beginning to panic, running to get away from the ship. The Captain recognized it as Fasala and realized the sentient ship must have over reacted. It was coming down into one of Valium's main cities. Streaks of lightning were shooting out into the air about it. The ship looked alive with anger, a sinister sight to the people in the streets. The smell of ozone got stronger the closer the starship came.

Captain Paerue placed Stax's communications unit on his own head. "Fasala, we've called for help and we're in control of the situation. Stop the lightning. I repeat, we're in control of the situation. Please stop your approach."

"What happened, Captain?" Fasala could hardly be heard for her crying.

"He's got a knife in his side. We've captured the person who did it."

"Is the Overseer still alive?" Fasala was now hovering several hundred meters above the street.

An atmospheric craft could now be heard approaching. Fasala immediately challenged it to identify itself.

"This is a military rescue. We have doctors aboard," someone answered.

"Quickly, my Overseer is dying," Fasala replied. "Captain Paerue? I want you and the doctors to bring Stax aboard."

"There's no place for you to land Fasala," the Captain replied. "I think it would be better to take him to the hospital."

"No! I want him aboard. My medical facility is well stocked both with medicine and equipment. I want you and the doctors to follow me back to the space port."

"Fasala, I'm not sure that's such a good idea."

"Do it Captain Paerue. Is that understood?" Fasala was speaking harshly now.

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“Okay Fasala, we’ll return to the space port with you, but I’ll order additional supplies to be brought immediately to the port.”

Hours later Stax was safely aboard Fasala. Others were already waiting on the tarmac with additional supplies and equipment.

“I should have never let him go out like that. It’s all my fault,” Fasala said crying the whole time.

“I think Kingdom Command under estimated his importance,” the Captain replied.

“Who would have wanted to do this?” Fasala asked.

“My only guess would be the Etihwa. We have known about their spies for years but honestly, I didn’t think they concerned themselves much about what we did,” the Captain answered.”

The medical unit arrived. Captain Paerue redirected Stax back to the spaceport as Fasala had ordered.

Hours later the several Kingdom doctors came out of medical. “He’ll be fine Captain Paerue. No real damage. Can you tell that computer that he will be okay? Our nurse will stay until you arrange something permanently.”

“I heard you the first time,” Fasala spoke.

“He’ll be sore for a couple of weeks,” the doctor was un-phased by what Fasala had said, “but that’s about all.”

“Thank you doctors,” Fasala said now in a less hysterical state.

The doctors looked around at the walls and then shook their heads.

Military guards circled the large ship. Inside the nurse sat patiently alongside Stax’s bed while Captain Paerue paced the deck in the corridor.

Amir Wakins entered accompanied by several officers, “How is he?” he asked in a lowered voice.

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“He’ll live,” Captain Paerue spoke up wondering why the Amir was speaking so softly.

“Uh, How is the ship taking all this?” the Amir said looking around.

“Rather upset at first, but now she’s calmed down considerably,” the Captain answered.

“It took me fifteen minutes to convince her to let me in,” he said again in a lowered voice. “The whole of Valium almost went to battle alert. Beside shaking the entire space port when she blasted out of here, she communicated on all channels warning that if any ship approached the area, they would be immediately destroyed. I think she would have taken on the whole of the Kingdom’s Fleet,” the Amir said.

“I see,” were Captain Paerue’s only words, his face had turned considerably pale.

4 Shore Leave

“I’m really discouraged Fasala. It’s been months of learning how to be the Overseer and now that we’re here, no one needs me any longer,” Stax said. “I’m still the 2nd Class Yeoman you met on Mars.”

“I need you Stax,” Fasala replied.

“Well, actually, I need you too,” Stax said.

“Oh, I’ve got a message coming through from Captain Paerue,” Fasala said.

“Overseer?” the Captain asked.

“Stax, call me Stax, Captain. That’s the way friends address each other where I’m from.”

“Stax...we may have found what you and Fasala are looking for.”

Stax came out of his chair, “What exactly have you found?”

“Well, it’s information on this company that Fasala worked for. The Kingdom Exploration Company which was under direct authority of a Twelve Kingdoms joint effort. It was from that some fifty or so years later that Eight Kingdom Confederacy was born. The Kingdom Command eventually took over the responsibilities of the long defunct Kingdom Exploration Company. We found a contract between a person called Fasala Wireck and

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Kingdom Exploration. It states salary, benefits and length of service. The project was highly secretive at the time and it was a military contract. It seems that we owe her some 400 years of back salary for whatever that's worth. Fasala is Royalty. She was a distant member of the Bassoon Royal Family. But as you know the Bassoon Kingdom was the first of the two kingdoms conquered and annexed by the Etihwa. Her home world is nothing but a human cattle farm now. Some of her people were rescued during the early years of the war and now live on a planet near the frontier. We only have one reference to the building of the ship. Two new prototypes were built at the same time and were being tested. No other reference, plans or information that enables us to know the whereabouts of her body."

"Can you forward a copy of that with the exact co-ordinates of her home world?" Stax asked.

"Of course, it's now deep within Etihwa space and five hundred light years from the Frontier."

"Thank you, Captain Paerue," Stax said.

"Sorry that it wasn't better news," he signed off.

There was a temporary silence. Stax thought long on what the Captain had said. Of course Fasala had heard the whole of the conversation but she hadn't commented on it yet. To Captain Paerue it was a 400 hundred-year-old history now but to Fasala, it was only months. "I'm sorry, Fasala," Stax said softly.

"It makes me feel so lonely," she said in a far off voice.

"You will never be alone Fasala, I promise. I'll always be here," Stax told her. He had never really understood the degree of sentience of Fasala and the way she was joined to the ship, but he knew that she was an emotional being, in many ways a lot like him. "Fasala, I think you need to concentrate on finding out everything you know about the people that escaped and resettled within Kingdom Space. I'm going to continue checking into your home planet and what happened to you. Just don't worry," he told her.

"Thanks, Stax ... it's all so strange. It wasn't that long ago that I said goodbye to my parents, my brothers and sisters but it's been 400 years." The reality of it all had only begun to sink in.

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Over the following days, Stax heard from various members of his group. Some were enjoying themselves greatly, some missed home and some had returned to their hotel room near the space port. The attempt on his life had not gone unnoticed by the group. Fasala had kept them well advised during the whole time.

David and Julie, now Stax's closest friends moved back aboard Fasala. Others, like Barrett Williams and John McBride kept their distance from Stax, Fasala and everyone else. When they left the ship, they had cleared their quarters of everything. In fact they hardly ever used their communications link for translation. Stax wondered how they were communicating with people but he had decided to let them go their way. He had enough on his mind.

They had all decided to have dinner together for old time sake. Small talk had included description of the different holiday places, different types of shops in the town. "City streets, buildings, shops and everything reminds me of a trip I took into Eastern Europe when it was under communism," David said. "It looks like a stagnant and dying economy."

"The Etihwa is slowly killing them by forcing them to maintain the war effort," Stax agreed.

"I wonder if the Etihwa are beyond reasoning with," Julie said.

"Well, they are driven by different motives and four hundred years of physical changes. They know that they have an edge on the war over the Kingdoms. I wonder what the everyday Etihwa life is all about," David interjected.

"Well, might as well tell you. Fasala and I are thinking about paying them a short visit."

"What!" Julie said.

"You can't be serious?" David asked.

"And you really haven't really discussed this with me either," Fasala added with a questioning tone.

"Well, actually, I briefly mentioned it. After studying the little information we have found, it's the next step. There may be nothing on Fasala's home planet but we need to

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investigate it.” Stax sounded as if he was pleading with Fasala but he continued, “We will go alone. I don’t want any other deaths on my hands.”

“Except your own and then what would Fasala do?” Julie said sounding very irritated. “You men are all alike! We’re in this together.”

“I think it’s a stupid idea but I’m in also,” David said.

“I think you need to put it to the others and let them decide whether they want to come along or not. They are linked to this ship more than you think Stax,” Julie said, trying to convince Stax.

“We’ll talk about it again. There needs to be a lot of planning. I want to see what we can do to raise the weaponry of Fasala among other things,” he finished off.

5 The Price of a Starship

Barrett and John sat in the living room of their spacious hotel suite.

“Too bad, the guy didn’t kill him,” Barrett said.

John looked around the walls, “Aren’t you afraid these rooms are bugged?”

“Are you kidding, the whole of this place is so lax? They trust everybody. Look how easy someone got to Wildson. No one’s bugged the room and besides, I’ve checked it out,” Barrett replied.

“So what now?” John said. He was willing to let Barrett do all the planning. He had brought everything from the ship as Barrett had instructed him to.

“I’ve done some checking on those rocks of ours. You and I are probably among the richest people on this world. These things are more valuable than gold,” he held up one of the diamonds between his fingers. “With a quarter of these, we can buy and staff one of their starships back to Earth. We’ll still have quite a fortune left plus whatever we sell the starship for after returning to Earth.

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“We don’t have the contacts and we can’t use the communication devices. That maniacal computer would turn us in faster than you could blink your eye,” John spoke hoping Barrett had considered all of this already.

“We just need to find the right person and show them this,” Barrett threw the picture over to him.

“Where did you find this?” John gazed at the color photo of a starship.

“Got it in a shop, didn’t even pay anything for it. When I spoke to the sales person, they just had me to sign my name in English,” Barrett laughed. “Remember, we got free run of this place for a month.”

“Let’s go and have a drink, somewhere.” Barrett got up pocketing the single diamond in one pocket and the picture in another.

The streets were less crowded than during the day. The giant primary cast its red glow over the city landscape. Barrett had already found some of the more dubious back street bars earlier that day. As he proceeded to retrace his steps back to the area, the narrow alleyways grew darker. With the red star just above the horizon, the shadows of the narrow confines approached darkness.

“Hey Barrett, are you sure you know where you’re going?” Empty rubbish containers lay about with their tops thrown about.

“You’ll see. It’s not too far now,” Barrett answered.

Turning a corner, they came out into a street having low lined buildings. Several shop doors were open on the opposite side with a few tables and chairs out front. People sat around one of the tables some holding drinks in their hands. It could have been a picture of any back street bar on Earth. Barrett and John made their way over to one bar and entered. Only a few customers were inside. A heavy beer smell reeked over the place. Pictures of various starships hung crooked on the dirty walls. Chairs and tables were heavily worn, some showed attempts at wiping the dust off.

“This is as good a place as any,” Barrett said as he pulled the chair away from the table.

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“We don’t have any money,” John looked around wondering how they were going to order.

“I keep telling you, we don’t need any. Watch this,” he said motioning to a waiter.

“We want those two things,” Barrett put up two fingers and pointed toward two glasses being held by others nearby.

“I’m not sure how much of that he got,” John said.

“Wait and see,” Barrett answered.

After several minutes the waiter returned with two large glasses of beer. After placing them on the table the waiter provided a piece of paper and a pen for Barrett to sign with.

“Well, that was easy,” John said.

“We’re being taken care of by Kingdom Command. I could even get to like this,” Barrett took the drink and leaned back in his chair with his mouth open and beer dripping, “Wow, this stuff is peppered with hot sauce.” He brought his chair forward sucking in and out trying to cool his mouth.

“Maybe, you’re supposed to sip it,” John said, “I don’t see anyone else taking large drafts.”

They sat watching people come and go. Barrett really didn’t know what he was waiting on or how to start up the right kind of conversation. But at that same moment a man and woman sat down at their table and started to talk.

“Sorry folks, I don’t understand a word you’re saying,” Barrett said and so indicated by raising his hands in an, ‘I don’t understand gesture’.

The woman produced a newspaper with a picture of a starship hovering just above a city street. In the foreground, people were assembled around a person lying on the street.

“Hey Barrett, that’s Fasala. That must be when Wildson was stabbed.

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Barrett took the paper from the lady and pointed at it then pointed at himself and John. The two people shook their heads in understanding. It was then that Barrett decided to try something. He took out the picture he had of the Kingdom Starship and laid it on the table. Pointing toward the photo he said, “We want to go on one of those,” but the two looked confused.

John then turned the picture over and quickly drew a sketch of the galaxy. The two understood what the picture was meant to represent.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Barrett took the picture and put an X in the general area where he thought Valium was located and then pointed toward the X. “We are here,” and pointed down at the floor. The man and woman again moved their heads in understanding. Barrett placed an X where he thought Earth was located and drew an arrow pointing toward Earth. Barrett took the freshly drawn map and turned it over pointing toward the Kingdom Starship on the other ship. Both had a surprised look on their faces.

Barrett looked at John. “You see, easy.”

The man and woman spoke to themselves for some time and then pulled out what looked to be like the local currency.

“I think they’re trying to tell us that we need money,” John said.

Barrett smiled as he reached into his pocket and brought out the diamond carefully concealing it in his hand. Barrett glanced about making sure that no one else had followed their conversation. He put his hand over and opened it. The man and woman’s eyes went wide and both started to speak rapidly with one another. After a few minutes they spoke directly to Barrett and John as they stood up.

“I think they want us to follow them Barrett,” John said.

“Let’s go. We obviously got our message over,” Barrett replied.

6 The Duo Return

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After a week, Stax was on his feet again. He had often roamed the corridors when he was lonely and this was what he was doing now. Fasala put up different scenes of the country side as he walked along. She often would appear to walk along side him.

“There’s a message for you,” Fasala informed him.

“Who’s it from?”

“It’s being rerouted from military police,” Fasala said questioningly, “They have two of our people in jail.”

“Who?” His face showed surprise.

“They don’t know. They can’t converse with them. They assumed that they were from our ship.”

“What were they doing, in a brawl or something?” Stax started to relax thinking that someone must have got drunk and started a fight.

“No, they were trying to buy a starship with illegal currency,” Fasala answered.

Stax came back to reality in hearing that, “Ask whether or not they could be brought here.”

Fasala forwarded the request and the police confirmed that they would bring them to the port.

Hours later, Stax stood at the bottom of the ramp watching Barrett and John being led across the tarmac. Why am I not surprised at this he thought?

“Found yourselves in a bit of trouble,” Stax said as they walked up. “What’s all this about?”

“We’ve done nothing wrong,” Barrett sneered.

“We’ll see,” Stax replied.

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“They were using illegal currency to buy a starship,” the official said handing two bags over to Stax. This must be registered as to where they got them and then properly exchanged in the bank,” the officer said.

Stax saw the diamonds as he opened one of the bags.

“We found those on Deneb and they’re ours,” John reached out to take the bag.

“So you and the Commander found them together. Why didn’t you report this?” Stax asked.

“Why should we have, yeoman?” Barrett said.

“Simply because there’s no room for selfishness in the galaxy we are in,” Stax countered.

“Could they have purchased a ship with these?” Stax asked the Officers.

The officers looked at each other, “They could have purchased a fleet of ships with them,” one of them replied.

Stax turned back toward Barrett and John, “Let me make it very clear to you two. You are not returning to Earth, and as for this, we’ll find other uses for it,” Stax headed back up the stairs with the diamonds.

Barrett came at him from behind but was stopped by one of the policemen, “I’ll get you for this Wildson. If it’s the last thing I do, I will get you for this.”

“I could have had you released but perhaps a couple of days in jail would do you good. You have the choice of either staying here on Valium or coming with us but you’ll have to walk a narrow line if you return to this ship, Mr. If you decide to stay, I’ll provide you with enough money, at least until you can find something to do.” Looking toward the two Officers, “I’m sorry, but could you take these two gentlemen back to their cell. We’ll figure out what to do with them in a couple of days.”

The military police led them back across the tarmac. Both walked along deflated.

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Stax continued up the stairs passing Martin and Julie who had just arrived, “Interesting, isn’t it?” Stax said to them, “Enough to buy a fleet of ships. Well, maybe that fleet can be filled with food to help feed some people.”

“What do you think of Wildson’s offer?” John asked while his eyes moved about the ceiling playing a game to keep himself busy.

“I think it sucks. I think he sucks. Oh, how I’d like to get him away from his sweetheart, that bucket of computer chips that’s protecting him,” Barrett said, the hatred obvious in his tone.

“We could take the offer and make a pretty good life for ourselves here,” John said.

“Doing what?” Barrett said sarcastically.

“What other options are there?” John raised himself out of the bunk, “Have you heard what he’s planning to do?”

“I hope the Etihwa catches him,” Barrett said.

“And us right along with him,” John finished.

“No, I’m returning to the ship. I’ve made a promise to get Wildson and get him I will. If I can play some part in the Etihwa doing the job, all the better,” Barrett said with a pleased look on his face.

“So, you’re going back to the ship knowing that they’re going into Etihwa space. The whole thing is suicidal,” John stared at Barrett for a while and turned away.

“There are six other ships going along. We could take over one of them after doing away with Wildson. Those Kingdom people wouldn’t bother us. We’d be set.”

“You’ve underestimated these Kingdom people and Wildson before. That’s why we’re in this stinking jail cell,” John argued.

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“Just imagine if we could get a ship, we could fly it ourselves, make our way back to Deneb for more diamonds. They’re there just for the picking. We could buy our own Kingdom on Earth.” Barrett sat up with his legs hanging over the side of the bunk. Looking around, he wondered aloud, “Do they ever clean this place?”

At that moment two military Officers entered from outside holding some keys in their hands. They stood speaking together for several minutes.

“And can you imagine being around that high pitched jabber all the time?” Barrett said listening to the two officers.

“It sounds like two monkeys talking, doesn’t it?” John laughed.

Opening the door, one Officer motioned for the two prisoners to follow.

“So we’re being released,” Barrett smiled.

The Officers gave them communications sets and indicated that Barrett and John were to put them on.

Immediately, they heard Wildson’s voice, “Have you made up your minds?”

Hesitating, both looked at each other. “We’re coming back to the ship,” Barrett said.

“Are you sure about this? You know where we’re going?” Stax asked again giving them yet another chance to back out.

“Yeah,” Barrett said.

“And you John?”

“Me too, the ship.” John replied.

“Okay, transport will be arranged to bring you to the port,” Stax stopped talking.

“You know, they still have hopes of returning to Earth,” Fasala said. “But I guess you can’t blame them and they think that coming back is the only way to get home.”

“I blame them for being stupid, not thinking beyond themselves,” Stax finished off.

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7 Counter Attack

Two days later, Captain Paerue and the Amir sat before Stax. Stax had told them of his plan to go into Etihwa space. They listened patiently but a surprise crossed their faces when an excursion into Etihwa space was mentioned.

“Not only that, I’d like to do some weapons development. “We’ve got plans whereby you can attach warheads to individualized engines. We call them missiles. I think your ship yards could easily develop them.”

“Overseer, no disrespect, but we can’t afford to send a fleet of ships into Etihwa space just to follow up on the whereabouts of your computer’s body, much less try and develop the weapons you’re talking about.”

Stax had expected this answer. He looked at Julie and David and several others who had returned to the ship earlier than expected. Stax reached down for the three bags and poured the diamonds out on the table before them. “Now according to what the banks tell us, this is no small fortune.” Stax smiled at both Officers.

The two men sat open mouthed. “This will pay for a dozen such ships and development,” the Amir said. “Where did you get these?”

“Take all three bags, use what you want for the required upgrades to Fasala and six more ships and then take the rest to buy food for wherever it’s needed in the Eight Kingdoms,” Stax said.

“Very generous of you Overseer. It will go a long way but we need to get this set up through the banks properly, The Kingdoms are very strict with currency laws,” explained the Amir.

The following weeks and months were all go. Stax’s people had all returned to the ship indicating their desire to be included in the operation. Stax made sure they were volunteering for the operation and encouraged them to stay back if they questioned it at all. John and Barrett for some strange reason returned after being released from jail. Nothing was said to either one of them or about Barrett’s threat to Stax, but Stax hadn’t forgotten.

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Progress was being made daily on the changes being made to the ships. Gean and Jan had organized training schedules for the crews in military attack strategies. Even Barrett and John got involved with the engineering part of the weapons development.

Stax was happy to learn that Captain Paerue and the Protector would be among those ships going. The Protector would be the Command Ship. The Captain had also informed him that quite a few large shipments of food were already en route to different Kingdoms.

In the meantime Fasala had made progress following up on the resettlement of her own people. Their planet was indeed located near the frontier. Their dream was to return someday to reclaim their home worlds. Their new home was an agricultural planet that promoted a simple life style. It was given autonomy within another Kingdom. Bassoon, as they called the world, had a constitutional monarchy much like the other Kingdoms but with an elected Queen. Fasala remembered that a queen had always ruled in her time, but usually came to power through succession. Fasala had already told Stax that they were a proud race of people. They supported the Eight Kingdoms as much as anyone else did. They had a higher than average number of soldiers with several completely staffed starships. Stax and Fasala decided then to pay a visit after their incursion efforts into Etihwa space.

8 Preparations

Fasala had moved to one of the nearby moons and its repair dock. Long days and nights characterized the activity of Stax and those around him. All had long moved back aboard. Kingdom Command had offered every scientist a handsome employment package. Those who had officer training would be allowed to enter a military contract. The Amir even allowed salary payments for a year of language study. There were eleven languages used within the Kingdoms. Most people spoke two or three of them. Each ship carried people of usually one or two language groups.

But all of Stax's people decided to return to the ship. Stax tried earnestly to talk every person out of it. Perhaps they all felt that Fasala was their only link with Earth. Many, Stax knew, still hoped to return.

Well, things were certainly happening. Various officers and engineers were seen throughout the once empty corridors of Fasala.

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A mini training center had been set up aboard. Jan, Gean and Paul continued their tactical training of Kingdom Officers. David Martin and Ron Lake worked with the new weapons systems. Barrett and John were upgrading their skills in Ion physics that powered all the Kingdoms ships.

Julie Timon was promoted to second in charge thus freeing Stax up a bit. Each member of the crew was assigned a strict training program in addition to their duties. Stax continued his command level training but decided to learn how to fly an atmospheric craft also. This took him away from the ship often. Of course Fasala objected strongly over this decision. Peace was upheld only by allowing two body guards, provided by Captain Paerue, to shadow Stax while he was off the ship. Both guards were directly under Fasala's command and in communication with her at all times. She got a bit carried away in describing what she would do to them if anything happened. Stax had to talk to her about that also. With all that was going on, Stax was tired most of the time. He was lucky if he got more than four hours sleep a night. Now, Stax had to go for a check up in regards to his wound. He would have to listen to all of that from the doctors and Fasala.

"Overseer, your lack of sleep is not helping your wound to heal any faster," Dr. Hussain said pushing his finger around the red area of Stax's side.

"We're all going through a massive re-education program now," Stax replied.

"Well, you're the boss. But you're not doing yourself any good. It will tell on you eventually," Dr. Hussain looked hard at Stax trying to make him understand.

"Later on, once we're in space, maybe I can get some rest," Stax said, trying to appease the doctor.

Dr. Roads then spoke up, "If you won't listen to Dr. Hussain, maybe you will listen to Fasala," she said with a smile on her face.

Why bring Fasala into this and her endless nagging, Stax thought? "I'll try and get some rest," Stax said.

"Fasala, did you hear what Dr. Hussain said to Stax?" Myrlen continued, "Stax needs more rest so that his wound will heal faster."

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Stax made a mental note to have a little talk with Dr. Roads the next time he saw her outside the ship.

“I think you should listen to the doctors, Overseer,” Fasala spoke up.

“Okay, Okay, I’ll try to get some extra sleep tonight. Is that all, doctor?” Stax was irritated.

There came only a mutter of acknowledgment from both doctors then.

Leaving medical, Stax headed to the launch bay. He had a training lesson scheduled. He walked to the end of the corridor and took the stairs leading up to the launch bay. Ten new atmospheric craft were in the bay. Two large ones carried five people each. All of them were installed with David’s new laser technology.

Entering the launch bay, two of his shadow guards came alert. Fasala had them stationed in the launch bay and at the entrance of the ship making sure that when he left the guards would be with him. This didn’t bother him, he increasingly enjoyed the freedom from the weeks of being cooped up inside the ship no matter who was following along after him. They all climbed into one of the larger crafts and flew off.

9 Departure

Now, after three months, they were ready. The crew of each ship had completed their training. This would be Kingdom Command’s first offensive in recent history. Fasala had been assigned a detachment of Marines under leadership of Paul Andrews and Micah Harris, both had been Lieutenants in the Navy. David, Martin and Ron had additional responsibilities over the newly installed missile system. Each ship had ten newly developed missiles except for Fasala who had been fitted with twenty all together. They were primitive even by Earth standards but they had the delivery systems of the Kingdom’s Ion engines with a relatively low payload.

The ships were ushered out through the narrow opening of the electronic wall that protected Valium. Fasala came up behind Protector while two other starships flanked her. This was the strongest task force ever brought together against its four hundred year old enemy.

Stax, along with Julie, David and Fasala were discussing the coming events. It would take nearly a month to reach Fasala’s former home world and once reaching the planet, they gave

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themselves only two hours on the ground. Fasala and the Protector would land and deploy the marines. Two ships would hover in the atmosphere and the remaining three would maintain a watchful orbit above the planet.

“Overseer,” Fasala’s tone immediately changed, “Captain Paerue has an audio to you from the Protector.”

“Let’s hear it,” Stax had long got used to Fasala changing voice roles. One minute she was a sweet and charming girl and the next minute everything was business.

“Overseer, as planned, we will begin implementing those new battle strategies. We will start tomorrow and continue every day thereafter with drills until we leave Kingdom Space.”

“Thank you Captain, we’ll be ready,” Stax replied to the audio and then looked up at the others. “Okay, I think we need to turn in. I might even get a whole eight hours sleep tonight.”

Falling onto his bed once he arrived in his quarters, he spoke to Fasala with his eyes closed. “We’re on our way again, Fasala. A little more dangerous this time.”

“It worries me still that so many people will be placed in danger just to find out more information about my past,” Fasala said.

“This offense is more than that. The Kingdoms need hope, otherwise they’ll continue their downward spiral,” Stax replied.

Fasala didn’t answer for Stax was now snoring, but she knew that he was correct about the Kingdoms needing hope.

Part VI

1 Awareness

The messenger stood silent before the High Lordship’s assistant. The assistant was upset with the breach of protocol but the instruction’s specified that the Lord was required to take the message personally from the messenger.

“You may enter,” the assistant said, obviously still irritated.

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The messenger nodded, showing a slight level of annoyance having been held up by this upstart. But entering the office, the messenger waited to be received.

The Lord stood around a table arguing some unknown point with the two lesser officers. “Ah, now we find out,” he took the envelope from the messenger acknowledging the receipt by way of a small stamp and then dismissing the messenger with a flip of a finger.

Carefully breaking the seal, he read aloud, “*Attempt on humans life failed. Increased security makes further attempt improbable. Rumors indicate a possible offence by said human and other kingdom ships into Etihwa space.*” The Lord handed the message to the Vice Lord.

“I believe so much attention to a single Kingdom Ship is unwarranted,” the Vice Lord said, “When have any of these animals been a threat to The Etihwa?”

“That person has destroyed some of our ships,” the Lord replied sternly.

“So,” said the Vice Lord, “we are at war. This is what happens in War. And we are winning the War. What makes you so concerned over this one ship, your Lordship?”

“My informant says that this ship is not an ordinary Kingdom Ship. It’s three times the size of any other ship about, plus the informant says that the ship is in some way unusual. I think it warrants a little attention. One of our exploration ships described such a ship on the far side of the Amorian wall some six months ago.”

“What do you mean by unusual?” The Vice Lord asked.

“Everyone refers to this person as ‘Overseer’ and his ship as a living entity,” the Lord responded.

“Oh, the old legend of a great ship, or great queen, like those of old, coming back to save humanity,” the Vice Lord laughed. “Nothing can save the humans now. In time, all of them will receive their due from us,” there was agreement from the other Etihwa.

“Just the same, we will watch this particular ship and its Overseer. I remind you again, it has destroyed several of our Starships.”

It was indeed an old legend, one that had been around since the first days of the Etihwa’s great change. But the Lord thought that his two underlings lacked insight. They were like others

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in the Etihwa Command. They had become lax in their thinking. The Lord wanted to be sure there were no surprises once the great Etihwa Political Machine made their decision to annex the next human kingdom which would be soon.

2 Trek

“Sound Battle Alarm.” Captain Paerue said to his second, “We might as well get started with these new drills. I want the ships to be in peak performance before we leave Kingdom Space.

“Yes, Captain,” the second replied.

“We’ll see how long it’ll take the fleet to move into battle formation.”

At the clang, the Captain’s crew responded quickly and efficiently. Indeed all ships moved into the required star pattern.

A loud clanging filled Stax’s sleeping quarters then he heard Fasala yelling at him to get up.

“What’s going on?” Fear went through Stax as he jumped up thinking that it was an Etihwa attack.

“Captain Paerue ordered a practice drill,” Fasala actually laughed.

“What time is it?” Stax pulled his trousers on quickly.

“Six o’clock,” she said grinning to herself.

“Great! I feel like I’ve re-enlisted back into the Navy,” he said continuing to dress. “Get everyone else up, Fasala.”

Stax staggered out of his quarters heading down to the bridge. In the mean time Fasala had executed the movement into battle formation. She was long used to operating on her own.

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“Initiate Phase Two,” the Captain ordered his second. Four starships broke away from the group and started to increase speed. Moving ahead, they shot ahead out like an umbrella opening up. Fasala repositioned herself alongside the Protector. Fifteen minutes later the four starships completed their clover leaf and came back together.

“Phase Three,” Captain Paerue ordered.

Stax had just arrived on the bridge as the order came through communications. “Ready for Phase Three, Fasala updated Stax on what was happening.

“Go to Phase Three,” Stax confirmed.

The Protector and Fasala split away from the other ships while the remaining four fired their energy crystals. Fifteen minutes later the two ships pulled back into formation.

The drills continued day in and day out until they reached the Frontier. Stax made sure that he along with Julie was on the bridge bright and early every day after his first tardiness.

He was standing on the bridge talking to Julie and Fasala, “I really haven’t minded this Overseer thing until now. I need to play the part as all the other ships seem to be looking up to us as something special,” Stax complained openly.

“I’ve noticed that the crews of the other ships almost idolize every suggestion you make as if it’s spiritual guidance of some sort,” Julie said.

“You’ve given them new hope, Overseer,” Fasala said proudly.

“Or rather you have Fasala,” Stax said, “I’m still just a Yeoman in heart and brain,” he added.

“Right!” Julie said shaking her head and laughing.

“What do you mean by that?” Stax countered.

“You enjoy being King Pin for once. You can’t fool me. I’m off on some rounds now,” she said with a smile still on her face.

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Stax didn't reply for there was something to be said to things being run the way he wanted them and not having to put up with the rubbish that he had put up with before. But he reminded himself that this was for Fasala's sake and hoped their adventure would prove fruitful.

The starships continued their journey, almost daily they would come across a patrol ship. The closer they came to the Frontier the more ships they met. The day came when three other Kingdom ships maneuvered into formation with them. Many aboard Fasala felt pride in being part of such a large flotilla. The ships were all identical. Word had long gotten around Kingdom Space about Stax and the sentient ship. Every ship that met them wanted to find out more about the Overseer and Fasala.

"Overseer?" Mary called across from the bridge.

Star looked up at her from the Star Charts he had been studying.

"A visual message from The Protector," she answered the look.

Stax pointed toward the front screen.

"Overseer, how are you?" Captain Paerue asked.

Stax had long stopped trying to encourage the Captain to call him Stax. "I'm fine, Captain. How are things with you?" Stax asked.

"I was wondering if all the Captains could join me for dinner before we leave Kingdom space. The three starships that just joined us, the Jehu, Abiad and the Perez, all expressed a particular interest in you and your ship," Captain Paerue said.

"That would be good. We'll host the evening if that's okay with you. Would you mind if I opened it up to my immediate crew as well?" Stax said diplomatically.

"Of course not," the Captain agreed. "What about 1800 hours?"

"We'll be ready," Stax confirmed.

"Fasala? Why did you translate those names the way you did?" Stax said mystified.
"They're old Biblical names."

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“Those words were the closest in meaning,” she replied.

Stax made a mental note to ask her more about that later but first, he only had five hours to sort this dinner business out. “Julie? Where are you?” He spoke aloud.

“I’m in Engineering, Overseer,” the reply came from the walls.

“All the Captains plus our crew are having a dinner in about five hours. Can you organize all of that? Assign whoever you want to it,” Stax said.

“I’ll get right on it.”

At eighteen hundred hours four atmospheric craft landed in the launch bay. Fasala ran through the welcoming procedures that all Kingdom Ships adhered to but it was accepted that Fasala and her own crew didn’t exactly have to follow Kingdom protocol. Stax had given one of his few ship wide commands earlier ordering everyone to be in dress uniform. Captain Paerue and the seven other Captains were all greeted by Stax, Julie and others of the advisory group. To Stax’s surprise those of the Jehu, Abiad and the Perez were all women. The mystery deepened, he said to himself. “Come this way ladies and gentlemen.”

Julie had organized dinner. Stax had asked that things be done in moderation thinking of the starving people within the Kingdoms but even then there ended up being quite a spread. Many were already seated at the table while others stood around. It was a tight fit getting everyone in. Everybody wore headsets for translation by Fasala. Stax had positioned himself near Captain Paerue but noticed that the three female Captains kept watching him.

Then the Perez Captain spoke loudly enough that everyone stopped and listened. “Overseer? We have heard much of your courage already during your short time among the Kingdoms. Among my people we have a special custom.”

At that Captain Paerue’s eyes opened wide, “Be careful what you say for these people are not aware of various customs within the different Kingdoms,” Fasala continued to translate.

“But Captain Paerue, it’s within my right to ask and it’s considered an honor to even put the question forward,” she responded.

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Stax was rather amused at the by-play. "Excuse me for interrupting but I'm very interested in your own customs and background. Fasala translates the names of your ships into very old religious names," he said.

"Well, we are from the oldest of the Kingdoms and the most religious. Many old tribal and religious traditions still apply. One of our customs especially permits us to ask whether another captain would like to become our mate." At that Fasala stopped translating but Stax could clearly see and hear the Captain talking. A quietness prevailed, especially by those who knew Fasala and her attachment to Stax.

"Fasala, continue the translation," Stax said. There was no answer. "Fasala, that's an order."

By then, the Captain of the Perez had stopped talking.

"Captain, I appreciate the cultural significance and indeed feel honored but my heart has already been given to my ship," Stax said.

"So, have we all," The Captain of the Perez continued.

"Well, my ship is a little different. Fasala, could you show yourself on one of the screens please?" Stax asked.

Her beautiful smooth brown features contrasted against the background as she was dressed in Kingdom Uniform.

"I forgot to introduce Fasala?" Stax leaned back and smiled.

"I'm happy to meet all of you," she also smiled youthfully. "So ladies, forget it. He's all mine, pretending to place her hands on his shoulders.

The three captains removed their head gear and spoke amongst themselves. Replacing the gear, the lady smiled and said, "It was an honor to ask you, Captain."

"As it was taken. Thank you."

Everyone returned to eating and the small talk started up again. Stax then leaned over to Captain Paerue and said, "Interesting custom." Were you aware that she was planning this?"

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“I was a bit suspicious but honestly, I didn’t know for sure. However, your fame has indeed spread throughout the Kingdoms. This sort of thing will happen more and more,” he left off.

The meal continued. Stax was happy that Fasala hadn’t lost her cool. Stax knew that she could have done so. He still found the three women captains interesting but dared not express that interest in any way. Under other circumstances he would have loved to explore this custom!

3 Trap

The Etihwa Lord took the report from the messenger. Reports had continued to come in ever since he expressed his concern over the Kingdom Ship and its Overseer. Not only were the Vice Lords present but the Lord had also summoned several Captains to attend the meeting.

“The Six Kingdom ships have now left Valium and headed toward the Frontier. They carry new single launch explosive devices equipped with star drives and a new electronic deadening weapon,” the Lord folded the report.

He looked around the table, gazing specifically at the two Vice Lords. “They are a powerful group. How were they able to afford to replenish their weapons’ system like this? The cost is prohibitive even for us.”

“We still have nothing to fear, our Triunes can easily face them,” the Vice Lords replied.

“And how many Triunes will it take to face them?” the Lord asked showing his aggravation through the deepness of his voice.

“We will capture these Kingdom animals, sending them to the slaughter pens, great Lord,” one of the Captains spoke up.

“My plan, exactly,” the Great Lord replied, “but I want them to enter Etihwa space first. I want to know what they’re after. They must be found first and monitored. First, let them go through with their plan. I want three Triunes waiting plus another three prepared to come up from behind. This will frighten them into surrendering sooner, giving us the ships, the human animals and above all, this unusual starship of theirs. The operation will be led by my close advisors,” the Lord pointed toward the two Vice Lords at the table.

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“We are honored,” both spoke at the same time but surprise was evident in their faces. They had not been in action for years.

You may not be so honored if you fail, the Lord thought. “Lords, prepare your crews. I believe you will have logistics to work through with your Captains,” he paused. “And one more thing, don’t assume you’ve won until the battle is over.” The Great Lord left the room leaving the Vice Lords and Captains to stew over their new orders and its implications.

4 The Frontier

The Jehu, Abiad and Perez pulled away from the six remaining starships. They had arrived at the Frontier. The three captains said their goodbyes and wished them well on their mission. Stax was disappointed that he hadn’t had the opportunity to find out more about their strange customs. Captain Paerue ordered power to be cut to all ships’ engines, minimizing the chances for the Etihwa to track them. They headed in a parabolic course through ‘no mans land’ between the Frontier and Etihwa space. This would take them clear around to the other side of Kingdom giving them a better chance of reaching their destination without running into any Etihwa ships. They sailed smoothly to their appointed destination knowing their chances for success, good, with Etihwa patrolling the Frontier less frequently than the Kingdom ships.

‘No mans land’ was a large area of space between the boundaries of the Kingdoms and the Etihwa. Star Trails faded in and out sometimes ending altogether and then taking days to find new ones. The richer the trail the larger the boost to their speed. Stax watched the screens passing the few systems that populated this area with even fewer uninhabitable planets. Those few planets that were habitable were too remote to protect. Sometimes as the trail faded out and the ships slowed down, good views were seen as they sometimes crossed systems containing double and tripled suns. Multiple planets that crisscrossed each other created unheard of gravitational forces that seem to pull planets apart before their very eyes. A few additional astronomical instruments had been added back at Kingdom Command during their refit for the benefit of the original Mars Exploration Team. They did not have to be encouraged to pursue their studies. Every scientist continued to spend their off duty hours studying every system, planet and phenomena that presented themselves. Stax had ordered Fasala to keep a close track of each person’s time to ensure that they received sufficient sleep. He needed everyone in peak condition especially during this trip.

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Several weeks had passed, much longer than any had expected. Strangely, they had not encountered any Etihwa patrols even upon entering Etihwa space. Another week has passed when they entered into an orbit around what was thought to be Fasala's home world. From a high orbit it looked like what Fasala had known it to be but there were also changes. There were few large population centers or cities of any kind. In fact, only one city of any size could be seen. The planet seemed to be heavily cultivated with small villages dominating the whole of the world. Cities that once existed were now gone.

"Fasala, find the co-ordinates of the Capital city and put it through to Captain Paerue," Stax said.

"It's on the screen now and reported to the Protector," she answered.

"Captain, we'd like to touch down at the co-ordinates shown. These show where the original Capital used to be," Stax said.

"Okay, it's your show now. Let's go. All ships take up positions," the Captain replied.

The Protector and Fasala headed down into the atmosphere.

The closer they got to the surface the more villages they could see dotting the surface. Small truck crops and fields hugged each village but vast tracts of land looked unused. The two starships were using full reverse thrust as they approached the ground. Obvious remains of a city came into view as they got closer. A small village was close to where they were heading. Captain Paerue noted the lack of power lines and even roads. The Protector and Fasala landed in an area devoid of plants and trees. It was near surrounding dilapidated walls and dirt mounds. Obviously, the remains of some city.

First to file out of both ships were the Kingdoms Marines taking up position around the ship and on top of the ruins themselves.

Stax and the Captain met outside accompanied by additional marines. "Not much here," the captain said looking about.

"There's nothing here," Stax sounded disgusted. "All this money spend on this and absolutely nothing. What a waste."

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“Not really. The fact that we have been able to come so far into Etihwa space without coming across one ship says a lot and Kingdom Command will be very interested in that information,” the Captain replied.

After some time searching, Stax said, “This isn’t going to get us anywhere. I really don’t know what I was expecting but certainly not this,” he pointed about the landscape.

“Overseer, we’ve found something,” One of the Marines said over the communication headset. “We’re in one of the buildings and there are signs of people living down in them.”

“We’re on our way,” Stax answered.

The walls of the buried building were still secure. The roof had fallen in long ago. A dirt path lead down into a large room where other marines were waiting. Signs of living could be seen everywhere. Broken pots, burnt fires and old furnishings were everywhere. More paths lead off down hallways, through open windows forming caves and down dark stairs but no sign of life was visible.

Captain Paerue ordered the marines down into the various paths that led further underground.

“Let’s follow this one,” Stax said walking down the corridor. “There’s more evidence of living,” Stax pointed to dry grass that was used as a bed. There were open containers of dirty water placed about. They passed rooms that smelled of urine and were fetid. Coming to a fork, one path lead down a staircase and the other through what used to be a window. Up until now, a dullness lit their way but beyond the fork intense darkness held.

“Let’s go this way,” the Captain indicated the open window.

The two forward marines first crossed over, “Hey, there’s movement up ahead,” but no sooner had they said this, two dirt covered figures rushed the marines pushing them back through the window. They looked at the two humans that stood before them. Their eyes were full of fear at first and then questioning looks developed upon their faces. One spoke into the darkness and moments later others began to appear. An older man wearing no more than a loin cloth with thick matted hair came up to Stax running his hand along Stax’s jaw and began to speak.

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“Can you hear that, Fasala?” Stax asked.

“Oh yes, it’s my own language,” Fasala replied. “He wants to know who you are?”

“Captain, perhaps you had better handle this,” Stax said careful not to take his eyes off the man that stood before him.

The Captain stepped up explaining who they were and where they had come from.

They knew about starships, “Often, the Etihwa brings their ships here to take the wild ones away. Sometimes the Etihwa comes hunting for us only for the sport of catching us. We’ve learned to hide from them,” the fear on the man’s face was still evident.

Stax spoke up, “How many are amongst you down here?”

The man reached his hand out and gathered several hand fulls of stones into a large mound, “This many,” he said looking at Stax.

“Would you and the others like to leave with us on the starships? We will take you where you no longer have to live in fear,” Stax said.

The man looked about, “Is there such a place?”

“Yes,” Stax said, “but it’s a long way from here.”

“I want to go but others may be too afraid,” the man answered. “Some of them are like the wild ones that are kept in cages near the village. But I will try. Wait for us in the open where we make our fires.” He then returned to the darkness beyond the window.

Stax, the Captain and four Marines made their way back to the surface. He ordered the other parties to return also. They had estimated thirty or so from the mound of stones the man had made. After a brief time of waiting they saw the man they had spoken to leading a group behind him. But then they saw another group approach from another path. Then all around them people started arriving. Their dark skins made white from the dust that covered half-dressed and nude bodies. Children hung from women’s bare chests or were pulled along crying. Some carried sticks and stones in their hands for defense. This seemed to encourage Stax, seeing that they still had some fight in them but he was amazed to see so many.

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The man walked up to Stax, “This is all that would come. The others are too afraid,” he said.

Taking a quick count, the Captain said, “We don’t have room for all these people.”

“But what about the other ships? We can load up our two ships and then bring down the others one at a time. We have to try Captain, please.” Stax spoke slowly hoping that the Captain would agree.

Looking around at the faces of the people, “We will try,” the Captain responded finally, “but we must be quick.”

After going into great lengths to explain what they were going to do, a few returned to the darkness of the paths. Those that stayed were counted, one hundred and seventy-nine all together. People were then proportioned out to the different ships. Fasala ended up with the most, fifty-four of them.

The Protector left and another ship landed. Captain Paerue stayed on the ground along with Stax, Fasala, and the one Marine contingent. Ships loaded and lifted as quickly as possible.

“Stax, an atmospheric craft just left the nearby village and is heading directly for us,” Fasala advised.

“Captain Paerue?” Stax called.

“Yeah, I heard. Get Fasala to warn them off,” The captain said. “We’re almost finished.”

Fasala advised the craft not to approach. When asked about the ship’s business, Fasala told them that she and her companions were on a military mission. Fasala of course was speaking to them in their own tongue.

“Overseer, it’s still coming,” Fasala said.

“I don’t think it’s much to worry about, however if they recognize us, we might worry about who comes afterwards,” the Captain said.

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A few minutes later, the Etihwa craft made a pass over the remaining two ships. The last twenty five people had just boarded and it prepared to lift off, but then the Etihwa craft kept circling above them.

“It probably wants to keep us here until reinforcements arrive. I think its time to go,” Captain Paerue ordered. “Okay, everyone into the ship and let’s get out of here.

The smaller Kingdom ship waited. The Marines were the last to enter Fasala. Fasala and the other Kingdom ship powered their main engines. Rising slowly, the Etihwa craft was forced out of their way.

They headed directly out to space. Other crew members helped with the settling of the Bassoon refugees. Both doctors busied themselves attending to the sick. Every person was suffering either from disease or lack of food.

The Kingdom ships regrouped and headed out of the system as fast as they could. Fasala had reported heavy communications on the planet.

“Ok everyone, now they know we are here,” the Captain spoke to all the ships. “You can guarantee that they’ll be on to us soon.”

5 Closing the Gap

The two Etihwa Armadas were on their way to engage the Kingdom Ships. Three Triunes proceeded directly to the planet where they had been reported to be and another three Triunes approached the Kingdom Ships from the opposite direction. The Vice Lords estimated that they would close in on their prey in several days if the star trails held. There would be no room for mistakes. They knew that they had been set up by the Great Lord for they had already arrived late. Never mind. They knew that the conquest of the Kingdom animals was assured. The Etihwa were superior beings. Even to suggest that the Kingdom animals could succeed against them was treasonable. The Great Lord would soon see the end of his position. The victory which they would experience would be the beginning of the great Lord’s undoing and besides, the Vice Lords were in a win win situation. They could even end up with a considerable amount of humans to sell on the open market and perhaps a Kingdom Ship or two which they also would profit from.

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The advancing Triune had passed the planet where the Kingdom Ships had put down. Communications from a remote village reported that they had picked up some stray beasts. No attack had been made against any of the Etihwa.

“Attention, all Captains,” the Vice Lord called to the other ships. “We are perhaps a day behind them. We’ll get this over with quickly. As a reward, each of you will receive a portion of the humans.” He thought that should be incentive enough for the ships to fight harder.

“Lord, we have just encountered their star trails,” the ship’s Captain reported.

“Change course accordingly,” the Vice Lord commanded. “Let me know when the Kingdom Ships come within sensor range. I’ll be in my quarters.”

“Should we hold back until they meet the Second group?” The Captain asked.

The Vice Lord paused, looking at the Captain. “I think perhaps the Great Lord has greatly overestimated these humans. Why share the bounty with the other Triunes?”

The Captain’s mouth opened slightly exposing his tiny tongue. “Yes Lord,” he acknowledged the Vice Lord’s good thinking.

On the way to his quarters, the Vice Lord imagined the victory they were about to have and savored the notion that perhaps this could even move him a step closer to the Great Lord’s own position.

6 The Suffering

All six Kingdom starships were at maximum engine power, except for Fasala. Stax sat in his quarters with Fasala’s image, actively portrayed on the screen.

“I’m sorry Fasala, I don’t know what I expected. Yeoman Wildson messes up again.” Stax shook his head and his eyes held a far away look. “I guess I got carried away with all that money we had,”

“But Stax, we did free a hundred and seventy-nine of my people. That goes beyond my own personal desires and wishes,” Fasala emphasized to Stax.

Stax looked at her serious stare.

The Lost Tribes

“You didn’t mess up Overseer. You saved those people. You’re a hero of the best kind.

He was somewhat encouraged by Fasala’s words, however he longed to reach out and touch her. He wasn’t really sure whether that longing was genuine or perhaps a deep hope that there was truly more to Fasala than the highly advanced circuits of a spaceship.

He thought again about the money they had expended in upgrading the six Kingdom Starships. Obviously that wasn’t needed. They had entered Etihwa space and were now about to leave it without so much as sighting another Etihwa ship.

“What are we to do now Fasala?” Stax asked still deep in thought about what had happened.

“Continue as planned. I’d like to see the remnants of my people. They’re the only ones left of my previous life,” Fasala replied.

“In the mean time, I want to see how our visitors are getting along,” Stax said still feeling discouraged as he proceeded to the lower levels.

“Most of them are well but very frightened,” Fasala’s voice followed along the corridors with Stax. “A few are more like mindless animals. They are the ones that had escaped from the Etihwa pens,” Fasala explained.

Upon arriving at the bottom of the stair well, he saw two Kingdom marines standing outside the closed hatch that led into Fasala’s larger freight compartment. Both marines saluted Stax but Stax didn’t think to salute back. He was deep in thought about the failure of the operation. However as he entered the compartment, his self pity quickly vanished. The smell of urine slapped him in the face. Various other smells hung in the air including the occasional whiff of disinfectant. Looking around the place, he could see that people were hard at work. Many of his own people assisted the doctors. Make shift baths and shower stalls were still being worked on. Over in corner, a man was peeing against a wall. A child was defecating in a corner. Cries of fear were heard from others. They wanted to return to their dark existence in the ruins of the long extinct capital. There was perhaps one helper to every two people. Stax knew that others were preparing meals and doing other things. He had only just entered the place but already he was sick to his stomach. “Doctor Hussain,” Stax raised his voice above the noise. “How is everything? Is there any thing that you need or require?”

The Lost Tribes

“We have people helping enough. We need time and patience for these people. Everyone, so far, has required some kind of medical treatment. A few will be terminal if we don’t get them to a hospital.” The doctor continued his examination of the person before him.

“Fasala?” Stax spoke as he left the hold.

“Yes, Overseer,” she answered.

“Their suffering is so great and these are the civilized ones.” Stax was only just able to hold back the tears. He wished that he could just wind the clock back to when he was just a Naval Yeoman with only the responsibility of doing his job. He would even welcome the harassment of those officers again. He stopped in the empty stairway and leaned against the bulkhead, “I’m tired of this Fasala. I can’t go on any longer.” Sitting down on the stairs, he began to cry.

“You must continue Stax, you must,” Fasala said frightened.

“Julie, Julie!” Fasala called with obvious distress in her voice. Julie was in the second hold preparing food. She stopped, looking up, “What’s wrong Fasala?” she replied.

“It’s the Overseer, I’m afraid for him. He’s in a stair well on the next level up from you. He’s having a breakdown of some kind. Oh, please hurry Julie.”

Julie stopped what she was doing and ran for the hatch. Once opened she tore through it and up the stairs.

“This way,” Fasala indicated.

Julie then saw him. “Stax?” But there was no answer. She put her arm around him and rested her head on his shoulder, “It’s going to be all right Stax. You’re not alone in any of this.”

“I can’t go on Julie, I just can’t,”

Fasala was heard crying in the background.

The Lost Tribes

“You just need to rest Stax. That’s all. But one thing you need to know, we’re with you in what you’re feeling. You’re not alone. We’ll go on together. You, Fasala and all of us, together Stax,” Julie emphasized it over again.

On arriving at Stax’s quarters, she helped him to his bed. He fell into it, all energy had left him.

“He broke down after seeing the people in the hold,” Fasala said still sniffing.

“He’ll be okay, Fasala. You got to perk up, yourself. Be an encouragement to him, especially now. I’m going back down to level five. You watch him and let me know if he needs anything.

“Okay, Julie and thank you so much,” Fasala then looked down on Stax. He had now fallen asleep. “I love you Stephen Wildson. I only survive because of you, darling,” she whispered softly.

7 Battle Stations

“Lord, we have the Kingdom ships in sight,” The Captain advised the Vice Lord.

“Closing in on the hunt, hey Captain? Let’s get this over with before the other ships arrive. We’ll destroy this Overseer and his ship first and capture the others.”

Battle station rang throughout the Protector. Captain Paerue advised all ships of the approaching nine Etihwa ships. Kingdom crews poised in expectation. They had worked long and hard for this moment. Captain Paerue ordered a formation change advising everyone to be prepared if necessary for changes in the maneuver.

Fasala had sounded battle stations long ago. Stax had slept an entire twelve hours. He had risen without saying a word to Fasala, hurriedly dressed and taken his place at the bridge.

From the Protector, “We have a set of three Triunes following us. One Triune alone is usually under command of a high-ranking officer, however, with three of them, one of their Lords may be leading the group.”

The Lost Tribes

“Fasala, how long before we make contact with the Etihwa?” Stax asked.

“In about thirty minutes,” she replied. Then she whispered “Are you okay Overseer?”

“Yes, thank you Fasala. I just haven’t awakened fully yet.”

The forward three Triunes were speeding onward to meet the coming humans.

They were about to spring the trap but, “Lord, we have just come in range of the humans. The rear Triunes are already engaging them,” the Captain advised.

“He had to have all the glory himself,” the Vice Lord said. “Okay, we’ll let him do all the dirty work. Slow the ships down Captain and let’s see what happens.”

The Lord watched, he would not be held responsible for what would happen since the Vice Lord had changed the attack pattern himself. It was then that the Kingdom ship’s changed to a curious flight formation; one that the Vice Lord had never studied before. All six Kingdom ships split apart. The pursuing Triunes followed with standard attack procedures. The humans had to be all strapped in to withstand such a maneuver. What were the humans doing now, he wondered? They were in a circle maneuver, then the Lord watched as several craft sped away from each of the humans’ ships. Was this their new weapon they had been told about? Each human ship began to pull out of their circle and head outward in separate directions. The Lord noticed that the ships were now at full power. These were new tactics, indeed. The human ships normally stayed together for better protection. The missiles proceeded forward ahead of the advancing Triunes. It would be interesting to see how the other Lord would handle this. He had the Etihwa ships to fire energy crystals toward the departing humans. It would take the ships some time to recover from that dispersal the Vice Lord thought. He noticed then the Vice Lord had slowed the Triunes approach. Perhaps they were about to divide up and chase the humans. If the Vice Lord didn’t change directions, they would run into the approaching missiles. Ah, the Lord had enough sense to spilt away from the approaching missiles but they would only just miss the missiles. However, what he now witnessed had never seen nor heard of before. The whole of the area of space ignited like a super nova. The Etihwa were destroyed immediately. The humans were ahead of the explosion that proceeded outward. There was no battle, no fighting, the Etihwa simply vanished.

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“All Captains, we are to split up. Do not engage the humans. Stay on the following course and meet back together once back inside Etihwa space,” the Vice Lord commanded.

“But we must wipe these animals out. They’ve just destroyed three of our Triunes,” the Captain argued.

“Did you not see what just happened?” The Vice yelled. They just destroyed three entire Triunes without even engaging in battle. The information we had on the new weapons were incomplete. The Great Lord was correct in his suspicions about this ‘Overseer’ and his ship. Now, do as I say,” the fear could be seen on the Vice Lord’s facial features by the Captain.

A cheer went up throughout Fasala from the Kingdom personnel aboard. They were surprised that the Etihwa didn’t react faster to what they had done.

“The other Etihwa ships have all split up and are headed back to their own space. Let’s go home,” Captain Paerue advised all the ships. The success we have experienced here today is only the beginning.

Part VII

1 Stax Meets His Queen

The Kingdom ships returned to their own space. All six were on their way to the planet Bassoon, home of Fasala’s resettled people. Once they transferred their passengers to the planet, four of the Starships would return to duty, each taking up a position of command due to their enhanced weaponry. Captain Paerue and the Protector would remain with Stax and Fasala until each was reassigned.

The small planet of Bassoon grew as the ships drew closer to it. Stax watched as a small ship became visible on the screens. Captain Paerue had already informed him of a waiting messenger ship.

“Overseer, this is Kingdom Messenger ship Carats. We have important information regarding your ship. The information was discovered in the historical archives and Amir Wakins dispatched me personally to deliver it.

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“Fasala, are you receiving it?” Stax said wondering why the Amir would go to such extremes.

“Oh Yes, Stax. Oh yes!,” Fasala excited voice rang out.

“Thank-you, Carats.” Stax keyed the communications unit, “We have the information. Send the Amir our regards.” Stax signed off.

“So, what’s it all about, Fasala?” Stax knew already that it had something to do with Fasala just by the tone of her voice.

“It’s about me, Stax. My personal history.” Fasala said crying.

Stax was wondering whether they had actually found her stasis body tucked away somewhere in a dusty cupboard at Kingdom Command.

“Go down to the fourth level Stax, quickly!” Fasala spoke mysteriously.

“Julie, take over here.”

“Fasala, just remember that you’ll need to prepare for the coming landing on Bassoon. You understand?” he said leaving the bridge.

“Better yet, Julie, come with me. I might need your help.”

“What am I supposed to see, Fasala?” Stax was really wondering now what the mystery was all about.

“Go to the communications console attached to my memory core,” she replied.

They now stood before the communications console. This was just one of the communications consoles around the ship. Stax had often thought about them and their redundancy since anyone could communicate with anyone through Fasala.

“Key in these orders manually; Overseer seeks entrance Fasala, over ride all blocking subroutines by command of the Overseer,” Fasala said as if reading it out.

Stax keyed the message in as she had instructed.

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“Now, say the message as an order to me,” Fasala requested.

Stax repeated the message as a command to Fasala.

“Command received, Overseer. All subroutines now released,” Fasala replied.

The bottom of the panel began to lift. Stax and Julie moved quickly back. Moments later Stax and Julie now stood before an opening to what was obviously Fasala’s memory core.

“Hurry Stax, tell me what you see. I have no visuals in this room,” Fasala said.

Stax entered the room first. Raw panels and electronics of a duplicate nature were everywhere. Stax described this as he walked about. At the back, Stax noticed a dim glass window with brass and silver colored cylinders arranged in positions on both sides. He placed his face to the tinted window and it was then that Julie saw him turn white.

“Look!” Stax could hardly speak.

Raising up on her toes, Julie said in disbelief, “She’s been here all the time.”

“What do you see Stax?” Fasala spoke from the comm unit.

“You’re beautiful, Fasala.” Stax stood gazing at Fasala’s face now separated from them behind several glass screens. It’s you Fasala!” Stax said still not believing it. “Are there any other instructions?” Stax asked before she had a chance to respond.

“No, there aren’t,” Fasala replied now crying.

Stax decided to try something. “Fasala, can you open the window.”

“What window?” she replied.

But then noises started up. A decompression of gases was taking place behind the screens. Minutes passed and the first tinted panel slides down. The body of a beautiful Nubian woman clearly revealed itself.

Julie quickly stood in front of the window. “She may not be aware yet but it’s her body until you two get married. So just turn around,” Julie indicated by making a circle in the air.

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Turning, Stax realized that all of that could happen now. “Fasala, are you still with us,” Stax asked.

“Of course, where would I be? You still haven’t told me much,” she replied.

“Well, your body is here. I think it’s out of the stasis field but you haven’t down loaded yourself into it yet,” Stax said.

Maybe all he needed to do was a command sequence since all blocking subroutines were now off but they’d need to land the ship first otherwise things might get out of control, he thought.

“Fasala, post two guards at this entrance now!” Stax ordered her.

“Julie, see to the off-loading of the Bassoons,” Stax headed back to the bridge.

“Fasala, it certainly is you and everything seems to be in order. You were with us all along but first keep your mind on landing this ship. Don’t try anything in regards to down loading your memory until we get all of those refugees taken care of first. Once they are off, I’ll return with Julie and the doctors and see if we can get you and your body back together,” Stax explained.

Only three starships could land on the small spaceport at any one time. Captain Paerue had informed the Bassoon authority of the refugees the six ships were carrying. News of the raid and rescue was bouncing around already over the news nets. The Bassoon government had also been informed of Fasala’s royal heritage and her uniqueness.

Thousands of people already lined the spaceport as the starships set down. The Protector and Fasala were among the last three ships to put down. The refugees were first taken care of, assisted by local doctors and nurses. Stax stood on the gantry right outside Fasala’s main hatch.

A chant was heard over the whole of the space port: “Queen Fasala! Queen Fasala! Queen Fasala!”

Did they not know that their queen may still be not more than the ship they were looking at?

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Fasala was being carried away with the moment also. “My people, Stax. They’re my people,” she cried.

“Stay calm Fasala, we now have to figure out how to down load your memories back into your body.” He immediately headed toward the 4th level instructing the two doctors and Julie to meet him there again.

Along the way Stax also asked David to come just in case there were problems with whatever computers that took over from Fasala. Approaching the core memory area two Kingdom Marine guards stood at attention before Stax. The two doctors arrived moments later.

Fasala’s body lay full length slightly tilted back, a clear envelope still snugly covered her.

“Well, how do we get her out alive with her memories?” Doctor Hussain spoke up.

“I think I know,” Stax said.

“Fasala, do you hear me?” Stax spoke into his communications unit.

“Yes, what do you want me to do?” she replied.

“First of all, Fasala, I want you to release as much of the ships operation over to subroutines as you can. Can you do that?” he asked.

“That’ll take a few minutes, Stax,” she replied.

“Take your time,” Stax said.

“Done.”

“Okay, now shut down only those operations with no subroutines to handle them. Those that you are directly responsible for,” Stax ordered. He wanted to make sure that there would be no surprises.

“That would mean shutting down the engines, life support, weaponry and main computer functions,” she replied. “That’s a bit scary,” she took on a formal tone.

“It scares me too,” Stax replied.

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Everyone waited. The small room was now crowded with others from the crew. The atmosphere was quite tense. Many were actually holding their breath. After several more minutes, Fasala confirmed that she had shut down and detached herself from these components.

“Okay, Fasala, I’m going to give you an order. All I want you to do is mentally obey it,” Stax said.

“Okay, I’m ready,” Fasala replied.

“Okay, doctors?” he looked around toward them.

“Fasala, download your memories and all required information back into yourself.” Nothing seemed to happen. They waited several more minutes. “Fasala, did you hear my order?” Stax asked.

Creaking and other movements behind the envelope could be heard. The clear envelop that held Fasala’s body opened down the middle. Everyone stood waiting. A deep silence held the moment in place with eyes glued to Fasala’s face. Fasala then opened them and peered around at everyone. She smiled that wide smile that Stax had fallen in love with. “Oh Stax, I’m back.” Everyone in the room let go of their breath. Both doctors rushed to her. She began crying. Tears of joy streamed down her face.

“She’s fine,” Doctor Roads said, “her muscles of course will be weak for a while. We’ll need to keep her in medical for a while.”

“I want to see my people. Just a glimpse.” Fasala spoke weakly, “Please.”

“Doctors?” Stax indicated.

“Perhaps for a minute or two,” Doctor Hussain said.

Julie had quickly put a hospital gown around her before they carried her out. Exiting the ship, the crowd had grown to as many as ten thousand people. “Take my arms,” she indicated to Stax and then slowly stood on one side with Julie holding her from the other side. The chant had immediately started up again. With further help from Stax, Fasala held her hand up and waved at the people. The crowds then started coming over the barriers running and chanting at the same time. The Kingdom Marines standing about on the tarmac quickly closed into a circle around the

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ship. Lowering her arm she put it around Stax and pulled his head over toward hers and kissed him, “I love you Stephen Wildson.” She looked deep within his eyes.

“I really think she needs to be back in medical now,” Doctor Hussain spoke up. “She’s been in stasis for 400 hundred years.”

2 The Queen is Crowned

Stax had stayed with Fasala until her strength returned which took nearly two weeks. He had set up a cot out in the corridor. Others had come and gone checking on her occasionally. Several Bassoon officials came and listened to the story of Fasala. They left overawed by the strange tale that brought their Queen to them.

“Hello Fasala, these are for you,” Julie placed the flowers next to her bed.

“Thank you Julie,” Fasala said smiling.

“How are you, Stax?” Julie leaned over, giving him a kiss on the forehead.

“Fine,” he stuttered, surprised by her forwardness.

“Hey, watch it there, I might get jealous,” Fasala said, seeing Stax’s embarrassment.

Julie only laughed. “I understand that the ship will get a new computer system,” Julie said.

“Yes, the Captain feels that the ship would be a good command ship, especially with all its new fire power,” Stax answered.

“And what of the others?” Julie asked solemnly.

“Barrett and John and a few others state that they still want to return to Earth. I suggested that they could be a lot of help to the Kingdoms in the fight against the Etihwa but they wouldn’t listen,” Stax said.

“Well, they’ll find their place in the galaxy. But now, I want to hear from Fasala. “How does it feel?” Julie looked directly at her.

“How does what feel?” Fasala smiled.

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“You know, back into your old body and now this good looking guy sitting across from you,” she indicated toward Stax.

“It’s great to be actually breathing again. When I first became part of the ship, I thought that I would never miss being human but now that I’m back, never again. It’s also good to feel, touch and smell normally. And it’s good to be with Stax instead of viewing him through a false eye lens all the time,” she said placing her hand on his.

Stax squeezed her hand and then looked up, “So how’s the Bassoon society life?”

“It’s a nice place, very countrified. The Bassoon’s are proud people. They hold their heads up high in spite of their struggles,” Julie replied.

“What do you mean?” Fasala asked.

“Well, the economy isn’t that wonderful. There is poverty with a few beggars on the streets. I hear that many of the country people live in unsanitary conditions. The crews were given the royal tour by the heads of government. It seems in repatriating the other Bassoons and bringing their queen back, we have been given the key to the planet,” Julie said.

A look of concern grew on Stax’s face, “Barrett could take advantage of that.”

“No, No. There just aren’t the resources on Bassoon that he found on Valium. Nowhere near it,” Julie assured him.

“How has everyone been coping without a translator?” Stax asked.

“There have been some problems but the Kingdom Marines on board have learned enough English to help out.”

“Well, do you want some good news?” Stax smiled as he looked over at Fasala. “We’re getting married and want all of you to hang around and attend.”

“Well, well, well, you guys have been doing some planning haven’t you?” Julie said.

“The doctors have given me the all clear. Tomorrow I leave medical,” Fasala said.

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“Well, don’t be surprised at the way people will react to both of you. Your pictures are on the local broadcast and local papers just about every day. They consider you the new Queen.”

“So much for a private life,” Stax said.

“Are you two staying on Bassoon?” Julie asked.

“Well, I haven’t considered otherwise. I could find something to do,” Stax answered.

“I don’t think you’ll ever have to worry about work, married to a planetary queen,” Julie laughed.

“Oh, I don’t know if I’m ready to be married to a queen,” Stax looked at Fasala teasingly,

“You’re ready, don’t worry about that,” Fasala said pulling his arm around her neck.

Bassoon was a world of deserts with a scattering of oases from the size of a few meters to hundreds of kilometers across. Lakes dotted the landscape of the planet made up of mostly salt water. Some were even large enough to be called seas. Surrounding one of the larger Oases was a steppe area that penetrated well into the desert. Underground irrigation was used extensively. This not only provided enough produce for themselves but they shipped what they could off the planet for the war effort. All together, four hundred thousand people inhabited the world. Some even wandered about the desert, moving from oases to oases living like their ancestors had lived centuries before.

The seas were empty of fish like all of the other Kingdom worlds. It was located just within light years of the frontier. As Stax and Fasala walked through streets of the city, they studied the faces about them. Like Fasala, they were physically tall. Fasala was nearly six foot and Stax was shorter than her. Every person that passed bowed to the couple but otherwise left them alone.

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The planet was lacking in educational institutions, hospitals and many other facilities that were considered standard even on Earth. The government, even though assisted by the other Kingdoms and Central Command, still lacked enough resources to do anything about it.

Fasala and Stax stopped in front of several beggars, all holding up bowls toward the two. One such bowl had several low denomination coins at the bottom. Fasala asked them why were they begging.

The war, the taxes, and death of supporting family members were some of the reasons given.

“Your heart really goes out to them,” Stax said to her.

A man then passed by and spoke to Fasala for some minutes. Answering, he then bowed his head and walked on.

“What did he say Fasala?” Stax asked.

“The usual, how proud he was to know us and that we had given his people new hope by being their new Queen,” Fasala replied.

“Queen Fasala, sounds good to me,” Stax smiled.

“I don’t know, what do I know about being a Queen?” she said.

“Enough to pilot and manage a star ship half way across the galaxy. That’s all!” Stax said, “Don’t sell yourself too short, girl. You’ve got what it takes.”

She looked down at him, putting her arm through his, “I love you, Stax.”

Stax had never been happier. He really didn’t care if he ever left Bassoon. This was home now. He had already started to learn the local language. They were to be married in another week.

He would miss Captain Paerue, who with his crew would stay at least until the wedding but afterwards the Captain really wasn’t sure. The other officers and scientists were still being encouraged to return to Kingdom Command. All would be offered the same deal as before.

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David and Julie surprised Stax and Fasala by announcing their wedding also. Julie had mentioned it some weeks back to Fasala but made her swear to secrecy.

“You even kept it from your Overseer,” Stax said jokingly to Fasala.

“I was still a woman even while I was embedded into the ship’s electronics and us girls always have our secrets,” she said standing up for her womanly rights.

Stax thought about Barrett and John. They still kept pretty much to themselves. The two had several talks with others trying to stir up support for a return trip to Earth. Stax told him that the issue no longer had anything to do with him. They would have to approach Kingdom Command about it, however he knew that Fasala would be the only person who knew the exact co-ordinates of Earth.

“Did you know that the two doctors have been asked to stay on at the local hospital?” Fasala said.

“They’re certainly needed, but they may want to take up some kind of research position on Valium.” Stax added, “And honestly, I do believe returning to Valium may be their best chance to perhaps eventually return home. Earth will have to brought into all of this.”

Three days later, in a simple ceremony, Fasala was sworn in as Bassoon’s new Queen. High-ranking government officials and some friends were the only ones allowed in the hall. It was over within a matter of minutes, as if it was an everyday event. Stax realized that money was part of the issue and the government was trying to keep cost down. The event was broadcast to those places who had proper communications and the day was proclaimed a holiday.

3 Married

Fasala’s dark olive skin contrasted against the bright red blouse and baggy trousers she wore. Stax stood beside her in the same costume but instead of red, his suit was white. The officiating government minister led with their vows. The wedding ceremony seemed to be a much bigger occasion than the Coronation Stax thought. He didn’t quite understand but knew that government officials of various departments were in attendance and a dinner was being held in their honor.

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David and Julie were bridesmaid and best man respectively, an idea that took some time to explain to Fasala. David leaned over quietly saying, “You’ve come a long way since Yeoman Wildson, haven’t you?”

Stax took but a moment to grin, his thoughts more on the beautiful woman standing beside him. There were similarities with weddings on Earth. Some kind of Holy Book was brought out and both had to put their hands on it while they repeated the words of the minister. Stax had remembered Fasala mentioning that many people throughout the Kingdoms still followed the sayings of the Holy Book religiously in the way they lived. He had never seen any temples or places of worship on any of the Kingdom worlds he had visited, but he had remembered the three female captains and their particular names. Were they connected, he wondered but then his mind focused back on the ceremony and Fasala standing beside him. Could life be any better, he asked himself?

More than an hour later, the minister pronounced them married. Queen Fasala and consort, Duke Stephen Wildson. The Duke part was the closest title Fasala could think of for his new position as husband of Bassoon’s Queen.

“Well, well, well. Stephen and Fasala Wildson, I assume you are taking his name,” several of Stax’s group surrounded them.

“Of course I am,” Fasala replied. “He’s all mine now.”

Stax noticed as one of the former Naval Lieutenants approached, Gean Looves. He thought back to that time when the civilians and military were separate. He had much less trouble from them once he had reorganized them and the civilians into one group.

“Look Stax, I know that many of the officers gave you quite a hard time during the last six months, but that was in another world. I want to apologize. There was really no excuse for it.”

“Like you said, that was another world and this is a new one, but thanks anyway,” Stax replied and shook Gean’s hand.

“You two should do quite well together,” Gean then placed her arms around both of them.”

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Stax thought he saw a tiny tear fall from her eye.

Stax found it awkward not having Fasala as a translator. He stumbled along with help from Fasala and others.

Captain Paerue walked up to them. He wished Stax and Fasala the best in their new life. He told them that he and his crew would miss their traveling together.

“What about the ship, Captain? What’s happening with it?” Stax asked letting Fasala translate for him.

“He says that a repair crew will be coming from Kingdom command to rework the ship with another computer system,” Fasala translated. “He and his crew will wait for the repair crew to arrive before they leave for Kingdom Command.”

“We’d like to get together before you actually leave,” Stax said. “We hope to move into the city after a couple more days.”

The Captain spoke at length again not giving Fasala a chance to translate everything. “What’s he saying?” Stax interrupted.

“He’s asking about the mental difference between being a part of the ship and who I now am,” Fasala replied. “I told him there were some differences like the freedom of movement but there were other freedoms being part of the ship also that I don’t have now. He doubts that Kingdom Command will ever be able to duplicate the process.”

“Tell him that my people studied the ship wire by wire and they couldn’t figure it out either. It has something to do with how they developed the matrix pathways that your thoughts were assigned to,” Stax said.

“The Captain says that if he had a fleet of sentient ships, he could drive the Etihwa back to their original space,” Fasala said.

Stax shook the Captain’s hand in an Earth style goodbye. The Captain had taken to the Earth custom immediately and gripped Stax’s hand, smiling.

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It was then that several government officials came and spoke to Fasala about different problems that the Bassoons were facing. This lasted for nearly an hour but they finally moved off to others in the room.

“Stax,” Fasala said, getting his attention. “Do you know what I would like to do tomorrow?”

“Anything you want to do darling. Anything you want,” he replied taking her arm in his. He had her now. No longer just a moving picture on the screen or a voice from the walls.

“I’d like just to spend our last couple of days at the ship just saying goodbye to those that are still living there,” she said.

“I would have thought that the ship would be the last place you would want to be,” Stax looked surprised.

“Well, you’re correct but I did meet you and some of the others I’ve gotten close to. We all learned a lot about each other,” Fasala said.

They stayed in the space port hotel suite that night. The following morning curled up in each other’s arms they walked the short distance to the ship. The guards went to attention and saluted as soon as they recognized Fasala and Stax. Fasala and Stax acknowledged their salute as they proceeded up the stairs to enter the ship.

The place was empty. The corridors echoed the silence. “You know, I could feel the people walking about doing their jobs. My feelings extended into the walls, decks and even the hatches about the ship. I felt a thousand sensations all at one time but yet distinctly separate,” Fasala explained.

“Sounds as if you miss it,” Stax said.

“Well there are things that I miss about it but I couldn’t do this.” She wrapped her long arms around him pulling him against her in a tight embrace and began a heated kiss.

Stax salvaged what food he could find, for it was well past noon.

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“Hello?” Stax recognized David’s voice.

“In the community room,” Stax replied.

Not only was David there but Julie and several others were with him.

“Couldn’t bear to stay away?” Stax laughed.

“You can talk. What are you doing here on your honeymoon?” Julie asked.

Fasala walked into the room, “Hi everyone,” she said obviously looking as if she had just woken up.

Julie gave her a hug, “Hello, married lady,” Julie replied.

Fasala’s bright white teeth shone with a wide contented smile. She walked over to stand beside Stax.

“So what are you doing here?” asked David but was hit in the arm by Julie before he could go on.

“Oh,” David looked embarrassed.

“Hello. Anybody around?” the voice of Paul Andrews was heard. Paul came into the community room along with Mary, Micah and Myrlen.

“This a reunion? We were only with each other last night,” Stax said.

“It’s really good to see all of you,” Fasala then punched Stax in the side. “I wish all the others were here.”

At that moment, in fact, all the others did show up, including the two wayward engineers. A moment of quietness reigned but quickly passed. Both doctors were the last to arrive. Stax had found some coffee while everyone got involved talking. He soon realized that in spite of their differences and difficulties, they had been drawn together as friends. He even noticed that Barrett and John were joining in the conversation.

“I know what David and Julie are doing but what about the rest of you?” Stax raised his voice to be heard by everyone.

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“Most of us are returning to Valium,” Jan spoke up. “All of us, military types, have been offered a job with Kingdom Command. The Amir wants us to start teaching tactical training at one of their academies.”

“I’m also returning to Valium,” the deep accented Russian spoke up. “I might as well work for the Amir also. It’s also the best money available.”

Everyone laughed at the money comment.

Fasala got everyone’s attention, “You know that all of you have become very special to me. I am where I am now because of you. I’m truly sorry I took you away from your home world and dear ones. The Bassoons may be my people but you’re my family.” The tears rolled down her face.

Julie leaned over and hugged her as did several others.

“A toast!” the Russian lifting his coffee cup into the air, “To us!”

And everyone repeated, “To us!”

Afterward Stax walked up to Barrett, “I hope there’s no hard feelings,” Stax held out his hand.

Barrett just looked at him, “So you want to make an amends Mr. Wildson. Got your computer in the flesh now and all is well, hey?” Barrett still hadn’t taken his hand. “I said that I would eventually get you back and I still mean that. When I become convinced that there’s no chance that you or your pretty lady can’t get me back to Earth then I’ll show you,” at that he left the room.

No one had overhead the threat but Stax were getting used to them by now and decided to keep quiet not wishing to destroy the mood that everyone else was in.

4 Surprise Attack

“We’re out of coffee,” Stax said aloud.

“Ah, Julie and I will go over to the base supply shop and see if they have anything similar to it there,” Fasala said getting up. “And it’ll give us some time alone she said quietly to Julie.”

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“It’s so good that you and David are staying on Bassoon,” Stax heard her say to Julie as they walked out. He decided to walk around and talk to some of the others, but it still bothered him somewhat about what Barrett had said. Stax really hoped that he would return to Valium and not stay on Bassoon. Stax wondered if he should order him to return to Valium. It would be one less headache to deal with. He knew that he and Fasala had a lot of work to do in their new jobs and he was actually looking forward to it. He had walked over to David and was about to speak when the ship shook. The Earth shattering blast hit near by with several more occurring one after another. The last one knocking everyone off their feet.

“What’s going on?” Stax headed for the exit. By the time he had reached it, a bombardment of the city was in full swing. Smoke rose from every direction. Energy balls were dropping like rain. Large craters were seen about the tarmac. One very close to the ship.

A larger explosion then shook the space port. A nearby building went up in flames and fiery debris rained down close to them.

“Where’s Julie,” David yelled pushing his way pass the others now standing at the hatch.

But Stax had already headed down the stairs toward the burning buildings. Others followed while another explosion rocked the space port making everyone again lose their balance falling to the tarmac. David quickly rebounded and helped Stax up. It took them several more minutes to cross the distance between the ship and the buildings. Entering what was left of a gate, the camp was laid waste with people. Stax scanned the area running through the wreckage yelling Fasala’s name. Explosions continued all about them, turning his head around, Stax then saw the Protector go up in flames.

“David,” Julie’s voice was then heard.

Both ran among the burning debris. “Stax,” Julie said with a look of defeat on her burned face. “Fasala was caught under a wall.”

“Where?”

“In shock, Julie was just able to point toward the area. David helped Julie while Stax ran into the now crumbling structure yelling again.”

“Stax,” a weak but definite sound could be heard.

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He began grabbing still burning materials paying little mind to the affect it was having on his own hands. Others had then joined him but being more careful. A charred hand fell out from under a smoking beam several of the others had moved. "I'm coming, Fasala. I'm coming," Stax was saying aloud. At that point, all the rubbish was cleared away. Stax smelled the burnt flesh of her body.

Dr. Hussain had arrived by then and began checking for life signs, "She's alive but her heart is very weak. We need to get her back to the ship now."

Using their arms, everyone formed a stretcher and headed back across the now cratered tarmac. Explosions still rocked the place. The city was nearly in flames now. After what seemed to Stax like an eternity, they reached the ship and continued inside. Even though Julie was conscious, David had single handedly carried her the whole distance in his arms.

"We'll take care of her, Stax," Dr. Roads said putting the IV into her arm.

Another blast happened near the ship forcing everyone to grab something.

"Who could be doing this?" Paul spoke out.

"Who else but the Etihwa," Stax decided that he'd better head to the exit in case the Etihwa landed.

"But why are they continuing to hammer the place?" another person said.

"To make sure that we're all dead. This is their way of showing revenge," Stax replied arriving at the exit.

Ten Kingdom Soldiers were seen running toward the ship. One of them was Captain Paerue. Several of the men had blood about their faces. Stax grabbed the Captain's hand to shake it then felt the pain from his own burned hands. He smiled at the Captain, "It's really great to see you sir."

The Captain replied in his own language. Even though Stax wasn't sure what he had said, he felt that the Captain was also glad to see him. The captain pointed up to the sky and said, "Etihwa."

Stax nodded his head in agreement.

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“I’ll take these guys down to medical,” Stax look at Paul. “Can you take charge up here? Issue everyone with weapons, just in case.”

Another blast threw Stax and the Kingdom Soldiers to the deck. Quickly getting up, they ran the rest of the way. The medical hatch was already open and Stax saw a pained look on both of the doctor’s faces.

Doctor Roads was standing over Fasala when she looked up at Stax, “She’s dying Stax. There’s nothing we can do. There are just too many internal injuries.”

Stax took a double take. He was at a loss for words. She’s dying, the doctor had said, just like that. This couldn’t be, his mind raced ahead wanting to do something, anything to save her.

Fasala opened her eyes. She lifted her hand and placed it in Stax’s. “Overseer,” she managed a formal voice, “I’m not doing too well am I?” but the smile didn’t come.

“You’re doing just fine darling,” tears slowly began to roll down his cheeks.

She grinned keeping her eyes on his, “I love you Stephen Wildson.”

“I love you Fasala Wildson,” he bent down and kissed her lightly on the forehead.

Another blast hit nearby, “You need to leave this place Stax,” she coughed, “before they blow the ship up.”

“The only safe place is in space,” Stax replied and then stopped and thought about what he had just said. Dr. Roads, Dr. Hussain, help me move her down to the fourth level.

“She shouldn’t be moved, Stax,” Dr. Roads answered.

“How long does she have?” Stax asked quickly.

“She could go at any moment,” Dr. Roads replied not sure what Stax was up to.

“Then, I’m going to save her. Now help me get her down to the fourth level.”

It was then that David realized what he was talking about, “The stasis chamber. That could do it.”

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“Hurry!” Stax turned to Fasala, “Darling, you must stay conscious for another fifteen minutes. Do you hear me?”

“I hear you,” but the reply was faint.

Getting Fasala down to the fourth level was easier said than done and keeping her alive at the same time. But after ten minutes they entered the small room where they had only weeks before they had retrieved her body.

“Let’s put her into the cavity and hook her up.” After another five minutes everything was ready. Through it all, Fasala forced herself to stay awake. “We’re ready,” Stax paused and looked into her eyes leaned down and kissed her gently on the lips. He closed the case that had previously protected her body. The dark glass rose up over the unit. Her eyes were still open for she knew now what Stax was doing. “Fasala, this is your Overseer. Upload your memories into the starship’s core.” Nothing happened. He repeated the order again but still nothing happened. Her body went limp, her eyes now had a glassy far off look.

“She’s gone, Stax,” Dr. Roads said softly. “There was nothing more you could have done.”

Stax just stared at her through the glass, saying nothing. But there was a sound coming from a nearby comm set.

He grabbed them putting the audio to his ears.

“Upload complete,” he heard a voice say.

“Fasala, are you there?” Stax yelled into the mike.

“I am still initializing subroutines but I think I uploaded properly,” she replied.

“She’s alive,” he said looking around at everyone. Stax started to cry. “Prepare for liftoff as soon as you can Fasala. We need to get into space.”

Had he just lost his wife? Stax didn’t have time to consider this as he now ran for the bridge.

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Another energy ball exploded nearby, the closest yet. The concussion threw everyone to the deck again. “Fasala, bring up all systems, including engines and life support,” he ordered.

“Yes Overseer,” she then spoke automatically in her usual formal tone.

Arriving at the hatch, Stax saw the two Engineers standing with others wondering what to do. “Get to engineering, that’s an order,” Stax yelled.

“What? You aren’t my boss anymore,” Barrett sneered at Stax.

“I promise that if you aren’t in engineering in two minutes, I will personally throw you on the tarmac leaving you behind. We’re lifting off. Is that understood?”

There wasn’t a reply this time, instead both hurried off down the corridor.

Stepping onto the bridge he said, “Fasala, sound battle stations.”

“Everybody to your post,” Stax then spoke directly to them.

“Captain Paerue, will you assign your men and then join me on the bridge?” Stax asked.

“Of course, Overseer,” the Captain replied via the communications unit.

After ten minutes and several more near misses, Fasala lifted off. She moved out and away from the city trying to dodge the still falling energy balls. Once clear, she increased power and headed toward space.

“David, you and the Captain’s people make sure all weaponry, missiles, energy crystals plus that laser of yours is ready. Get whoever else you need,”

For a few seconds Stax’s mind drifted back over the last few weeks and the happiness he had experienced and now he thought about Fasala’s dead body in the stasis chamber below. He felt devastated and both relieved that he had given some sort of life back to her.

“Overseer, there are ten Triunes directly over the Bassoon capital,” Fasala said.

“Show them on the screen, darling.” Stax added the darling part because this was his newly married wife he was speaking to not some computer voice.

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“Of course,” Fasala responded femininely.

Etihwa ships were closely packed in amongst themselves firing at will upon the already dead city below. Stax was surprised that none had moved to intercept Fasala. Perhaps they were caught up in the intensity of the hunt.

“Captain Paerue, what action do you recommend?” Stax asked.

“Fire a missile right in the heart of them before they realize we are here. It will be impossible for them to disperse so quickly. They will be low on energy.”

“David, are those missiles ready to fire?” Stax asked.

“They’re ready,” came the reply.

“Okay. David fire a missile into the center of the ships and see what happens. Do it now,” Stax ordered.

“Missile away,” David said.

But before he heard David’s confirmation, he heard the star engine of the missile as it left the launch bay.

Stax watched the missile head toward the packed group. He also noticed that the ships had now seen Fasala and the coming missile but it was too late. The missile struck moments later. Ten Etihwa ships exploded before their eyes. A cheer went up throughout the ship. Another five ships were obviously damaged.

“Fasala, release an energy ball toward the other ships but don’t cripple our power. Make it a wide dispersal. What’s next Captain?” he asked.

“We’re no match for those that are left,” the Captain said, “but we must try.”

“Overseer, I’m picking up other starships approaching Bassoon. They are Kingdom Starships,” Fasala said hurriedly.

All the Etihwa ships started to pull away. Stax watched as the Energy crystals hit a ship and immediately disabled it. It was now dead in space but only for a moment before it blew itself

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apart. Several Missiles had been released by the other Kingdom ships toward the fifteen ships speeding away. The crippled starships blew themselves up one by one. Shortly after that the missiles managed to get several more.

“Mary, ask the lead Kingdom ship whether they need assistance,” Stax spoke across the bridge.

“They’re fine, Overseer. Twelve Etihwa ships are no-match for four Kingdom ships.

“Fasala, take us back down to the planet. Your people will need us,” Stax said as he leaned back in his chair.

Only three of the Etihwa ships made it back to the frontier and back into Etihwa space. Two weeks had passed since the bombardment. The Bassoon Capital was still very much in the process of turning to some kind of normality. Ten thousand people had died.

“The Etihwa has never done such a thing like this before,” Stax overheard some officers speaking.

“Perhaps, they are afraid of this ship and its Overseer,” one of the officers replied.

“Gentlemen,” Stax interrupted, “I promise you that the Etihwa will soon learn what fear is all about. They will learn to fear the name of this ship and especially its Overseer.” Stax left the bridge climbing the stairs to his cabin.

The officers felt the deep coldness in the Overseer’s voice but did not comment.

The End